

JACK LARSEN

Post-war Master-weaver and Collector:

an appreciation of his creative life upon his passing December 23rd, 2020

MARC LEUTHOLD

Born in Seattle in 1927, Jack Lenor Larsen moved to New York City in the early 1950's and audaciously opened his weaving studio in Manhattan. He promptly received his first commission: textiles for Lever House, one of the first post-war glass and steel towers that rose in New York City. The building, designed by famed Skidmore, Owings and Merrill sits on Park Avenue at 53rd street and remains an icon of mid 20th century Modernism.

How did this unproven young talent secure a top-level commission for a highly visible project? At the time, floral chintz fabrics were the norm while Larsen was producing Bauhaus-inspired architecturally structured and textured tactile fabrics in neutral colors. As a student at Cranbrook Academy of Art – perhaps America's Bauhaus, Larsen wove anything he could find into his hand-made modernist creations, sometimes sticks and other organic and improbable

materials. Lever House decision-makers needed something textural, elegant and minimal (not florals!) to soften the concrete, steel, and glass of the building, and so Larsen wove the lush understated fabrics for curtains for the elegant, but severe structure. The rest is history. Larsen, who was a tall charming man, wooed many clients and became a leader of what sometimes is called the craftsmen's "studio movement" in the USA. After the heavy sacrifices and deprivations of the Great Depression and WWII - America with industrial plants intact and a large population of employed and educated citizens, was a large and fertile market. Crafters were able to set up private studios and find customers. Larsen was one of the early and most visible of these people.

In contrast to Europe, there has been little or no government support for art and especially, for artists. Yet, people from the great American families with a sense of noblesse oblige, understood that artists need support. Aileen Osborn Webb had wealth and connections through birth and marriage to museum directors, industrialists, philanthropists, and famous artists like Frederick Church. Webb and her friends wanted to give back to their communities that made them so rich. Jack Lenor Larsen was her friend and he advised her as she and other philanthropists structured the American Craft Council - the leading organization that supports craft in the USA, and the Museum of Contemporary Craft - now the Museum of Art and Design, and conferences like Asilomar in California in 1957 where artists met and shared concerns.

Jack Lenor Larsen was front and center in these efforts and countless others. Jack also helped many individual artists. Famously, Jack advised Dale Chihuly to switch from weaving to blowing glass. Jack went on to grow his studio into a textile business. He worked with the U.S.

Dining room with collection doors open





Collection with Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye and Jennifer Lee and others

Carrie Chino Charlie of Acoma Pueblo New Mexico

Dining room corner with Kiki and Marc sculpture





Red Garden featuring Toshiko Takaezu vessel

State Department to visit third world countries to help indigenous crafts people create textiles suitable for export to the USA. Eventually, Larsen's company produced in and imported from over 100 countries. These experiences heavily influenced his eye. His large art collection of a lifetime is broad and includes mas-

terpieces by Buckminster Fuller, William Tucker, Yoko Ono, Augustus St. Gaudens, Willem de Kooning, Takashi Soga, Sol Le Witt, Claus Bury (German), Grace Knowlton, Lenore Tawney, Dale Chihuly, and Kiki Smith. His tastes, always adventurous, became increasingly eclectic and not limited to conventional fine arts.

He put together a celebrated basket collection, but perhaps his most famous craft collection is his ceramics. He collected all periods and has historical works from Japan, China and Southeast Asia. He also was very interested in postwar and contemporary ceramics. He loved the British, particularly Hans Coper, Lu-

Brad Miller and Richard Devore on Ed Wormly table



cie Rie and Jennifer Lee who were his friends. Other Europeans include Gabriel Hain, the Austrian famous for her elegant kiln slumped porcelains; and Ursula Morley Price. Internationals include Gwyn Hansen Piggot of Australia, Josephine Guesa from South Africa, Shin Sang Ho of Korea. He supported Americans as well: Richard Devore, Wayne Higby, Brad Miller, Barbara Diduk, Jun Kaneko, Toshiko Takaezu, Karen Karnes, Jim Makins, Rudy Autio, and Marc Leuthold. Larsen mentored some of the artists, including me, and some were part of his "chosen family of sisters" including Lucie Rie, Toshiko Takaezu and Karen Karnes. How did I meet this man? In 1986 seeing a gallery announcement, Larsen wrote me asking for more images and eventually asked for a visit to Larsen Fabrics. This began a twice-annual ritual, where I would schedule an appointment with the master's personal secretary and visit his beautiful company offices - showing him slides and artwork. He seemed very interested in the work, yet each appointment ended abruptly – once with the comment, "Most artists I only see once!" as he turned on his heel and walked quickly away.

Over the years he collected many pieces and introduced my work to many people and curators. I was invited to LongHouse, his enormous personal retreat – now a museum, in East Hampton, Long Island. While there in 2001, he had an idea. He wanted to plan semiannual galas keynoting and honoring people he admired: artists, gardeners, art critics and creatives. LongHouse commissioned an award, an art object, to be created for each honoree. Since then, I have created all of the LongHouse awards, over 50. Recipients include writer Edward Albee, dancer Bill T. Jones, restaurateur Alice Waters, clothing designer Donna Karan, architect Richard Meier, artists Martin Puryear, Ai Wei Wei, Shirin Neshat, Christo and Jean Claude, Laurie Anderson, Julian Schnabel, Yoko Ono, Cindy Sherman, Storm King Sculpture Park founder, H. Peter Stern, philanthropist Agnes Gund and many others. Jack presented each of these awards personally, and at these ceremonies touched on his design philosophy and the mission of LongHouse.

Jack learned early the importance of living with beauty and the importance of teaching people how to live with art and how to live artfully. Masterpieces by major artists mingle with inexpensive unusual finds. For example, in his cupboards you will find David Leach teacups and saucers next to Ikea wares. Jack was always interested in seeing new things and collected what he liked, regardless.

Often his new finds set trends and launched artists' careers. People who learn about Jack and visit LongHouse are surprised by the diversity of objects they encounter and yet how unified his sensibility and aesthetic were. Jack Larsen will be remembered as a renaissance man of craft and an acknowledged master connoisseur of ceramics.



Toshiko Takaezu Bell in Dune Garden

Marc Leuthold

is an artist who creates objects, videos, and mixed media installations that create a dialog between cultures, histories, social justice, and the senses. He is affiliated with the State University of New York, the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA), and the International Cultural Inheritance and Innovation Studio at SIVA. Leuthold has been invited to create and exhibit art worldwide. Leuthold has exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the China Art Museum in Shanghai.

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