

WIN ANDERSON

According to Win Anderson, "If you've read Jack Lenor Larsen's autobiography *A Weaver's Memoir*, you've read my biography!" That's not far from the truth. The two shared an almost symbiotic working association for twenty-five years, from the formation of the first Larsen company in 1952 until rheumatoid arthritis forced Win's retirement in 1977.

Together, they established a position at the leading edge of New York's highly competitive fabric design market. It was an exciting and challenging time to be a designer in New York. After the stringencies of WWII, the design world reveled in the luxurious and the unusual, influenced by the industrial revolution on the one hand, and the rediscovery of the old ethnic patterns, materials, and techniques on the other. One of Win's favorite projects combined the two: the Phoenix Opera wanted their new curtains to include mirrors, so Win applied rich, ethnically-inspired wool embroidery to a base of fabric-backed mylar, leaving tiny mylar 'mirrors' exposed. The company worked with high-end customers, including the premier interior designers, dress designers, carpet manufacturers, and furniture makers of the times. They provided the upholstery fabric for President Kennedy's rocking chair. Perhaps their greatest accolade was the retrospective show called "30 Years of Creative Textiles" at the Louvre Museum in Paris, which was its first one-man show of interior fabrics.

This glamorous world was also fraught with delivery deadlines, demanding clients, (often artists themselves), and of course the pressures of the market place – which stifled a much-applauded, moderate-priced line of fabrics that would likely have made Win's name a household word, since they were named after her. To many of us, this life might sound a little too challenging, even harrowing. Win beams, "It was such FUN!"

How did this association work? According to Win, "Jack would come back from a meeting and say, 'The client wants such-a-thing' and I would say, 'We could do thus with this and such with that and achieve what he wants.' Then I would go arrange for that to happen." Win has a gift for getting to the simple essence of things! Jack was President of Jack Larsen, Inc. with Win as Vice-President. While they were both involved in design, Jack handled marketing and public relations ("I wouldn't talk to the press. They never seemed to print what I wanted to say.") On design, she says, "I always gave Jack the last word. It was easier!" However, the managing of design teams and the harnessing of materials sources and production operations were hers. In his memoirs, Jack acknowledges his reliance on "her common sense and ingenuity in problem solving".

Win operated mainly out of the New York design studios. However, she made two extensive research trips with Jack, studying and collecting samples that were the basis for several collections of fabrics. In 1957 they went to Europe, then to Athens and the Greek Isles. In 1960 they visited West and South Africa, studying rich fabric traditions that were then hardly known in the Western world, such as the "blue markets" (indigo dye works) of Nigeria. These were unusual travels at the time, a little before hippie travelers put India and Africa on the West's cultural map. Win did not feel particularly at risk, as she recalls, though Jack notes in his memoirs a couple of unusual situations, one involving charging rhinos.

Win made solo trips to many of their production shops, which in 1977 were in 37 countries scattered across every continent except Antarctica. She went to supervise the first production run on most new lines of fabric, to make sure the materials, equipment, and methods would indeed produce the exact design specified, and to make spot corrections, if needed. The production facilities ranged from primitive looms in India, Haiti, and Thailand to the most sophisticated state-of-the-art production looms in Germany and Switzerland. So these trips were a particular joy and satisfaction to Win, who loves machines.

Where does a sophisticate from the New York art scene learn to love work machines? Back home on the farm in Montana. When she wasn't riding horse back, Win spent happy hours learning from her father how all the farm machinery worked

and how to fix it. Her father was an important influence in her life, her mother having died in childbirth when Win was 8. Though her time with her mother was brief, it too was formative. When Win was 7, the family moved into a new house where her mother had had free reign with the interior design and decoration. It was greatly praised by neighbors and friends, and the experience left a strong impression on young Win, who inherited her mother's talents and interests. At an early age she somehow knew she wanted to study interior design, though the local rural schools provided no introductions to art or design, and at junior college she took all academic courses. But she had her sights set on the University of Washington.

However, World War II intervened, and Win moved to Seattle to work at Boeing, then after a short time enlisted in the Navy WAVES. After demobilization, she finally entered a four-year program at UW as an interior design major. Since she had already completed all academic requirements, she was free to spend her four years in art courses, experimenting gloriously with design and fabrication techniques from oil painting to ceramics to glass-blowing to welding. In one weaving class, Professor Ed Rossbach's assistant was Jack Lenor Larsen; a friendship was formed and the working association was soon born. From Jack's small studio in Seattle they began designing and marketing textiles. Win remembers especially one huge order for bamboo blinds. The only looms big enough to take the long sticks of bamboo were located in a building down on Skid Row; so every day for weeks, she went there early in the morning, before the sidewalks had been cleared, and wove madly to get the order out on time. Both Win and Jack soon went on to the intensive experience of studying and living at Cranbrook, after which Win took a teaching position at the University of Minnesota. Shortly, Jack started his business in New York and called for Win to come join him as production manager, but as soon as a replacement could be found, Win moved on to head of design.

Today, 20 years after retirement, Win still enjoys designing and making textiles for her own use. Though arthritis prevents her from using finger-controlled techniques, she manages a knitting machine, a serger and a sewing machine to good effect. Her latest product is a block-patterned crop top in shades of raspberry, taupe and beige, which she is re-working a bit to get the fit exactly right. Also, she has an antique wardrobe packed with interesting materials for future projects.

Win loves the Whidbey life she took up permanently in 1986, after three years of weekendng. She especially enjoyed the companionship of the Guild members and of the congregation of her church, which she served many years as treasurer. She takes great pleasure in the growth of the Maxwellton Assembly of God from tens of members to several hundred. She early developed a special friendship with a clergyman there, Rev. Matt Chambers, and his wife Barbara and their young family. Last fall, Win and the Chambers family moved into a large house they purchased together. Aside from receiving help with buttons and other practical matters, Win finds joy in being with her "new family," which she calls the "best part" of her present life. She enjoys the children aged 15, 14, 8, and 1-year old twin boys who were adopted from Cambodia. "Matt and Barbara came to me and said they wanted to adopt either me or a baby. As it turned out, they got not only both, but one extra!".

Win has her own apartment, customized to her needs, with a connecting door to the main house. It is exactly what she wants, because she designed it herself, and hugely enjoyed doing it. Originally an oversized garage, her remodeled apartment is light and airy, and contains a workroom, a sitting room, a bedroom and bathroom, and a small garage for her car. It is furnished with treasured pieces that have come with Win through the years; the artwork on its walls and the ceramics and baskets on its many shelves are the work of internationally known artists who were her friends in New York. And Win seems to find her life now as rich, rewarding and full of fun as it was then.