

MARY BLACK

Our Mary Black (“the *other* Mary Black, not *the* Mary Black,” as she often points out) looks back over nearly four decades of investigating, experimenting, learning, crafting, teaching, and sharing, and sums it all up “Weaving is the thread of my life.”.

“Weaving” here includes all the allied fiber arts. Mary has never been inclined to specialize in one technique exclusively. “I’m a generalist,” she says. If pressed, she calls herself “a spinner who weaves.” Pressed further, she ranks her passions and accomplishments in the fiber arts as: 1. Spinning, 2. Temari, 3. Weaving, 4. Everything else - which seems to include about everything you can do with fiber, from dyeing (natural and chemical) to basketry to macramé to felting to knitting and decorative needlework. Her newest interest is in nuno felting, in which fiber is felted onto a scrim of fabric.

Among her abiding interests, making temari balls has a special fascination. Each ball gives the artist a new experience in the interplay of colors. And the finished work does nothing but exist in beauty and give aesthetic pleasure—perhaps beauty in its purest form. As Mary points out, giving such a gift of beauty is a feature of Japanese culture, but is rare and hardly understood in Western culture. How did Mary discover temari? She saw a piece at the San Francisco home of Helen Pope, an icon among Bay Area weavers and a rare collector. She learned the technique by following the pictures in a book printed in Japanese, provided by the friendly owner of her favorite needlework store in San Francisco’s Japantown. A large, beautiful temari by Mary is in the permanent collection of the Coupeville Art Center. In her living room there is a whole basketful, some finished, some still in work.

Mary’s spinning and weaving repertoire includes many different techniques, and she has taught both arts in New York, California, Arizona and Washington. She has an unusual connection to Navajo spinning and weaving – another instance of her outreach to non-European cultures – which began when she was living in Arizona. After one of her spinning demonstrations at the Desert Museum, a Navajo woman came up and asked how she could obtain a spinning wheel, which would give her much better production than her traditional Navajo spindle. The upshot of this meeting was that Mary sweet-talked her husband Grant (an enthusiastic woodworker when not on his peripatetic work as a McDonald-Douglas field representative) into making a wheel, one with a quill instead of a flyer assembly, so it would work the wool like a traditional spindle. After that came requests for wheels from two more Navajo ladies, and then from a fourth one, who was Sarah Natani, whom Mary brought to teach at the CAC’s annual Fiber Forum, where she is now a virtual fixture. Those early contacts became a long-standing relationship with the Navajo ladies and their families. On the walls of Mary’s house are four rugs, a painting, and a sand-painting, all gifts from Navajo friends. Like all Mary’s favorite possessions, each of these come with story attached, reminders of warm connections between lives.

A different connection brought Mary to learn spinning: Girl Scouts. A long-time leader, she taught puppetry and other crafts to her girls, and wanted to include spinning, but didn’t know how. (That, despite her early determination “I’m going to do that someday” on seeing a picture of a French lady spinning from a bunny in her lap. And she did, being the first in the San Francisco Bay Area to spin that way.) But in 1962 she knew nothing of it, and, on a family visit to the Cuttstown Fair in Pennsylvania, she sat for a whole day watching an elderly Amish man spin. Mr. Claude Oldt gave her an instructional pamphlet and directions to a Mr. Beber who sold antiques from a working grist mill and who might (and did) find her a nice spinning wheel. As Mary tells the details of these episodes, one is reminded that the Girl Scouts no doubt gave her opportunities to hone her considerable skills as a storyteller!

On her \$40 antique wheel, Mary taught herself to spin from Mr. Oldt's pamphlet and Else Davenport's book, though for the first week she could produce "nothing better than rope". In time she met a weaver who also spun, and her journey into weaving was begun. She bought her first loom, a 24" Structo, at the Salvation Army, where she was looking for temporary furnishings for a friend in transit. Though she took six weeks of classes at Oyster Bay, N.Y., she considers her first real lessons came in 1969 from Berta Frey in Woodstock, N.Y., one of the redoubtables who kept weaving alive during the 1930's to the 1960's. There she "never worked so hard in her life" happily spending 9 am till 6 pm in the studio, and doing drafts and drawdowns and required reading in the evening, while her husband, son and daughter enjoyed their country vacation. A glutton for punishment, for her first solo project – towels in 20/2 cotton – she put on a 24 yard warp.

As interest in fiber work spread nationally in the late '60s and early '70s, Mary played a part in the growing movement. At the first weaving conference, held in Las Vegas in 1969, at which the Handweavers' Guild of America was born, Mary was the first state representative from Arizona. She taught Navajo spinning at the first Convergence in Detroit, and for the 1972 Convergence in San Francisco, she was program chair. Despite having no budget to speak of, she enticed luminaries such as Peter Collingwood and Noel Bennet to lead seminars in return for fare and room and board. Keynote speaker for this conference was to have been *the* Mary Black, but she fell ill. The two Marys nonetheless met, and the senior Mary, even at 94 and in a hospital bed, was, in her junior's word, "a hoot" – full of spirit and humor.

Over the years Mary has belonged to several guilds. In 1966, after Grant's job brought them to Seattle, she joined the Seattle guild, sponsored by Virginia Harvey and Mary Bisom. After a year, the Blacks were sent to San Francisco for six months, then on to Phoenix, Arizona for 2-1/2 years, where Mary became a member of the Desert Spinners and Weavers. There she taught and demonstrated frequently, also, she was invited to join and exhibit with the Arizona Designer Craftsmen. From there, it was back to San Francisco in 1970 for nine years, during which she belonged to the Loom and Shuttle guild and taught spinning and weaving in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1979, Mary and Grant returned to his native Washington, settling on Whidbey Island. She promptly joined our Guild, then in 1982 was appointed to the Board of Directors of The Handweavers Guild of America for a three-year term. She has been an active leader and supporter of the WWG for 12 years. Though she moved a few years ago, after the death of her husband, to Edmonds, where her children live, she still regularly attends our meetings and give us hilarious times as our auctioneer par excellence.

She says she cannot move from her house in Edmonds because "I have too many treasures." And true, the lower story of her house is packed with looms and spinning wheels and related equipment, with art works of fiber and paper and paint and stained glass and dyed straw, and devil's claw for baskets, and shelves of books, and stacks of materials and works in progress. What makes them treasures and not just stuff is their individual associations with people, like the rugs from her friends on the Navajo reservation, or the histories that came with them, like her old Macomber loom that was rescued from a trash fire built by the deceased weaver's heirs.

Weaving and spinning are even among the threads that bind her to her own family. Both of her daughters have become spinners and weavers, one owning a weavers' supply store in Seattle for a while. Even her son, who as a boy seemed to pay no attention to his mother's activities, when required to give a demonstration as part of a college teacher training program, found a spinning wheel and performed on it very creditably. A granddaughter is now spinning. And Mary's husband Grant was also the maker of many of her tools. She recalls "I only had to say 'Honey, I need a...'" and the latest tool making project was begun. Her latest weaving project – fresh off the loom – continues this thread of life: it is her daughter's horoscope scarf.