

VIRGINIA I. HARVEY

"There's only one place to go, and that's *-forward.*"

That was Virginia's comment, delivered calmly with a lift of the shoulders and an ironic half-smile, on the 1974 fire that destroyed her home and publishing business. At that time, she and her late husband Bill (one of her partners in the publishing company) also owned an extra mobile home. Into it they put a table, some pencils and pads, and a borrowed typewriter. They were back in business.

She reflected on this episode, sitting by her broad windows overlooking the shipping lanes, but quickly moved on to other times and involvements, reviewing a career of over 50 years. A white-haired lady of upright posture, poise and dignity, she spoke in the same measured tones we hear from her in Guild meetings, making her point with thoughtful clarity and often a gleam of humor. Her quiet demeanor reflects her comfort with public speaking, but not the impact her work has had on the world of textile art. In 1996, when the American Crafts Council elected her an Honorary Fellow, Jack Lenor Larsen introduced her as "this weaver's weaver," and today's "doyenne of serious handweavers."

It began for Virginia with weaving courses at Mills College, Oakland, California, in 1935, and the University of Washington in 1936-7. After her marriage to Bill Harvey in 1937, family matters took precedence for a while, especially the raising of her two sons, William Jr. and Russell. But she did not stop weaving. She was a member of the Seattle Weavers Guild and she had begun to accept commissions for pieces such as altar cloths. She began exhibiting in 1955. In 1956-60 she was studying formally again, this time at the Cornish School.

In 1958, an offer came to her through some museum research of three months' part-time work at University of Washington's Henry Gallery. The job was mainly to catalog a recently donated collection of 1,000 Indian saris. That 3-month contract turned into a 20-year association with the University and its collection of textiles, in a role which became formally titled Curator of the University of Washington Textile Study Center. The initial job posed fundamental problems: there was no standard way of cataloging textiles for conservation, and few methods of storing the fragile fabrics without folding them. This was true not only of the Henry, but of all textile museums. So Virginia set about studying library cataloging methods with help from University of Washington departmental libraries, to evolve a method that would work for textiles. She also researched textile storage systems around the U.S., sometimes finding reference textiles lying in heaps on the floor. After extensive, precise analysis, she designed, with an architect, a storage system based on rollers that would hold the fabrics without folding them. Those systems are now in use in many textile museums worldwide. Since effective cataloging and storage systems became available, textile museums do a much better job of conservation; and since they now do an effective job, there are more of them.

That was Virginia's contribution to textile conservation. What the museum work did for her was to give her the opportunity to study an enormous range of textiles, not only from the U.S., but from other cultures. She studied, for example, Peruvian textiles to discover how those sophisticated "primitives" controlled their elaborate patterns, which specialists were puzzled about. Such studies, along with experiment and replication, helped make her, in Larsen's words, again, "as knowledgeable as anyone living on the structural analysis of fabrics."

Over nearly 40 years she has shared her knowledge generously. She has participated in nearly 50 exhibitions and juried others. She has lectured across the U.S., from the Smithsonian mainly on macramé and basketry, and has also taught classes in diverse subjects from fabric design and drafting, to special basketry techniques (most recently split-ply twining at Fiber Forum '97), to decorative design, and contemporary applications of porcupine quill embroidery. While she now feels that probably she will not teach workshops any longer, she is not done disseminating knowledge. She has donated to the Coupeville Art Center a series of opportunities for groups of up to 8 people to spend "A Day with Virginia Harvey" at her home.

Roundtable discussion will focus on topics of the attendees' choice. "I feel an obligation," she says, "to share the knowledge I have accumulated, much of it from the generous help of others."

She has recorded some of her knowledge in 19 periodical articles and in 10 monographs, including several presenting the encyclopedic collection of fabric structures of Professor William G. Bateman. The original woven samples for at least one of these monographs, resides in our Guild library. She has published three influential books, *Macramé: The Art of Creative Knotting* (published in both hardbound and paperback editions and in four languages)-1967, *Color and Design in Macramé* – 1970, reprinted 1981; and *The Techniques of Basketry* – 1976, reprinted 1986.

The first book on macramé propelled Virginia to popular recognition. Macramé was a forgotten art. In the early '60s, in the course of museum studies, she discovered an old French text. The book had not been out of the library since 1915. From its diagrams (knowing no French), she taught herself the basic knots and structures, using, after some experiments, upholsterer's tufting cord. She tried out her ideas on a group mainly of librarians and was soon requested to teach workshops. The publication of her first book started a wave of interest that made macramé the signature popular art form of the '60s and '70s. Further, artists developed a new interest in all finger techniques. Once again, moving forward to a goal that only she had identified, Virginia made a difference to the textile world.

When her publisher lost interest (later renewed) in a second book on macramé, Virginia characteristically opted to march steadily and observantly forward into unknown territory. With partners Bill Harvey and two weaver friends, she bought a small publishing company, thereafter named HTH Publishers. It was through this company she published her monographs and 17 issues of a quarterly journal (suspended after the fire). The company was run by Bill, in addition to his own work. Virginia points out appreciatively, "Bill always supported my career" in a time when few men would have done so. He not only ran the publishing operation, but gave encouragement and support, including packing and unpacking exhibitions and workshop materials. For many years the couple also ran a fiber-art supply house, a business they built from a box of threads to a warehouse with 13 employees.

In recent years, Virginia has reduced her public commitments, focusing instead on the creative impulses that previously she did not always have time to pursue. In her compact and highly organized workroom, she weaves exquisite miniature soumac tapestries, mounted for display on their own working frames of bound twigs. Her most recent invention is "silk wraps" – triangles wrapped with fine silk threads in complex patterns, and then assembled, points inward like the sections of a kaleidoscope image, into a circular medallion, which sings with lustrous colors. A project she is planning is a larger, very complex tapestry that has intrigued and challenged her for some time. She is working on the color design between silk wraps. As always, Virginia is still going – where else? - forward.

---- Shirley Owen - 1997