

A PORTRAIT OF ANN MEERKERK

What most Whidbey Islanders associate with 'Meerkerk' is "Rhododendron Gardens." For older WWG members, however, "Meerkerk" follows "Ann", who was an inspiration and a challenge to many Island weavers, as well as the benefactor who opened the Gardens to the public.

As an artist Ann was not a specialist, but a talented, creative explorer who, it seemed, could understand and master anything. When Doris Macomber first met her in a Greenbank laundromat, Ann was working a very intricate piece of crochet. What did she plan to do with it? "Oh, nothing in particular, I just wanted to see if I could do it." She was a weaver who could build looms. She learned to be a spinner and raised her own sheep for a wool supply. She was a collector of spinning wheels, many other kinds of art and artifacts, not to mention books. She was an enthusiastic dyer, and was known for keeping a couple of good indigo pots at the ready. Ikat was one of the forms of weaving she favored. She was a painter in oils and watercolor and shared many painting outings with Mildred Sherwood. She did some woodwork and also leatherwork. She trained as a ceramist, and made the tiles that decorated the windowsills in her house. According to her friend Sylvia Tacker she had "the eye of an artist, the mind of an engineer and a soul borrowed from Leonardo."

The second leader of the new Guild, Ann drew her fellow-members along by her wide-ranging curiosity, intense focus and energy and consistency of effort, all leavened by a vivid sense of humor. She would get together workshops in whatever interested her, and the communal exploration went from there.

She was born Ann Wright in 1916, in Minneapolis, her parents' fourth and youngest child. The birth took place in the upper story of a house designed by her architect father, which was still under construction – an appropriate beginning for a person whose artistic insights and skills were "under construction" her entire life.

Ann was educated in the Minneapolis schools, studied art, including weaving, at the University of Ohio and emerged as a ceramist. During the early 1940's she moved to New York, shared an apartment in Greenwich Village with a friend and opened a ceramics shop. At that time she typically dressed in a long black skirt, black stockings and amber beads: a Village Artist.

In New York she met her future husband Max Meerkerk, a descendant of Prussia nobility, a man of ranging interests and some 30 years her senior. She became his fifth wife in June 1950. They raised Weimaraners. When they moved to Idaho they transported 55 dogs in an odyssey that gave them stories for years to come. In 1961 Max bought 13 acres on Whidbey Island, the beginning of their "Secret Garden" The rhododendrons were one of Max's passions and the first varieties he ordered were Chinese. Ann put her artistic talents to work in developing groupings and color schemes and continued to develop and complete the garden after Max's death in 1969.

On Whidbey, Ann's interest in weaving was reawakened by Helen Munn's supply shop in Langley and the local weavers she met there. She joined the Seattle Weavers' Guild in the mid '60's and a few years later, helped Doris Macomber start the WWG. During the 70's until her own death in 1979 Ann flung herself into fiber work, to include spinning, macramé, tatting, dying, tie-dying, ikat. She kept sheep, especially black sheep, saw them sheared, worked the wool, spun it and knitted or wove it. She is reported to have said that the years on Whidbey were the best years of her very diverse life. At the time of her death there were some 25 spinning wheels of various designs in the house and about the same number of looms, ranging from a large floor loom housed in the basement to a number of primitive back-strap looms that consisted mainly of the appropriate size and number of sticks.

Considering the influence she had on so many people – weavers, artists and the community at large – it is strange to realize that, according to Lynn Murphy, one of her closest friends, Ann was in person quite shy and somewhat self-effacing. Nonetheless, her creative energy and spirit of exploration and sharing made a memorable legacy to weavers; her generosity left a great gift of natural beauty to the public.

By Shirley Owen & Sally Starnes 2008