

MILDRED SHERWOOD

Every apartment door at Bayview Manor, where Mildred now lives in Seattle, has some personal decoration. Mildred's has a bald eagle, spun and woven in wool. But this is not the lordly American eagle; he dangles by his neck, like a dead goose in a farm wife's kitchen. Mildred, whose attitude to her own work is pragmatic and in no way egotistical, explains: He was originally on a branch, but how do you fasten that to a door?

One of her pieces, however, she keeps carefully rolled and covered; a tapestry of fantastical, imaginary birds. A plump, lordly, orange and brown fellow steps boldly out of the dark blue background, surrounded by other birds and flowers in reds, yellows, greens, and at the bottom lurks an antediluvian grey fish, his great-hinged jaws ambiguously open, in either a grin or a threat. Mildred's designs are artistically adventurous and often humorous, like her design cartoon that shows women in their cups-literally! Merry faces, sketched in black, laugh out from tilted champagne glasses, all drawn together in an oval pool of hot-party orange. Most of her tapestries start out, she says, as "a little drawing of some kind," but develop into a "terribly demanding" experience. They are also, she admits, "addictive." Her biggest and best tapestry, she feels, is a rendering of Yggdrasil, the prodigious ash tree of Norse mythology, whose roots penetrate the underworld and its branches the heavens, harboring heroes and villains human, superhuman, and non-human. This is in the keeping of a grandniece. "Everything I have, my family wants," she chuckles.

In contrast to her own lively and colorful tapestries, the two elegant fiber works by other artists that hang on her walls are both reserved in color and abstract in design. One is a transparent hanging, in overlapping rectangles of beiges and brown, by Theo Moorman. The other is a dark olive green macramé', complex and symmetrical, by Virginia Harvey. A third hanging, however, is quite unreserved; a tapestry from the child weavers of Harranea, Egypt, whose bold, earthy colors and intuitive, animal-rich designs seem to speak to her imagination. Two well-thumbed books about them lie on her coffee table.

Probably the largest influence on her tapestries was her experience at the Chicago Art Institute, where she studied for a Master of Fine Arts degree in the 1940s, when she was already in her thirties. She studied mainly painting and design, making a specialty of portrait painting. The Institute was an unforgettable experience. A very social person, Mildred finds the mere presence of other artists both enjoyable and stimulating. At the Institute she also profited from an international group of talented (and tough!) teachers, who were also memorable personalities; Mr. Boris Anisfeld, a Russian émigré and a shy, simple man who cut his own hair, with whom she studied still life painting and whose work as a colorist she admired; Mr. Giesbert, from the Black Forest area of Germany, with whom she studied life drawing; and most of all, Miss Artingstall, the very British descendant of one of Britain's foremost silk merchants, another great colorist and a challenging design teacher, who would hang her students' works for the week and then demand "OK-Anything you like up there? Anything you'd pay money for?—now WHY do you like it?" Very few people, Mildred notes, really know why they like something. The Institute was a very broadening experience for a young woman from Everett, Washington, whose first university experience had been in her own back yard at UW. Mildred sums it up "I L-O-O-O-O-O-V-E-D it!" A friend in Chehalis kept a whole suitcase full of her letters home, which have been returned to Mildred for re-reading.

Though she is best remembered as a tapestry weaver, Mildred didn't start out as such. As a girl, she learned at home a range of needle arts, which she maintained into adulthood. It was her future mother-in-law (with whom she got along famously) who introduced her and her future sister-in-law to weaving and spinning. She herself had recently been inspired by a class with 'Marna' Gravander, who came out of the Bay Area in the 1930's to rescue spinning and handweaving from industrial oblivion. Mildred subsequently spun "hundreds and hundreds" of yards of yarn and used it to weave a great variety and quantity of yardage: for upholstery (some still covers her

wing backed chair), clothing, and household linens, and many rugs. She particularly liked making rugs, and still uses her first rug in the entryway of her apartment.

As a girl she was an avid reader, and the library was just across the street. She and her seven siblings were also encouraged to learn as much as possible about anything that interested them. From these early experiences came a fulltime career as a librarian, which she took up after her husband Paul's tragic death in an industrial accident in the third year of their marriage. She was first a county librarian. There, most librarians were pursuing their advanced degree by taking surveys and interpreting results. Mildred decided that was too pedestrian; instead she wanted to seriously study art. She found herself a job at the Chicago Art Institute's Ryerson Library, so her library skills funded her studies. At the Ryerson, the deputy head librarian, who introduced Mildred to the sights of Chicago, became one of her favorite companions. She was a Greek woman who lived life to the fullest, and whose speech was colorful and highly metaphoric.

Though she was offered a permanent job at a women's college in the Chicago area, she returned to Everett to be with her mother, who was diabetic. Then there just happened to be an ideal opening for her at UW's Art Library, where she stayed for the rest of her career. She became a member of the Seattle Weavers Guild, and grew well acquainted with Virginia Harvey, who persuaded her to move to Whidbey Island in 1969, to join Luise Ziegler and others. She recalls that the Whidbey Weavers Guild in the early years had close connections to the Seattle guild, because so many of its members had belonged to the Seattle guild before (or, in some cases, after). She served the Whidbey Guild as its third president – or "Queen Bee", as she recalls a predecessor's term for it.

Her work as a librarian gave her the means to travel extensively and meet weavers from many countries. She visited Peru twice, once for an International Craft Conference, and once (with Anne Meerkerk) on a three-part trip that included Colombia and Ecuador. She has visited Greece twice, Asia Minor, Egypt, Hong Kong, China and Thailand. A high point in her travels was an International Tapestry Symposium in Melbourne, Australia, where she was thrilled to spend time visiting the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, an atelier housed in a converted former slaughterhouse and warehouse, and also to visit a textile college where all skills pertaining to wool are taught. One eleven-week trip to Europe (which included visits to fiber-art collections and studios) was actually a working library research trip, looking in secondhand bookstores in Paris, Holland, Italy and Denmark for works on French Provincial furniture for a UW teacher of interior design. She has also made trips to Norway to visit relatives.

Mildred, who cheerfully admits to being born in 1911, still spins her own yarns on a Norwegian wheel, one of three she imported years ago, through a Scandinavian cousin, for early members of the Guild. She has a tapestry in progress, which she says she is "just playing with.," working without a cartoon, laying in narrow, undulating stripes of her characteristic high-contrast dark/light colors into fluid, abstract shapes, that suggest perhaps northwest landforms. It is the creative 'play' of a practiced artist and colorist.