

LongHouse Reserve

As Seen in

HAFN

April 2, 2007

the markets | textiles

Weaving a Tale

By Christine Bockelman

NEW YORK—Weaver and textiles designer Jack Lenor Larsen laughs loudly as he remembers the 1960s line he created with now-defunct textiles company J.P. Stevens.

"I was the first designer to do sheets and towels with my name on them," he said. "Of the designers at the time, [Yves] Saint Laurent and I had the most royalties. Snoopy made twice as much."

A champion of contemporary and traditional crafts and a world-renowned innovator in textiles design, Larsen is best known for the "Larsen look," a series of hand-woven fabrics of varied, natural yarns in random repeats that have become iconic representations of the modern 1950s and 1960s aesthetic.

Larsen turns 80 this year, and is honoring his octogenarian status with a long celebration. First up is an auction of his private archive of ethnographic textiles held here April 3 to 5 at Christie's auction house. He's also celebrating the 15th year of the estate he founded, LongHouse Reserve, on Long Island in East Hampton, N.Y., which boasts a public gallery, arboretum and sculpture gardens. The estate is home to work by Dale Chihuly, Yoko Ono and Willem de Kooning.

After studying at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., Larsen's textiles career took off when architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill hired him in 1952 to design the curtains for Lever House, the quintessential glass box skyscraper on New York's Park Avenue. Since then, Larsen's work has been installed in many high-profile venues, including the Wolf Trap Theatre outside Washington and the Sears Tower in Chicago. Frank Lloyd Wright ordered a large amount of Larsen's iridescent blue linen design for the meeting room at his iconic Taliesin home in Spring Green, Wis.

Over the years, Larsen has created many of his own textiles, rug, upholstery and dinnerware lines for Baker Furniture, Dansk and others, but has mixed feelings about licensing his work. He remembers the outrage in the artist and architect communities when Wright announced he was creating a collection of fabrics and furniture based on his architectural details. The general consensus was that Wright was selling out.

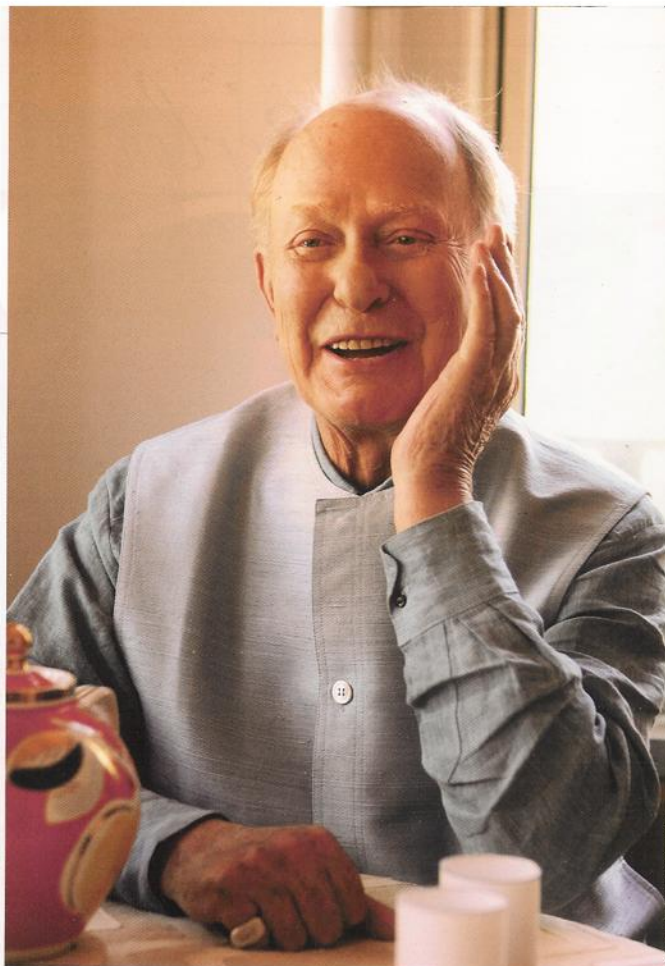
"He did something for money, but he needed to because he spent a lot of it," Larsen said. Still, Wright's high-profile collection opened the floodgates for others to follow him into the world of licensing.

By the 1960s, attitudes had tempered and Larsen was on board, creating his own line of licensed textiles—with a caveat. "I never tried to create things just for their ability to sell," he said. "I always tried to create things that I loved."

For J.P. Stevens, he created a jacquard-woven towel that he describes in his book, "A Weaver's Memoir," as "probably the most complex towel ever woven." The pattern of the towel, a complex landscape of buildings in blue and gold, "uses two shaded warp stripes with various tweeds combining the two. The bas-relief in its several forms derives from voided velvet technique."

While many of his collections were successful, Larsen stumbled a few times. "I made a towel line using natural fibers and just a hint of color, but they turned out to be waterproof," he said. "The towels didn't absorb a drop of water. It just beaded up on the fibers because the cotton had been treated with some kind of wash."

His missteps didn't slow him down, and he became bolder with his use of color and pattern.



"I was a weaver, so I was able to do innovative things that the graphic designers didn't think about." Jack Lenor Larsen

"I quickly realized that with towels there was no need to be cautious," Larsen said. "People would buy them on impulse and if they didn't work out, it didn't cost them much to fix the mistake."

As for commercial design today, Larsen is optimistic. Quality design was watered down a bit over the years, he said, but is on the upswing now.

"I think it's becoming easier to find good work, thanks to the rise of luxury goods, which demand good design," Larsen said.

And he takes great pleasure in the resurgence of midcentury modern, a look credited to himself, Russel Wright and other designers who used the new technologies and materials available after World War II to create their work.

"We tried so hard to get midcentury modern going years ago," Larsen said. "It is much more successful now." ■

Jack Lenor Larsen talks about the beginning of commercial textiles design