

# THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

## JACK LENOR LARSEN

Growing up in and around Seattle, Jack Lenor Larsen's initiation to visual culture was colored by the Asian aesthetic by which much of the Pacific Northwest is characterized. Set against Puget Sound and a background of volcanic peaks, glacial inlets and pearly light, the native palette there is one of muted earth tones and misty blues and grays. Last month, the renowned textile designer, author, insatiable collector and founder of LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton sat down to reflect on raking pine needles, spinning yarn and the qualities of a simple life.

"Weaving is like architecture," said Mr. Larsen. "The focus is on material; shade and shadow; of texture. And being useful – purposeful."

He paused to consider one of the intricate Thai baskets arranged on the table between us. Reaching out, he moved it to the left about a quarter of an inch.

"Therefore it's logical. It presents limitations that act as guideposts. You think about what has to be achieved and it builds itself for you, whereas a blank canvas is clueless."

One could posit that in the beginning, the 16 acre parcel on which LongHouse Reserve's gardens, sculpture installations and 13,000 square foot house now thrive was just such a blank canvas, albeit of staggering proportions. "It did have some challenges," he conceded.

Founded in 1991, LongHouse Reserve is just one of many remarkable ventures in this weaver's eighty some years. In fact, it's hard to believe Jack Lenor Larsen has squeezed so much into one lifetime. From boardroom to bedroom, Mr. Larsen has been revolutionizing the design world since the 1950s. He has designed textiles for middle America as well as Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, Eero Saarinen and Marilyn Monroe. His fabrics, wall coverings and carpets have graced every thing from Air Force One to Chicago's Sears Tower. Over the past five decades, Larsen Design Studio and its variants has come to exemplify 20<sup>th</sup> century textile design. Spread out across the globe, Mr. Larsen has worked with local artisans to both preserve and extend the boundaries of local craft traditions in over 60 countries. In effect, Jack Lenor Larsen designed the world.

"I was a prodigy," he said. "When I started out I was so young. I used to wear double-breasted suits – even a moustache – trying to look older," he laughed. When he started his own design firm at age 25 he had already been working professionally for six years. By 34 he was in analysis. "I was lopsided. All my focus had been on career objectives," he recalled. "I found analysis rather fascinating."

Relative to the East Coast, the Pacific Northwest where he grew up had few urban trappings, owing its aesthetic temperament more to the romance of its foggy coastline than to its cultural sophistication. "Even in the 40s San Francisco seemed urban. Seattle never did," recalled Mr. Larsen. "It seemed like a big garden."

Along with many of his compatriots, Mr. Larsen was influenced by the orientalism that dominated the northwest's Pacific Rim. "Europe seemed very far away," mused Mr. Larsen. "We were much closer to Asia."

The artist Mark Tobey, who was known throughout the west for his abstract paintings that incorporated an all-over calligraphic weave, founded Seattle's Northwest School. Inspired by the philosophy, religion and traditional design aspects symbolic of Asian thinking, the artists affiliated with the school were often called "mystics". This in combination with Richard Fuller and his mother Margaret's massive collection of Oriental art that was to become the Seattle Art Museum fueled an aesthetic tone that has sustained an allegiance to Asian design and temperament. One look at Mr. Larsen's oeuvre and it's clear that his aesthetic was formed, at least in part, by a sensitivity to the cool minimalism and visual language of Southeast Asia.

LongHouse, inspired by a seventh century Shinto shrine, was not Mr. Larsen's first home on the East End. In fact, Round House, now privately owned, is located just next door. Based on the Bantu dwellings of West Africa, it was completed by Mr. Larsen in 1965. Among the architectural community, its circular structures are the stuff of legend.

"Round House had rolling meadows, pines, cedars -- it was glorious just as I found it," he recalled. "This," he waved his palm, "had nothing going for it."

One of the challenges of creating LongHouse Reserve was to identify the so-called "guide posts" that might help navigate the vast acreage of second growth trees, poison ivy and monster vines. The aerial photographs on file with the town of East Hampton were particularly helpful, but the broad tapestry that developed into its luscious landscape was achieved through the brutal work of digging and cutting and clearing thick woodland and weeds.

"There were two long mounds of earth. We commemorated them by planting rows of hemlock -- you could get them a hundred to a bundle -- and they grow in the shade. That gave us some sense of the space," he explained. "And we made clearings. That is great sport -- at the end of the day you can see what you've done."

Taming the property wasn't something achieved by armies of landscapers but by Mr. Larsen and his friend and colleague, Peter Olsen. "And houseguests," he smiled. "We didn't even have a chain-saw back then, so the question became, 'what can you do without a budget?' We moved some grasses and bamboo from Round House; we created woodland trails. The dunes were a result of digging out basements." He continued, "Any time you can do two things at once -- like digging a basement and creating dunes -- that is irresistible."

"For a long time I didn't think of building here," he recalled. "Eventually I needed a bigger house with waste space."

Leaning over, he considered the basket a second time. He reached out and moved it another eighth of an inch. His wrist was cuffed with a woven silver bracelet designed by John Iverson of Springs. Dressed in oatmeal colored linen and wearing his customary beret, Mr. Larsen was the picture of a country gentleman.

"The Japanese keep most of their possessions in a little half-underground place in the furthest corner of the garden so when the house burns down the art isn't destroyed," he mused. "It means only a small percentage of what they have is ever on view."

The concept of "waste space" came from his friend Stanley Marcus (of the department store, Neiman-Marcus) whose rambling Santa Fe home was outfitted with several rooms dedicated solely to the storage and exhibition of art. Returning home from a visit there, Mr. Larsen was stirred by a book on the Shinto shrine in Ise, Japan just outside Kyoto. The shrine's stunning architectural style would become the inspiration for LongHouse.

The 13,000 square foot residence incorporates 18 separate spaces within its four levels. A cathedral ceiling soars 37 ft. above while a sprawling basement below includes not only a cinema and space for Mr. Larsen's looms but ample "waste space" to house his spectacular collection of arts and crafts. Nonetheless, there is nary a corner in the living space that doesn't hold a precious artifact. Gossamer sculptures by friend and protégé Dale Chihuly, Asian ceramics, African footed bowls and modern stoneware line glass shelves. The living room is an eclectic mix of masterful hand crafted furnishings, exotic skirt cloth, silk kimonos and ancient vessels.

Under a towering skylight, a Wharton Esherick archway carved in chestnut defines the passageway into the dining room. Mr. Larsen (and LongHouse Reserve) has one of the most significant collections of Esherick's work, second only to the artist's own studio museum. The arch came from the famed Curtis Bok house; the dining room table and chairs, from the World's Fair.

"Wharton was easy to like. He was a Quaker -- reticent, appreciative -- not unsophisticated," said Mr. Larsen. "His furniture is practical and unassuming." Esherick's non-traditional designs earned him tremendous respect, and he was widely recognized by his peers as the "dean of American craftsmen."

Still, the primary mission of LongHouse has been public in spirit, and for Mr. Larsen the idea of sharing his love affair with nature, fine art and craft was the driving force in its creation. To that end, Mr. Larsen has made certain that LongHouse Reserve (a not-for-profit museum and arboretum) will have a long life by deeding and pledging the property and most of his private collection to the organization. The lush gardens, meandering paths and sculpted woodlands are indicative of the very things he has prized throughout his life and career. The sculpture installations range from Eric Fischl's "Tumbling Woman," to Magdalena Abakanowicz's figures gazing over Peter's Pond. Of course, there are also sculptures by Linda Benglis, Peter Volkous, Grace Knowlton and Sol Lewitt – even a Bucky Fuller dome – all placed in situ for the enjoyment of visitors of every age and demographic. One of his favorite pastimes is watching the children who visit, and they visit often through a robust philosophy in education and the enthusiasm of local teachers.

As the world's preeminent textile designer, Mr. Larsen's innovations in weaving techniques have spun a global tapestry that has affected visual culture on every continent. So where does an over-achieving, restless mind the likes of Jack Lenor Larsen find "the simple life?"

"Well, I avoid things I'm not keen on," he said, "I don't feel obliged to do the things most people do." He paused, "and, I garden."

Janet Goleas