

Meeting Swiss Carpet Friends

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He could have been a painter, an architect or a poet; he chose to be a weaver because, through textiles, he could be painter, architect and poet all at once. Thus Conservateur en Chef François Mathey introduced the artist on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Louvre, Paris, 1981) dedicated to "30 years of creative textiles" by

JACK LENOR LARSEN

A dominant force in international fabrics and a major influence on environmental design, Jack Lenor Larsen has been honoured with numerous exhibitions, and his work is represented in the permanent collection of major museums. Winner of many awards, he is involved with education and design, working closely with schools and universities. Also a scholar and traveller, many of his collections derive from a culture or a people; others have grown out of his involvement with new technology.

A buffer against mass production

Born in 1927 to Danish-Canadian parents in Seattle (Washington), Jack Lenor Larsen studied architecture, furniture design, fabrics and the art of weaving. After his graduation in 1951 as Master of Fine Arts from the distinguished Cranbrook Academy of Art (Michigan), he opened a studio in New York City. In the years that followed, his commissions ranged from a consultancy to the U.S. State Department for grass weaving projects in Taiwan and Vietnam, designer and director of the itinerant exhibition "Fabrics International", design director and U.S. commissioner XIII Triennale di Milano, designer of Bayer's "Visions IV", to an Artist-in-Residence appointment at the Royal College of Art, London – to name just a random selected few.



At the same time, Jack Lenor Larsen Incorporated, which was founded in 1953 to design, manufacture and distribute fabrics, expanded at an equally breathtaking pace. In 1958 the Larsen Design Studio was initiated, in 1963 Jack Larsen International opened in Zurich, then Stuttgart and Paris, followed by Silk, Leather, Carpet and Furniture Divisions in subsequent years. Today, the company employs about 200 people, including 4 senior designers and 4 assistant designers. Operations are increasingly international with production centers in thirty countries and Larsen showrooms in as many cities around the world. Products are extremely diversified, ranging from fabrics, towels, sheets, blankets, dinnerware, carpets, furniture, to commissioned wall panels, theater curtains and upholstery collections.

Sometimes compared to an eight-handed Bodhisattva juggling his ever-expanding innovations and responsibilities, designer/chairman Larsen says of his firm's evolution: "We started out as revolutionaries, wanting only to make brave new designs for a contemporary society. Today our mission is to maintain the great tradition for luxurious quality as a buffer against mass production.»

Coir – core of the carpet collection

This concern for quality, his interest in natural fibres and in the revival of ancient arts through modern technology led Larsen to the oldest Swiss carpet factory, RAG Ruckstuhl Ltd., Langenthal. For more than 100 years this family enterprise has been producing coir and sisal matting in natural, bleached and tinted colours. Since the first contact some twelve years ago, coir has become part of the Larsen image. All of the company's showrooms are fitted with coir matting by RAG, and so is the designer's weekend home, a "Bantu" round house construction set on the shore of Long Island. Larsen's revival of coir and sisal matting in America greatly contributed to the worldwide

Residential-office setting of a ship company. A texturized lookout at the top of a New York skyscraper: Calicut sisal matting designed by Jack Lenor Larsen, manufactured by RAG Ruckstuhl Ltd., Langenthal (Switzerland). Room design: Kroeger and Naess. Photography: Bill Helms.



Flame-proof treated sisal matting covers floors and vertical surfaces of desks as well as walls.

practical and a neutral background for the colours and patterns of other textiles used in a room. Working with RAG and the Swiss dye industry to get good colour fastness, he is about to introduce a new collection of coloured solids and stripes which can be used either for walls or floors.

An appreciation of Swiss quality, of his Swiss suppliers' reliability, responsiveness and realistic deliveries, plus the added challenge to create a jacquard-woven carpet range using the same warp for different patterns, persuaded him to design RAG's first Wilton collection. Launched in 1983, the collection includes some striking patterns and bold multicolorations which the designer feels cannot be found elsewhere and also provide excellent soil-hiding properties. "Next to light, colour is the most important element of interior environment", says Jack Lenor Larsen, whose own colour sense was influenced by the shibui shades of Japan and his native Northwest.

Future trends in floor coverings

Often described as an artist of delicate taste, firm principles and sound business judgement, Jack Lenor Larsen predicts a return to room-sized rugs, large enough to hold a furniture grouping. In wall-to-wall carpeting, borders running around the edge of a room will become quite important. Since, as he says, most newly built rooms are devoid of architectural detail and material interest, and floors being an important area, colours and patterns are strong tools to make an individual statement.

Having already contributed so much to the improvement of our surroundings, he believes that "personal environment must support our need for identity, and provide more than small spaces inside locked doors. The revolution coming to architecture will center on designing from the inside out. The starting point will be not merely façade nor available structure, as it has been since the time of cavemen." Through such thoughts Jack Lenor Larsen reveals an insight, a deep understanding of human needs which must be felt by anyone who has the privilege of a personal encounter. He projects warmth and a profound calmness, evidence of an inner harmony. His interest in mankind embraces young artists, other talents as well as ordinary men, on whose needs he reflects in terms of environmental textiles. As is often the case with truly great men, he is quite reticent about his own achievements and much more inclined to promote the merits of others.

In his quiet, measured voice and with an ever-present, almost British sense of humour, he concludes the interview, saying: "About 97% of all carpets in America are synthetic, and about the same percentage is tufted. Yet virtually all of our carpets are natural fibres and woven. So we are something of a dinosaur. But a successful one. We are not going extinct!"