

“Magnum”, 1970. By Jack Lenor Larsen
Spotlight Paper by Peggy Porter, 2017

Artist’s Background

Jack Lenor Larsen was born in 1927 in Seattle, WA. He presently resides at his home, LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton, NY.

Larsen has had multiple careers and has been recognized by his peers for his many accomplishments. He distinguished himself as a textile designer with architects Frank Lloyd Wright, Edward Larabee Barnes, I.M. Pei, Louis Kahn and with the firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Larsen has worked in sixty countries adapting local traditions and handcraft skills into his designs. His work challenges and inspires future generations.

I selected Larsen because his name was the most familiar to me on the list of suggested artists. As an undergrad textile major at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Larsen wrote the “textile bible” (*Fabrics for Interiors: A Guide for Architects, Designers and Consumers*) that we students memorized and enjoyed quoting.

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Education

In 1945, Larsen enrolled at the University of Washington to study architecture. During this time he began his studies of interior and furniture design under Hope Foote in the Art Department. In 1947, he changed his focus to study weaving in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California. He started teaching color and design at Dorthea Hulse’s Handcraft House, thus beginning his lifelong dual interests in design practice and weaving.

In 1949, Larsen returned to the University of Washington where he was a teaching assistant to Ed Rossbach, a recent graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art. By early 1950, Larsen opened his own weaving studio near the campus to satisfy architects need for custom designed, hand woven cloths. He received a degree in General Studies and Textiles in 1950. He transferred to the MFA program at Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan on a scholarship.

Career Beginnings

After completing his Cranbrook program in one year, Larsen headed to New York to work for Thaibok Ltd. (a silk importer) and was provided with studio space by Arundell Clarke, a director at Knoll Textiles. Larsen quickly received his first “big time” commission to design/weave the lobby draperies for Lever House designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

In 1951, Larsen hired Richard Bolan, whose skills included the ability to hand weave on power looms. Larsen’s designs were in such great demand that hand looms were too slow to meet his commission requests. Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc. was established in 1952. Later, Win Anderson (who co-created Magnum in 1970) and Bob Carr were hired. The firm

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became known for fabrics that are organic variations in texture and color. Larsen also taught in the summers at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine. The first Larsen showroom opened on Park Avenue in 1954. During the early 1960's, Larsen ventured into producing fabrics for fashion designers and he introduced the first down-filled coat. The company's designs represented the style of Modern Movement (designs based on function and structure) that was now in full swing in the 1960's.

Early Influences

Larsen and Win Anderson traveled the world for twelve years as “textile anthropologists”. They visited third world countries and studied how local textiles were woven and dyed. The main focus of the business when Larsen Design Studio opened in 1958 was corporate commissions: designing fabrics for Pan America's 707, Varig Airlines and the new capital city of Brasilia. Larsen was the first designer of stretch upholstery fabric and printed velvet. He was also the first designer of towels and sheets for J.P. Stevens, now known as a “bed and bath collection.”

After extensive travel working with third world countries on development of their textile industry, Larsen received many awards such as: Design Director and US Commissioner for the 13th Milan Triennial, served as a consultant to the US State Department to design exports crafted in Taiwan and South Vietnam, and as an advisor to the government of India's Weavers' Service Centers.

Career Success

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In 1963, Larsen established his third company, **Larsen International** to manufacture and distribute to the global market. The headquarters were in Stuttgart, Germany.

Larsen experienced early successes: furniture designer Edward Wormly commissioned him to design casements for his exhibit space and he designed the wallcoverings (jacquard double plain weave) and carpet (Wilton wool) for the Rainbow Room at the Rockefeller Center.

An invitation from the Irish Export Board requested his expertise on developing fabrics for interiors. Larsen produced worsted damasks, tweeds and satins using a worsted mill and a Donegal hand weaving operation. The results were his 1969 Irish Awakening Collection.

Louis Kahn commissioned Larsen to create wall hangings for the Rochester, NY First Unitarian Church. Larsen states “the objective was to provide visual incident and acoustical correction for a windowless concrete cube with reflected light from above. Kahn’s challenge to us was to span the full color spectrum with only one yellow, one red, and one blue yarn.”

Also in 1969, he designed fabrics for Pan Am and Braniff 747 jets. He co-authored books on weaving and museums displayed retrospectives of his work. The Musee Bellerive, Zurich, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Renwick Gallery and the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC are examples of exhibits that have shown his works. No matter how successful or how many accolades he has received, Larsen still called himself, “just a weaver.” By 1970 this weaver served on the boards of a dozen non-profits.

In 1972, his company acquired Thaibok Ltd. (his first job out of college) and launched a successful Thai silk collection that included ikat designs.

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This was very important to Larsen because all the weavers were able to work in one production studio on a campus of weave sheds and dye houses with modern spinning looms “without losing the handcraft potentials I have employed in recent designs. The weavers can still bicycle to the campus from nearby villages to have steady work without moving into a metropolitan slum.”

In 1973, Larsen Carpet and Larsen Leather divisions were established. He promoted the use of sisal and coconut fibers before they become popular worldwide.

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In 1975, JLL Inc. installed twenty eight quilted silk hangings for the main floor of the Sears Bank & Trust, Chicago, then the world’s tallest building, on a commission from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill **as pictured above.**

This same year, he became an Artist in Residence at the Royal College of Art, London and published *Fabric for Interiors: A Guide for Architects, Designers and Consumers* which became a popular college textbook as well as an essential resource for interior designers.

Even greater accolades began in 1978 (when Larsen was 51 years old). The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) show “The Larsen Influence: The First 25Years”. He became an Honorary Fellow, American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), Fellow of American Craft Council and the Eliot Noyes Fellow of the Aspen International Design Council. He has also received many honorary Doctorate degrees.

The 1979 retrospective, *Jack Lenor Larsen: 30 Years of Creative Textile* at Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Paris was quite a career/success benchmark. The curator, Francis Mathey said “Jack Lenor Larsen could have been a sculptor, a painter, or a poet but he chose to be a weaver because, through textiles, he could be a painter, architect and a poet all at once... We recognize the craftsman by his masterpiece. Larsen, however, is an artist because of a single masterpiece, he prefers a long term and harmonious work that continues to search and evolve.”

In 1997, Larsen’s companies merged with Cowtan & Tout the US subsidiary of the London based Colefax & Fowler. Larsen remained a consultant and continued to develop new designs. The Larsen archive

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has been donated to institutions in Minnesota: the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the University of Minnesota’s Goldstein Museum of Design and the University’s Elmer L. Andersen Library. Because there are over 25,000 items in this collection, no one institution could provide enough space to house the collection.

Magnum

Magnum was a gift to the museum in 2003 from the artist. The colorway of golds, beiges and browns are exactly like the design for the Phoenix Opera House curtain in Scottsdale, AZ. Color and patterns exploded in Larsen’s geometric designs. He used secondary and tertiary colors rather than primary colors that other Modernist designers used. The commission asked for simulation of hand embroidered mirror work of India but in the colors of the Southwest’s Kachina dolls. The Phoenix curtain, installed in 1972, is still in use, delighting audiences with its changing reflections as they wait for performances to begin. Win Anderson, his co-designing partner since their days at Cranbrook, partnered on this piece.

Magnum is made of Mylar, cotton flannel, polyester, organza, wool, cotton with synthetic threads used in machine schiffly embroidery. The Mylar reflects the light and the machine embroidery creates the repetitive grid. This design was also available in different colorways and was discontinued in 1992 by JLL,Inc. when it became too costly to produce.

In May, 2007 a small sample of *Magnum* was auctioned by Phillips in Paris for \$3,120.00 along with a personal note from Jack Lenor Larsen explaining how important the weaving was in his career.

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Navajo Indian blanket from Montgomery meets Modernism exhibit



The above pictured *Chief Blanket, Third Phase Variant* was a gift to the museum of Isabel White Chase from the Cornelia B. White estate in 1974.

When comparing this blanket which is displayed in the same gallery as Jack Lenor Larsen’s *Magnum*, there are obvious similarities such as geometric shapes in a woven construction. The chief blanket is made of handspun natural wool using synthetic dyes while *Magnum* is made of natural and synthetic fibers using man made dyes. Both art works are symmetrical and minimalist. And in my opinion, both designs are timeless.

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