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DECORATING AND GARDENING

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Weaving his own way

The designer relaxes in the living room of his East Hampton home, LongHouse Reserve, which is filled with his extensive art collections.

By ARIELLA BUDICK
STAFF WRITER

In his homes and his work, fabric designer Jack Lenor Larsen remains an icon of independence

Plain-spoken, self-effacing and unfailingly polite, Jack Lenor Larsen is nevertheless a strident defender of nonconformity. He practices it in his dress — for an interview in his Manhattan pied-a-terre, the 77-year-old textile designer was outfitted in a flowing ensemble of rough and silky black — and even more in his approach to home decor.

Larsen, one of just a handful of fabric designers elevated to the status of artist, has been confounding convention for more than half a century.

His designs appeal equally to machine-revering modernists and connoisseurs of exotic craft. In the 1950s and '60s, he created rustic-chic fabrics, sometimes marrying traditional and high-tech materials such as wool and mohair with metal thread. He created patterns that lent themselves to the sharp-angled geometries of that period's furniture but at the same time offset all those austere angles with sensuous, sunset colors. In 1969, for example, he upholstered the severe seats of Braniff Airlines planes in streaks of fuchsia and orange.

Now an icon, Larsen is being treated to a retrospective titled "Jack Lenor Larsen: Creator and Collector" at the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan, an exhibit that deals with the overlap between his public work and private surroundings.

In a strip-mall world, Larsen sees the home as a last battlefront in the defense of individuality. His own residences — the peach-walled Murray Hill apartment and LongHouse Reserve, his paradisiacal retreat in East Hampton, are theaters of self-expression and laboratories of uniqueness.

His New York kitchen, for instance, is accessorized with an eclectic mix of the homespun and the factory-made: a sleek, silvery cloth thrown over the table, white tin plates right off the assembly line and squat, knobby earthenware cups that bear the marks of their maker's fingers.

A showcase of philosophy

And he uses LongHouse as a showcase for his philosophies of design.

"I've spent my life trying to avoid the middle," he says. "I equate it with mediocrity. I know moderation is the way to go, but my heart doesn't operate that way. Any extreme is interesting because our culture is so middle-oriented."

So Larsen puts his own refined, domestic nonconformity on display. "I've lectured all my life at museums about the joys and benefits of design," he says. "Then I'd be invited home by people, and intellectually they would believe in all this, but they didn't internalize it in how they lived. The best teaching experience is to be in a space."

Sections of LongHouse, which is owned by his foundation, often are open to the public as a way to demonstrate how graciousness can be achieved. The house, which stretches toward a

See LARSEN on B50

TOMORROW ON THE BACK OF PART 2: a NIGHT

HOME COVER STORY

An icon of independence

LARSEN from B52

water-lily pond and an ever-changing sculpture garden, is imbued with light from a glass-tipped roof and supported on piers above a furnished porch that Larsen calls an "outdoor living room." The whole place seems to hover in a blissful haze.

The interiors have the quality of a please-touch museum, with each object perfectly, but not forbiddingly, arranged. In the living room, visitors are greeted by a pair of life-size, limbless figures made of woven straw, as if two baskets were metamorphosing into a human couple. A Spartan modernist sofa is jazzed up with a spray of luminous pillows. A huge, deliberately imperfect Japanese bowl sits lopsided on a diminutive table, reflecting the fact that the house's architecture was inspired by a Shinto shrine.

The son of a building contractor, Larsen grew up in a series of model homes around Seattle. As a student at the University of Washington, he lapped up the bohemian atmosphere and immersed himself in the study of architecture. A weaving course taught him the pleasures of working with his hands, and he changed direction entirely, despite his family's objections.

He wanted to weave

"When he became aware that what he really wanted to do was weave, his parents weren't thrilled," says Larsen's friend Louis Groop, the former editor of House Beautiful. "It's one thing to have a son who's an architect, another to have a son who's a weaver. But he knew where his destiny was."

Larsen went to graduate school at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and it was there that he picked up an enduring principle of collecting: Forego a few impractical luxuries, and you can afford to surround yourself in useful fine design.

"I went to a young professor's house, and she had everything we thought of as good design 50 years ago — the best European stainless flatware, designer dinnerware and simple stemware. I asked her if she was rich. She said, 'No, I don't have any Spode, or patterned crystal, or sterling silver.' What every girl had from her hope chest, she had done without — all this fancy stuff that was really too good to use. And I learned that that's how you have nice things. You don't have to be rich, you just subsidize a little. When I wanted to buy things, I could go without a lunch or two, and then I could have them."

NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER

LongHouse Reserve, Larsen's East Hampton home, above left, was inspired by a Shinto shrine; each object is placed with care and artistry — a mirror, above right, reflects a nearby sculpture; perfectly arranged pottery, left, and limbless straw figures, below, give the rooms the feel of a "please-touch" museum.

Larsen has been building up his collection for years, filling his homes with fabrics, ceramics and glass discovered in the course of his far-flung travels or gathered through an intricate network of artist-friends. The Museum of Arts and Design show juxtaposes his acquisitions with samples of his work, and there's a strong reciprocity between them. The dense weaves in a trio of bamboo baskets from the Philippines echo the intricacy of Larsen's cloths. A teat-shaped wooden milk jug from Burundi could be a sculptural study for the abstracted cupolas in the 1965 fabric he called Architecture.

"One of the goals of the exhibition is to allow the viewer to get inside Jack Larsen's head and look through his eyes," says curator David McFadden. "What is it that makes the two parts of his life converse with each other? Jack has collected an extraordinary number of objects that deal with the idea of light passing through them."

That fascination with light is a key element of his own designs, and it was the salient feature of his first major commission in New York, where he arrived in 1952. Just 25 and freshly out of school, he was invited to submit a curtain de-