

From Holland: Remembering Two Weeks of Weaving at Haystack, June 2004

by *Monika Auch*

Holland is a tiny, waterlogged country where they talk a lot about design and consider “craft” to be a dirty word. At the same time, Holland has a great number of institutions that give grants to the brave who find their way through the application procedures. Combining a character trait for going against the grain with a tenacity regarding bureaucratic procedures, I remembered the place in America where my former weaving professor had taught many years ago. Although the name of the institution included the “dirty” word I applied there and for a grant and got a positive answer from both. I had to go!

Flying in via Newfoundland towards Boston and along the rugged coastline of Maine, I got a feeling for the vastness of the land. How must it feel for a citizen of this country to be held by this huge mass of land? As a citizen of a place that is continuously threatened by water, densely populated with hardly any nature left, and hemmed in by countries that are bigger, I felt slightly claustrophobic in comparison. The trip by Greyhound and car to Deer Isle gave me yet another taste of distances being stretched and of unspoiled scenery. Then, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, of course, is a surprise in itself!

The humility of the architecture in the grand scenery and the nature itself are simply breathtaking. The warmth of the welcome was in inverse proportion to the scale of the outside temperature. Randall Darwall’s advice to bring longjohns had been to the point. He might have added, “bring elastic clothes”—the meals were amazing! The school’s policy of inviting a diversity of students instead of centering on the young and brilliant makes for a very stimulating, non-competitive climate where creativity can prosper.

In our weaving class, we were quite pampered with attention because of its small size and the two skilled technical assistants, Amy Putansu and Fayette Watkis. Randall Darwall’s method of teaching (should I say, method of educating us?) and his generous sharing of expertise were excellent. Beyond that, he proved to be quite a slave driver. In combination, these characteristics make for a great working atmosphere. There was always another task around the corner just as we had nicely settled into a job. For example, a maltreated duvet donated by two staff members had been washed at too high a temperature and had shrunk into an interesting, non-usable form. Task: transformation into an auction piece. We set to work cutting it, dyeing it many times, punching holes, dyeing again, and bleaching until it became a piece of art. A similar task was the transformation of 12 horrid black pashmina shawls into beauties that fetched good prices at the auction. All that kept us on our toes. We learned a lot from each other’s knowledge; as the pace accelerated, personal limits were stretched and expanded. The

climax: the presentation walk-through and the auction itself.

My “Dutch merchant’s” mind figured that since you had to pay for working so hard, you might as well sleep as little as possible in order to keep the costs per hour low. With my persistent jet lag I got up at 5:30 AM in order to work before breakfast and before teaching sessions started.

A word on my classmates: what a fierce and fantastic bunch of women and what exquisite craftsmanship in weaving! The team spirit was great. There was respect for each other’s work, profound communication, and trans-cultural inspiration.

My hero was Suzi, mother of four who worked additional hours in the kitchen to finance the course. At times I felt quite spoiled being on scholarship. One incident of weavers skinny dipping has to be commented on, if the rumor has lived long enough! Yes, we went swimming in the ice-cold waters and yes, some weaving students weren’t wearing a thread. Taking the temperature of the water into account, it was an extremely short event. Aren’t we blessed with the gulfstream warming up our European shores?

What did I take home? On a general line: relief that such a place exists, a haven where one is pampered and nurtured in

order to work as an artist. There always was the feeling of too many things to be taken in—other interesting classes, the absolutely non-threatening performance sessions of visiting artist Dan Hurlin, fabulous cookies, the scenery...

On a subject-specific line: The freedom to feel emotion about cloth, inspiration in various ways which will be executed soon, and finally, the discovery of great colleagues and friends in the USA—the start of a network?

I have gained a sense of the state of crafts and craft-related design and the American market situation. From the teaching sessions it became obvious that there is a broad variety of approaches, from a craftsmanlike way to a more design-oriented way based on a firm Bauhaus tradition. The exchange between the various approaches was a great bonus for our class and may yet lead to amazing results for each participant. It strikes me as funny that I had to go to America to become aware of my own roots as a direct descendant—fourth generation—of Bauhaus weavers.

At home, I am reminiscing, weaving a piece inspired by the fragile lichen that grow in that wondrous place—“a thin place,” Randall Darwall called it. (I interpreted that to mean a magic place where different realities meet.) In my mind I am collecting places where I can go for inspiration and comfort. I already had two “thin” places on the European continent and now I can add a third, Haystack.

—*Monika E. Auch lives in Muiderberg, the Netherlands.*



Standing: Randall Darwall. Seated, second row: Judi Jetson, Amy Putansu, Bobbi Taylor, Monika Auch, Kate Dean. Seated, first row: Fayette Watkis, Monique Beaumont, Norma Navarro, Suzi Ballenger, Beryl Schmidt.