

Pam Rosenblatt

Cambridge's Susan Cheever: a weaver in the Swedish tradition



BECKY ASHENDEN

On one warm but charming June 11, 2014 day in Cambridge, Massachusetts, weaver Susan Cheever welcomed Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt into her home. Rosenblatt had previously picked up Cheever's business card at her art studio in Somerville during Somerville Open Studios in May 2014 because Rosenblatt enjoyed Cheever's colorful Swedish style woven items on display that Saturday afternoon. The two women got together several weeks later for the interview. A few days afterwards,

Rosenblatt emailed more questions, which Cheever cordially answered. And the finished product is an informative interview about Swedish style weaving. Please read on:

WHLR: Today is Tuesday, June 11, 2014, and *Wilderness House Literary Review* is interviewing Susan Cheever, a weaver. You currently live in Cambridge and have a studio in Somerville. Where are you originally from? And did you graduate high school and college?

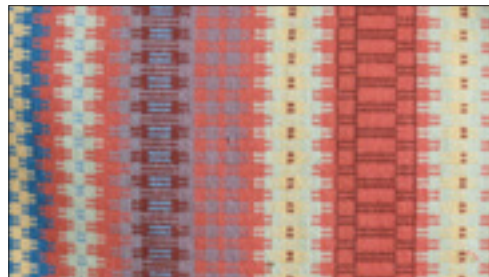
SC: I'm originally from Medfield, Massachusetts, not far away. And I attended school in Milton. I went to college in New Hampshire, and I went to college in California. So I have a B.A. in History.

WHLR: What type of weaver would you call yourself?

SC: I would say that I'm a weaver in the Swedish tradition. I weave mostly with cotton, cottolin, and linen. And I weave mostly table linens.

WHLR: What is Swedish weaving known for? Why do you enjoy Swedish weaving? And how long did it take you to catch on to Swedish weaving?

SC: Swedish weaving is known for very distinctive patterns, i.e. monks belt and rosepath, rep weave, which is a warp faced weave, used in both table runners and rugs. A warp faced weave means only the warp (or vertical) threads will show in the end product. Swedish weaving is also known for its distinctive colors, use of stripes, use of linen and cotton, espe-



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cially very fine threads. Textiles are used more in the Scandinavian countries -for decoration on tables and walls, and in the past, for warmth on their beds and sleighs, and insulation and color on their floors. I learned to weave in Maine many years ago from two women who had started their own business. Their teacher had learned her skills in Sweden, hence the use of Glimakra looms (counterbalance looms made in Sweden), and Swedish materials. Around 2004, I learned of Vav Stuga, a Swedish school in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, started and still operated by Becky Ashenden. Since then I have taken many classes with Becky. For me, it is a wonderful place to get inspired and learn from Becky and other weavers, to receive warm ambience and hospitality, and to weave more complex things than I would be able to put on my loom in my studio.

WHLR: Is Becky Ashenden a Master Swedish Weaver or a Master Weaver or simple a Weaver? What is her title? And what is her specialty in weaving?

SC: Becky learned to weave at a school in Sweden called Saterglantan, which is renowned

for its weaving and other traditional crafts. She started her own school, Vav Stuga, in Shelburne Falls, Ma. around 1991. She is a wonderful teacher, formulated her own course and methods for beginner. She also teaches classes in more complex weaves. In addition, she has published her own books, translated weaving books from Swedish to English, and helped to re-publish out-of-print books. She has an amazing amount of energy, is a wonderful teacher, and cares deeply about keeping traditional crafts alive.

WHLR: Please explain the Swedish weaving process from start to finish as efficiently as you can.

SC: There is no Swedish process. Weaving is weaving. The differences are in the techniques. Weavers who use counterbalance looms put the warp on from the back to front. Weavers using Jack looms put their warps on front to back! Putting a warp on a loom is the first step. People using table looms, tapestry looms or back strap looms have to do it differently.

WHLR: What is your specialty in Swedish weaving? Why?

SC: I don't have any specialty. I just happened to learn from Swedish trained teachers on a Swedish loom, and that is what I have continued to do. I do happen to love Swedish designs, especially monks belt. It is a technique where the weft threads pass over several warp threads, creating a float. So within a certain structure one can be very creative in both color and design. This is a very simplistic explanation and applies to many other structures.

WHLR: What is the most difficult thing about Swedish weaving to you? And what is the simplest thing to do in Swedish weaving?

SC: I don't even know how to answer this question and don't think it applies to anything. Since I am not mathematical, I would say I sometimes struggle to understand more complex weaves. A weaver has to read

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a 'draft' which explains everything from how long to make the warp, how to set it up on the loom and how to weave it.

I am better with my use of colors and design in simple weaves. That is one reason I enjoy going to Vav Stuga and doing more complex weaves - the hard work - setting up the loom - is already done for me!

WHLR: So you make napkins, rugs, tablecloths, and more items. When you make a tablecloth, is there one general style? Or are there a lot of different types of tablecloths?

SC: There are different styles and designs. And each weaver can create something different with their use of color.

WHLR: What types of looms are there? What are their names? What styles of weaving are there?

SC: There are three basic types of floor looms. A counter balance loom, developed in both Europe and the USA, a countermarche loom, which is similar to a counter balance loom, and a Jack loom, which was developed in the USA, and is still more popular here. Of course there are other looms, too - table looms, draw looms, tapestry looms, and the most basic and ancient, a back strap loom.

Swedish looms are just made of wood, and they're very easy to take apart. They're generally big because they have an overhead beater. They are held together with sturdy wooden pegs, hence easy to assemble and disassemble. You can have a 4 harness, 8 harness, 32 harness etc. Swedish looms are either counter balance or countermarche. And American looms are called Jack looms. You know, looms come in all sizes.

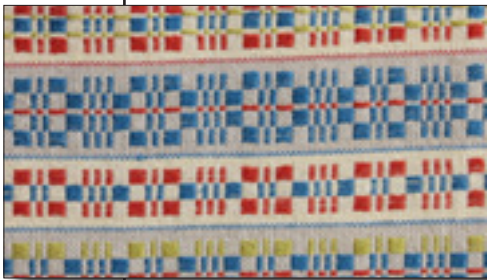
WHLR: Please explain some of the terms used in the Swedish weaving vocabulary, like warp, weft, shuttles, beating, and any additional terms that you find would be usual to write about in the arts article.

SC: These terms apply to all weaving:

WARP - The tightly stretched vertical threads that are attached to the loom.

WEFT - The horizontal threads that go between the warp threads to create a pattern.

SHUTTLE - The object held in the hand of



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the weaver containing a bobbin with the chosen warp threads.

SHED/BEATER/BEATING - The shuttle is passed between the open warp threads, called the shed, and then pushed together by the overhead beater. The threads on the bobbin unwind as it is passed back and forth. Beating must be light if one is making a fine table runner with linen or cotton, or very hard, if one is making a rug.

WHLR: Are you trained in other areas of art like painting, sculpture? Do you write? Do you play a musical instrument?

SC: No. I really did just fall into [weaving]. Like I said, it was living in Blue Hill, Maine and I think I had taken a weaving workshop in Cambridge years before. When I moved to Maine, this weaving school was there. And I really did fall into it ... so I started taking classes. I took a couple of classes and then they asked me to start weaving for them. Then I bought into the business "Peninsula Weavers". We did that for about 11 years. And then I moved back down [to Cambridge].

WHLR: Was your clientele basically around the Maine area? Or was it throughout New England?

SC: It was basically in the Maine area. Blue Hill is a big summer community. So we would sell a lot of items to the summer visitors.

WHLR: What is the future of weaving? You mentioned that the weaving industry is slowing down. But do you see the possibility of it gaining momentum – that a growing appreciation of weaving may happen? Do you see it as always being here?

SC: I definitely think there is an appreciation of [weaving]. And it's like the way our society is structured. Most people work with computers all day and don't get a chance to create something personal-handmade. And a lot of people get real satisfaction doing things with their hands. It's a craft. I think that's one of the big [advantages] is: doing things with their hands and creating something beautiful. And I think there's a lot of interest in it. Becky's basic classes are always full.

WHLR: What advice do you have for people interested in pursuing weaving?

SC: Try to take a class. Becky's beginner classes are five days. So you have to commit a little time. She is also creating shorter, more flexible classes. But, you know, you can buy a really simple table loom and try it yourself. That's probably a good way to do it, too, 'cause then you can try it out and if you want to pursue it, then you can find a place to take classes.



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There are good places to take classes around here, too. Not necessarily in the Swedish tradition. And the oldest weaving guild in the United States is right here in Boston at The Boston Weaver's Guild. I do notice that many members are mostly older women [at The Boston Weaver's Guild] because... so many more people work nowadays... so I wish weaving attracted more younger people. But I think it's hard.



WHLR: What type of person does weaving attract? Is it a "typical" person or people with different types of interests?

SC: It has to be someone who likes to do handworks. To be a weaver, you have to have a certain amount of patience to set up the loom. I think that is what a lot of people don't like about it 'cause it's very time consuming to set up the loom. And besides, everyone wants something in a hurry.

WHLR: Would you call rug weaving, or weaving in general, an art or a necessity? Or both?

SC: Now it's an art. It's not a necessity. In the 19th century, everyone had to weave their own clothing. And, in colder countries, they would weave coverings for their beds, coverings to put over themselves in their sleighs. But when clothing became made by industrial looms that didn't happen anymore. So it's definitely an art. It's not a necessity anymore. We go out and buy our clothes.

WHLR: Do you have any humorous stories about Swedish weaving that you would like to tell the readers of this article?

SC: Sorry to say I do not have any humorous stories. If anyone is interested in Swedish culture there is a nice Swedish Christmas Festive called SWEA, which is held the first weekend in December at the Cyclo-rama in Boston. For the past few years, I have sold my products there with several other weaving friends. There are other booths, music, and good food. A very Swedish tradition. And, of course, anyone interested in weaving should look up Vav Stuga in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts.

WHLR: Please add any information that you think will assist in making this article.

SC: Can't think of anything at the moment.

WHLR: Thank you for the interview!

SC: Thank you.