

“We have been thinking of the changes in dining habits in this particular decade. .. In the home it might be called the great “tray period”, with the centre interest of the T.V. set. Trays on laps, trays on stands, large trays on trolleys -- short and long, narrow and wide. Then, in the food area of the contemporary home we are surrounded by arborite and kindred surfaces on tables and counters. In short, we are as often informal as not.”

Mary Sandin and Ethel Henderson wrote about the “great tray period” in the January 1956 issue of “Loom Music” a publication the two weaving educators co-authored for more than two decades.<sup>1</sup> Happily, the reader - likely a weaver also facing the prospect of adapting her own hand weaving to this change “in social living” is reassured, “...today’s trends need not disturb us greatly, just so we realize what fits in theme with these needs, both in color and basic fibre.” (1) Sandin and Henderson go on (as they do in nearly every issue) to instruct the weaver how to create useful and beautiful textiles for the home.

This brief anecdote from “Loom Music” provides us a glimpse at how Sandin and her fellow weavers thought of weaving as a contemporary form. Readers of this text may recognize Mary Sandin as one of the founding members and first president of the Edmonton Weavers’ Guild. She was a master craftsperson, prize winning weaver (Banff School of Fine Arts Calendar 17) and co-founder of the Guild of Canadian Weavers and its testing program. Sandin was committed to sharing knowledge of weaving and did so throughout her life. It is telling that one of the Edmonton Weavers’ Guild’s influential early members was so focused on weaving as both relevant to daily life and responsive to the ways in which we live. The living legacy of Sandin and others like her, including the weavers whose work is presented in “Art in Ubiquity”, is one of self-reliance, dedication to craft and a focus on utility that recognizes the things we make have meaning not only because they are useful, but because they are used.

Artists working in textiles also recognize the potential of useful textiles to hold ideas. Household items reflect how we live and relate to one another making them a unique vehicle for the transmission of ideas and knowledge. Often culturally specific and sometimes deeply intimate, textiles have an uncanny capacity for evoking the body's fragility and the temporality of existence as both textiles (and one's body) degrade in use over time. In 2013, artist and weaver John Paul Morabito began a collaboration with photographer Laura Letinsky. “Stain” was one of the projects that resulted in which eight different spill patterns were woven into a set of napkins using a Jacquard loom. Enmeshing the traces of the social experience of a meal into a familiar textile form, Letinsky and Morabito’s project proposes that utilitarian textiles<sup>2</sup> provide a material

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<sup>1</sup> The two women initiated their publication while teaching at the Banff School of Fine Arts (now Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity) in the early 1940’s. In the 1944 Program Calendar for the Banff School, the education and achievements of both women are listed in great detail, establishing their authority and expertise in weaving theory and colour and design. (Banff Program Calendar 17)

<sup>2</sup> The napkins are useable and in use will collect more stains.

analog for a way of thinking about the world as “...dabs of wine, spots of oil, the juice of a tomato all recall shared experience and a social space where cultural memory builds.” In this project intangible experience is made visible through craft. Meaning is found in the making, and the residue of the past “...bleeds into the future.” (Morabito)

Another way in which meaning may be found in the making is in the weaver’s instrumentalization of craft at the loom. Here we may reflect on the process of weaving and acknowledge that the weaver will often encounter resistance from her materials, mechanical indifference from her loom and great uncertainty and even risk during the finishing process only to emerge at the other end with something amazing - cloth - pliable, absorbent and useful. A humble feat for sure, but one that few weavers will tire of. Why is this? I feel that there is an inherent satisfaction that comes from the application of intentional, mindful effort in the production of something for use by you, your community and your loved ones. In her keynote address to the Cultivating Craft conference hosted by the Canadian Federation of Crafts in 2016, Shannon Stratton discussed the potential of craft as a distinct way of being and moving through the world. “It is not,” she says, “the shape we make specifically, but the way we nudge that shape into being. It’s the care taken in making ideas sensible, visible and understandable. It is taking that care and making those ideas come to fruition that are the lessons I took from craft.” (Stratton) This sentiment is one that I hope my fellow weavers might recognize as the intangible and optimistic ethic of care enmeshed in every shot of her weaving shuttle.

In the October 1965 issue Mary Sandin and Ethel Henderson announced the end of their publication “Loom Music”. The announcement was accompanied by a statistical listing of the various types of projects included in their twenty-two year publication run. Ranking seventh (just behind upholstery) was “towel” featured in forty-five separate articles. (66) A staple of many a weaver’s production for sale or personal use, the tea towel is a handy format in which a new weaver may learn different structures or the seasoned weaver may experiment with new ideas. The inventiveness of the pieces exhibited in “Art in Ubiquity” attest to more than the skill and knowledge of the weaver. Each piece demonstrates a keen curiosity for how weaving works and the unique design potential of the form. “What if I used the bar code on a tin of milk to generate a stripe pattern?” for example, or “Would it be possible to use overshot in a double-weave block pattern?” In every sense “Art in Ubiquity” provides a snapshot of how members of the Edmonton Weavers’ Guild have been making their world since 1953. It is obvious that Mary Sandin’s legacy of generosity and knowledge sharing<sup>3</sup> persists in this vital community of weavers. Weavers who continue to cultivate community, sharing skills and inspiring new members to take up the craft, creating cloth as exquisite as it is humble.

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<sup>3</sup> Sandin continued to distribute back issues of “Loom Music” following the final issue. One gets a sense that Sandin and Henderson found great joy in sharing their knowledge of weaving closing their final issue happy to be known as “weaving people”. (Loom Music December 1965)

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## **Author Bio**

Mackenzie Kelly-Frère is an artist, writer and educator who has taught at the Alberta University of the Arts (formerly ACAD) since 2006. His textiles have been exhibited broadly in Canada and internationally. Mackenzie has also contributed texts to various publications including "Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture". His ongoing research focuses on textiles in contemporary art and the social history of weaving in Canada. Recently Mackenzie has undertaken the first level of the Guild of Canadian Weavers Master Weaver program.