

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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## ON THE OCCASION OF LILA NELSON'S 90TH BIRTHDAY

**Lila Nelson says,** *For much of my life, my favorite pastime was reading and my favorite mode of expression was writing. A change occurred in the 1960s when I assumed care of the textile collection at Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American folk museum in Decorah, Iowa.*

*The colorful, richly patterned clothing and bed covers that Norwegian farmers brought with them when they emigrated from Norway to America were often left to the Museum. And it was this collection which led to over a quarter of a century of studying, copying, reproducing, and teaching the varied traditions, and which continued until my retirement in 1991.*

*Most of the objects I wove during those years were used up, given away, or sold at various Vesterheim functions.*

*Since my retirement, I have woven tapestries on my upright 36-inch wide Fireside loom. My primary but not exclusive weft has been wool from Norwegian spelsau sheep and a sturdy cotton warp (fiskegarn), both from Norway. More recently I ventured farther afield in both materials and techniques, but spelsau and fiskegarn still predominate. My purpose is to express my joys, my sorrows, my concerns, whatever comes my way, and to share them freely with whoever pauses to look.*

*Now, I have moved to a smaller apartment and have sold my tapestry looms. I have returned to my earlier favorite pastimes of reading and writing.*

from an interview with FRANCIE IVERSON  
and PHYLLIS WAGGONER

**Photos of Lila's tapestries by Sara Moe**

You may contact Lila at:  
Lila Nelson  
The Hermitage at Lynblomsten #111  
1440 Midway Parkway  
St. Paul, MN 55108  
lilanelson@usfamily.net  
651-645-5303

Lila Nelson at a reception celebrating her honorary doctorate from Luther College in 2006. picture from Vesterheim magazine Vol. 4, No.1 2006



## THE LILA NELSON COLLECTION AT VESTERHEIM

BY LAURANN GILBERTSON, CHIEF CURATOR

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum has a wonderful collection of textiles woven by Lila Nelson of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In addition to being Registrar and Curator of Textiles at Vesterheim for twenty-seven years, Lila was very involved with the museum's folk art education program. Through textile artifacts, Norwegian instructors, and textile experiences in Norway, Lila was inspired to learn traditional techniques. After she learned the most common historical patterns, colors, and materials, she began to experiment. She tried new patterns on old threadings and she combined multiple techniques in a single piece.

Vesterheim is pleased to have Lila's examples of both traditional and creative interpretations of Norwegian weaving techniques. There are seventy-one woven textiles in total. The greatest number (38) are tapestry, both pictorial and geometric. Thirteen are *dansk brogd*, a boundweave pickup technique that Lila and husband Marion (former Executive Director of Vesterheim) discovered on a coverlet in an antique store in Oslo. Subsequent research revealed that the technique was special to Agder County in southern Norway. Another regional technique from southern Norway is *Vestfoldsmett*,

a brocaded plain weave. A piece at Vesterheim, a large wall hanging woven in 1987, toured museums in the U.S. and Norway twice!



*Vestfold hanging*. Vesterheim—2002.049.002.

Several pieces at Vesterheim show Lila's creative combination of loom-controlled and weaver-controlled techniques. A tapestry-woven Foolish Virgin stands out against a background of *H's* (*harrender*).



*Foolish Virgin* 11"x 9 1/2".  
Vesterheim—2011.032.018.  
(Note the three-dimensional skirt. ed.)

After retiring from Vesterheim in 1991, Lila concentrated on pictorial tapestry. She often explored themes, such as the runic alphabet and Norse mythology. (*Fenris Wolf* and *Yggdrasil the World Tree*).



*The Wolf That Ate the Sun* 11 1/2"x 16".  
Vesterheim—2011.032.030.





***The Tree of Life Surrounded by the Midgard Serpent***  
3'5"x2'3" Vesterheim—2011.032.055.  
Lila explains, "Odin has transformed himself into an eagle.  
The squirrel named Ratatoskr scurries up and down the tree  
with messages."



***Comb Goddess*** 13"x 18"  
Vesterheim—2011.032.034.

Nature  
appears as  
realistic and  
abstracted  
animals and  
plants. Lila  
has long  
been  
interested in  
ancient and

global cultures, so she has woven a series with symbols of Navajo life and folklore (see p. 8), as well as a series based on petroglyphs and archaeological finds (*Comb Goddess*).

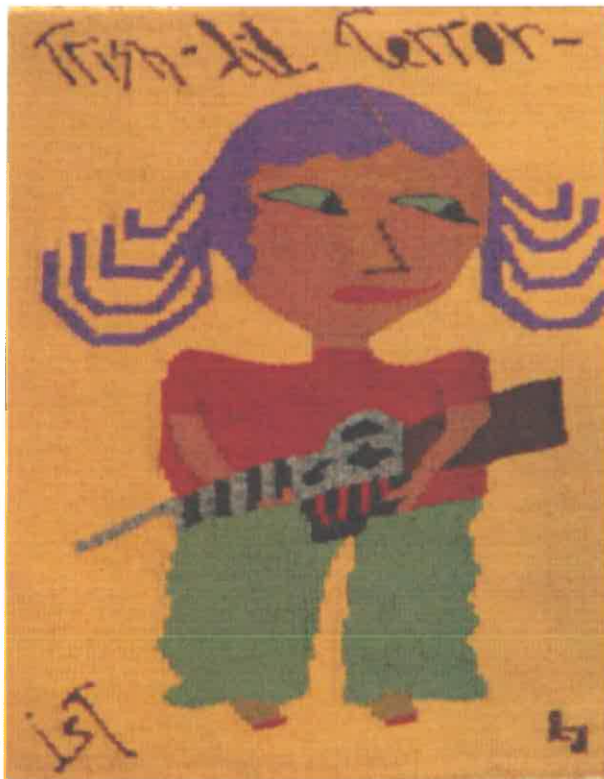
Some tapestries were woven in reaction to current events and issues: greed (*Empty Bowls* and *Famine*) and terrorism (*Trish Li'l Terrorist* and *Tree of Death*).



***Empty Bowls*** 13"x11" Vesterheim—2011.032.031.



***Famine*** 14"x12". Given to Vesterheim for a fund raiser.



**Trish the Terrorist 15"x11" Vesterheim—2011.032.008.**

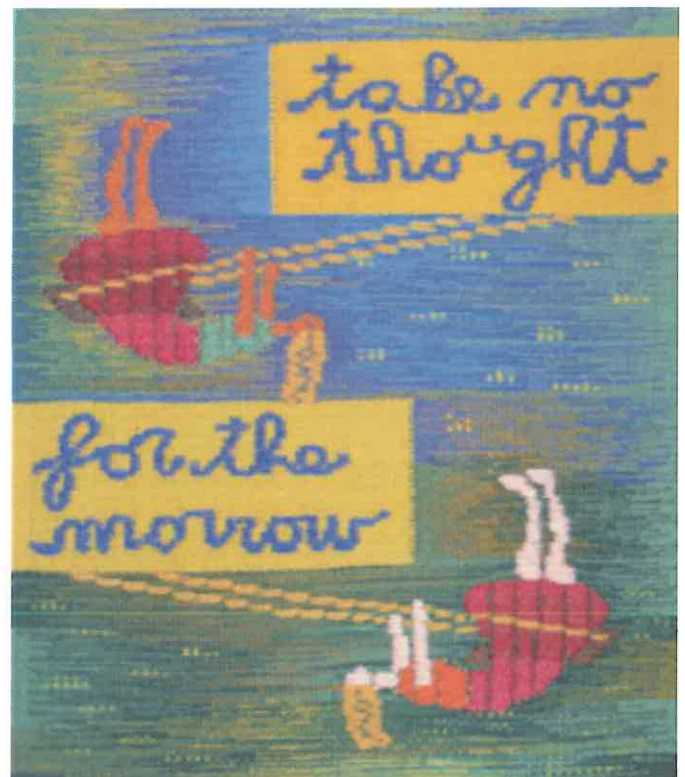
Lila's love of language is an overriding theme. Letters, phrases, and entire poems appear on tapestries, like *Cat at the Loom* and *The Swingers*.



**Cat at the Loom 41"x15".  
Vesterheim—2011.032.058.**

And the cat set up  
its loom  
in the corner  
there it stood for  
a hundred years  
beat in both sticks  
and straw  
and all the chaff that  
lay on the floor—  
and then  
the weaving was  
finished!

translation by Heather Torgenrud



**The Swingers 19"x17".**



**Large Flower exhibited 2005  
in "Frisk og Flink," the  
special show for the  
Conference on Norwegian  
Woven Textiles.**

Lila has shifted concentrations once again. She is no longer weaving so that she can spend more time reading and writing. Lila has generously donated some tapestries for the museum collection and some to be used to fundraise for Vesterheim. Watch for Lila's tapestries and weavings at museum events, such as Nordic Brunch (April 21, 2012) and the Biennial Benefit Auction (October 19, 2012). Several tapestries will soon be sold on eBay to create a fund to help bring folk art instructors from Norway to teach in Decorah.

#### THE LILA NELSON COLLECTION

can be studied by appointment.  
Contact Laurann Gilbertson at 563-382-9681 or  
lgilbertson@vesterheim.org.



# LILA'S CRADLE LOOM LEGACY

BY NANCY ELLISON

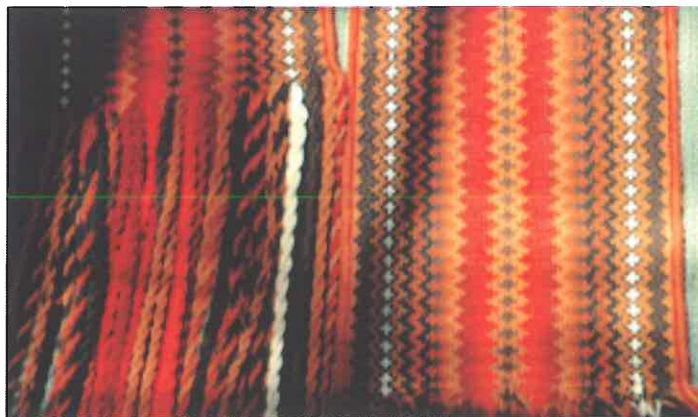
One of many accomplishments that Lila Nelson is noted for during her years at Vesterheim is the development of cradle looms based on the 1849 loom in the museum collection.



**Cradle Loom in the Vesterheim collection—LC6695.**  
Photo by Nancy Ellison.

Lila said that at first no one was sure what the object was or what it was used for. It was remarked that it resembled a doll's cradle. Later, when it was confirmed that it was a loom, the name "cradle loom" continued to be used and Lila used that term in the booklet she wrote in 1977. (*Norwegian Cradle Loom* by Lila Nelson, published by Vesterheim, 1977)

Originally, these looms were used to weave geometric slit tapestry bands used to trim clothing, such as an apron in the museum collection. Besides these bands, the booklet gives many other ideas for uses for cradle looms, such as weaving small tapestries with string heddles and a shed stick. Cradle looms could also tension warp for card or tablet weaving.



**This example of a cardwoven belt was woven on a floor loom. It is a belt for the Telemark national costume. Vesterheim—2011.403.005.**

Lila has often remarked how convenient cradle looms are. "You can tuck them under your arm and take them with you. There is room inside for your yarn, scissors, and other supplies." Countless numbers of weavers, rosemalers, wood carvers, and others have enjoyed cradle looms thanks to Lila Nelson.



**Lila with her cradle loom.** Photo by Nancy Ellison.

**Nancy Ellison** is teaching a cradle loom weaving class at Vesterheim July 14, 2012. She has done a small loom weaving video (available from her) which includes cradle looms. You can see a 10 minute video filmed at her farm and broadcast on KMSQ TV by clicking on "Off90" on her website [www.EllisonSheepFarm.com](http://www.EllisonSheepFarm.com). Phone her at 506-732-5281.

LILA NELSON —

## THE SOUL OF THE SCANDINAVIAN WEAVERS

### STUDY GROUP BY ROBBIE LA FLEUR MOORE

Lila is a shining example to us all in so many of her life choices. She was passionately devoted to building the textile collection and programs of the Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum. She is well-read and politically astute and a devoted friend to many. And her weaving! I know I speak for all the current and past attendees of the Scandinavian Weavers Study Group when I rank her as the top inspirational member over all the years of the group.

Lila's steady and prolific pace of weaving was an inspiration. With a deep knowledge of many weave structures, she chose to concentrate on the type of weaving that would provide a steady challenge to her development. Tapestry gave her the opportunity to grow artistically and technically.

Her images could be whimsical or political, many times both. She wove a girl on a swing (p. 4) that was charming without being sentimental, and an Abu Ghraib image both beautiful and brutal.



**Tree of Death 29"x25" Vesterheim—2011.032.051 .Crucifixion at Abu Ghraib.**

In other pieces she worked with letters to augment an image, or lettering became the image. She used Sami runic letters as design elements.

Lila explored technique and materials to

enhance her images. Traditional Scandinavian joining methods became design elements in some weavings; in others, she used hatching more common in French tapestry. And why not incorporate a variety of yarns in one piece? Lila made it work.

The yarn lining her shelves and plucked for her pieces tended towards deep, saturated colors. She added

unexpected contrast colors with an admirable sense of just what was needed to make her palette alive and engrossing. With color too, change was the constant in Lila's work.



**The Language of Friendship 27"x19". Lila says this piece honors the great friendship between her husband, Marion, and their good friend, David.**



**Innuith Throat Singers 23"x27" Vesterheim—2011.032.019.**

Playing on her interest in the Arctic, she wove two Eskimo women facing one another, setting herself the challenge of working in a limited set of colors. It's typical of Lila's path—explore, move on, break the rules.

Happy Birthday, Lila. The Scandinavian Weavers have inspiration to weave for decades.



LUTHER COLLEGE  
CITATION FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF FINE ARTS, *HONORIS CAUSA*  
LILA NENTWICK NELSON

Lila Nentwick Nelson was born and raised in Long Prairie, Minnesota. Her classmates from the small town might not be surprised that she is here receiving an honorary degree today, though they may be confused as to which of her talents she became known for once she left town. Her jobs have been varied: working a switchboard, teaching rural school after graduation from St. Cloud State, doing social work, plotting weather maps while in the Air Force in Germany, and being a scholar with a Master's degree in English from the University of Minnesota. However, it is her work with the Norwegian American Museum first as Registrar and later as Textile Curator, teacher, and weaver for which we honor her today. These areas of interest unfolded after her marriage to Scandinavian scholar and Art Historian Dr. Marion Nelson. Soon after their wedding in 1957, the couple took a research trip to Norway where Lila began to appreciate Norway and its culture as she studied at the Oslo International Summer School.

Learning to weave began upon her return to St. Paul with a succession of excellent teachers and sturdy equipment. She was soon hired by the agricultural arm of the University of Minnesota for education outreach in rural Minnesota. She taught various fiber techniques as she honed her own technical knowledge and began to participate in the revival of Norwegian weaving, an endeavor for which she has become known. From that time her sense of personal artistic expression has expanded as she developed into a noted Mid-Western textile artist.

In 1964 Vesterheim Museum's first Board of Directors asked Marion and later Lila to catalogue the collection of some 7,000 items. In those pre-computer days Lila became Registrar, a job she carried on while commuting weekends and summers from St. Paul. Her past administrative and organizational skills were a benefit as she organized, photographed, researched, and cared for artifacts. As the Museum was renovated and expanded, it became important that someone become Textile Curator to supervise storage, maintenance, acquisition, research, and display of textiles in the collection. Classes at Winterthur Museum and at the University of Minnesota as well as consultations with textile specialists, most notably Aagot Noss at the Norwegian Folk Museum, helped to prepare her for the enormous task of supervising this most important and delicate of collections.

In addition to the curatorial aspects of her job, Lila also embraced its strictly educational aspects. She helped to begin the *Handverk* School, the educational program at Vesterheim, led and taught various arts tours to Norway, presented workshops both here and abroad, and helped establish both local and state weaving guilds. Lila Nelson has published various articles on Norwegian textiles and is a popular speaker at various fiber arts venues where her reputation for excellence is well known.

Retirement from Vesterheim in the early 90s slowed only Lila's number of trips taken monthly between Decorah and St. Paul as she placed the collection, then numbering around 20,000 items, in the hands of her capable colleagues. She continues to weave, write, lecture, maintaining both the excellence of her own work and the quality of the Norwegian textile tradition in the US. For her contributions she was awarded the St. Olav medal in 2001. We join the King and Government of Norway as we honor her today. Therefore, Mr. President, on behalf of the faculty of Luther College, I present to you Lila Nentwick Nelson as a Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts, *Honoris Causa*.

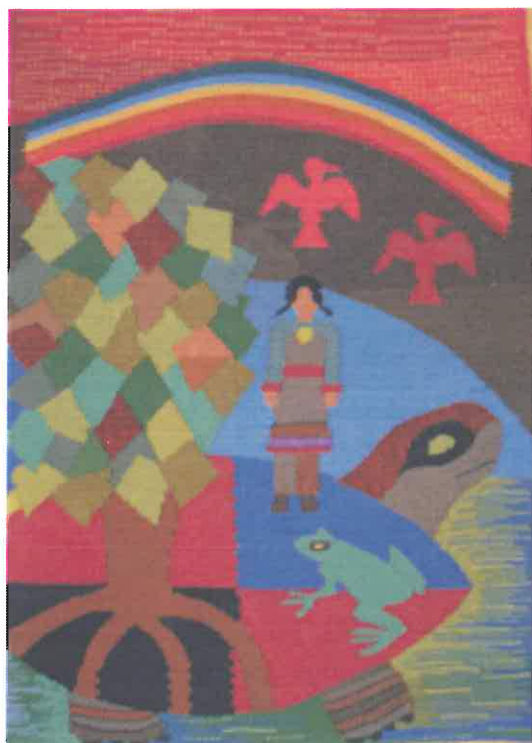
Kathleen Martinson  
Associate Professor of Art  
May 21, 2006  
Decorah, Iowa

Lila's 5-shaft dansk bragd  
hanging 50"x28"





*Two Houses: Prospect Park and Vesterheim dukagang 26"x11". Given to Vesterheim to sell as a fundraiser.*



*"A Turtle Holds the World" 23"x16".*

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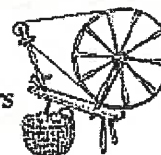
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Please direct comments, suggestions, and ideas for  
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Mary Lønning Skoy, editor  
7200 York Ave. South #120  
Edina MN 55435 USA  
952-831-4512  
[maryskoy@hotmail.com](mailto:maryskoy@hotmail.com)