

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. X No. 1

Nov, 2003

## 2003 Textile Study Tour to Norway

by Kay Larson

### PART I

For three weeks in June-July 2003, an enthusiastic group of Norwegian Textile Guild members visited museums, schools, private studios, and interpretive centers in southern Norway. The 2003 Textile Study Tour to Norway, meticulously planned and superbly led by Vesterheim's Curator of Textiles, Laurann Gilbertsen, provided a stimulating mix of opposing themes: traditional and modern, primitive and complex, rural and urban, home-art and industry. All this was accomplished while introducing tour participants to areas of Norway rich in textile history and providing unforgettable scenery along the way.

#### JUNE 21: Bergen

The tour began in Bergen, where the first two excursions set the tone for contrasting experiences to be enjoyed on the forthcoming tour. Rainy weather did little to dampen spirits on the short ferry ride to *Lyngheisenteret* (the Heathland Center), located on the island of Lygra north of Bergen. This internationally recognized cultural center is dedicated to presenting and preserving a way of life prevalent in coastal areas of Europe for over five thousand years. Although rapidly disappearing from the modern landscape, at one time farmers from Portugal to Norway successfully lived on the sparse soils of coastal areas through careful management of the low-growing but nutritious heather. A combination of yearly grazing, burning, and harvesting allowed farmers to make a living by maintaining domestic animals, a stable system that perfectly balanced people, plants and animals. Of particular importance in coastal Norway was the small but hardy Nordic sheep, the *villsau*, a thrifty meat and wool producer whose ability to survive out of doors all winter without extra feed or shelter left farmers free to supplement their livelihood through fishing. Unfortunately, all the *villsau* at the Heathland Center remained shyly out of sight during our visit except for one personable black lamb, an excellent candidate for tour mascot. Sadly, he remained at the Center.<sup>1</sup>



A friendly orphaned *villsau* lamb at the Heathland Center.

Shifting gears from thousand-year-old traditions to the leading edge of modern textile art, we returned to Bergen to view a retrospective of the work of Bente Særtrang on exhibition at the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art. Larger-than-life textile pieces from three decades demonstrated that Særtrang has always challenged convention while working within the textile medium. The bright colors and bold style typical of the 80s in her earlier work gave way to a more reflective use of color and the exploration of pattern as an element of the textile language in later years, but a degree of political comment was evident throughout. Later work included an interesting dark piece pierced by a series of nails and several works depicting subtle hanging folds, an illusion of draped material executed on a flat surface. (The malodorous pile of automobile tires assembled in the center of the

final gallery was perhaps more engaging of the senses than intended.)

<sup>1</sup> Further information about the European Heathlands can be found in *Fem tusen år med flamer: Det europeiske lyngheilandskapet*, by Svein Haaland, Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke AS, 2002.

Although Særtrang has worked primarily with print on canvas, and her pieces are never in the guise of domestic use, these provocative works nonetheless celebrate textiles. In the assessment of our guide, Assistant Professor Jon Pettersen, Særtrang is among the most important artists working in Norway today<sup>2</sup>

Following the exhibition, the group walked to the National College of Art and Design, where Professor Pettersen delivered a lecture on trends in Norwegian textile design. Pettersen, a talented designer whose specialties include an expertise in jacquard technology, discussed the textile art program at the College, where degrees are offered at the Bachelor's and Master's levels. A slide show detailed the transition from traditional textile art to the progressive work of artists such as Frida Hansen, Hannah Ryggen, Synnøve Anker Aurdal, and Else Maria Jakobsen. He concluded with examples of imaginative and decorative clothing, furniture covers, and monumental textile artwork being produced in Norway today, using materials as diverse as metallic thread, paper and plastic.

In the evening, those tour members who had opted to knit the mitten project assembled in the lobby of the hotel to learn two-colored casting-on from tour member and project organizer Susan Kolstad, while tourists of varying nationalities peered over our shoulders with interest.

#### JUNE 22: Bergen

A brief bus ride brought the group to the Hordamuseet south of Bergen, where the aspiring tapestry artists among us were awed by Ragna Breivik's magnificent series of tapestries. Woven from original watercolors painted by Gerhard Munthe that depict the medieval ballad of Åsmund Frægdagjeva (kidnapped princess, fearsome trolls, gallant knight who overcomes all whilst winning princess and half of kingdom), these ten tapestries were woven over a period of 25 years while Breivik worked as a teacher at the Art and Handcraft School in Bergen. Munthe's distinctive images were creatively translated into textile form by Breivik's meticulous process of dying the raw

wool and then blending the desired colors during carding. This ability to see beyond the watercolor to the underlying impression being conveyed by the painter finally satisfied the exacting Munthe that a weaver could successfully translate his artwork into tapestry.<sup>3</sup>

Before leaving Hordamuseet, the group enjoyed an educational visit to the conservation lab. There we reviewed the preventative measures and steps of intervention required for textile preservation, an important reminder of the relative fragility of artifacts in our common field of interest. We were also shown the film, *Veving på Upstadgogn i Sør-Noreg* (*Weaving on the Upright Loom in Southern Norway*), an overview of Berta Liarbø's weaving on the loom first documented in Marta Hoffmann's ground-breaking book, *The Warp-Weighted Loom*. Although the narrative was in Norwegian, the language of the hands was clear as Liarbø first warped and then wove a coverlet in various weft-faced techniques. For those of us scheduled to take the warp-weighted loom workshop, the efficient hand movements and methodical steps of a master weaver appeared quite obvious on the film....<sup>4</sup>

Another bus ride brought us to the Osterøy Museum, where a number of the warp-weighted loom coverlets typical of Hordaland (and detailed in the Liarbø film) were on exhibit. These coverlets are composed of a variety of weft-faced techniques, primarily horizontal stripes and pick and pick, but also square weave, lightning weave, krokbragd, brocading, and the selvage to selvage supplemental weft technique that extends pick and pick patterns. On a tour of the old buildings collected on the grounds at Osterøy (one of many such tours during the trip that always revealed surprises) we were introduced to the juniper walls typical of this district, a system of ventilation in which one wall of a barn was composed of rows of juniper brush systematically inserted (woven) into rows of joists. According to our guide, such a wall could last up to 100 years.

---

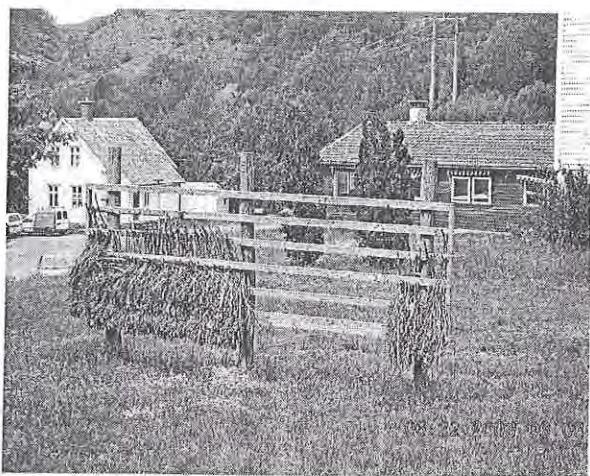
3 Photographs of the Åsmund Frægdagjeva tapestries are included in *Ragna Breivik: Et liv ved veven*, by Åse Enerstvedt, Eide forlag, 1991.

4 Photographs of warping and weaving on the warp-weighted loom, plus loom plans with dimensions, appear in *Oppstad-veven*, by Anna Østerbø Kåstad, Osterøy Museum, 2000.

---

2 Thanks to tour member Katharine Dickerson, Professor at Alberta College of Art and Design, for her thoughts on this exhibition.





An open-air exhibit at the Osterøy Museum, showing the weaving of a juniper "ventilation" wall.

Following a welcome treat of the local Hardingake served with jam, we returned to town to attend an evening presentation by Solveig Hisdal. Although an internationally acclaimed designer who is often considered the driving force behind the fashion sweater industry in Norway, Solveig Hisdal gives the appearance of a soft-spoken, unassuming woman. By returning to the Norwegian tradition of dressing the bride in the most sumptuous costume possible, her goal has been to design beautiful sweaters that focus attention on the woman wearing them. Much of her inspiration is drawn from traditional folk costumes, but not necessarily from sweaters. Instead, she searches out the distinctive decorative touches such as silk brocades, beading, and fancy embroidery, that were added to the caps, aprons, shoes, and particularly bodices of many costumes. Without copying the patterns themselves, Hisdal distills the essence of these elements into her distinctive, award-winning designs.

#### JUNE 23: Bergen – Arna – Voss

Excitement was palpable as we departed Bergen for the Oleana Factory in Arna. What a privilege to have co-owners Kolbjørn Valestrand and wife Signe Aarhus describe their business and show us their factory. Both had begun their careers in large textile companies, where "received wisdom" dictated that good design would not sell, and that labor-intensive textiles must be produced in Asia. Fighting this trend, they launched Oleana in 1992

in an old textile factory outside of Bergen, wanting to take Norway's tradition of knitting onto the world stage. Good design, high quality, and a combination of the best of handwork with the best of technology were their guiding principles, along with a desire to break away from industry norms. One telling example: where textiles factories typically emphasize machinery over employees, Oleana departed from the paid-by-piecowork mentality and instituted salaries and profit sharing, resulting in a highly skilled and loyal work force. Little wonder that Signe Aarhus was named Norwegian Business Woman of the Year just prior to our visit!

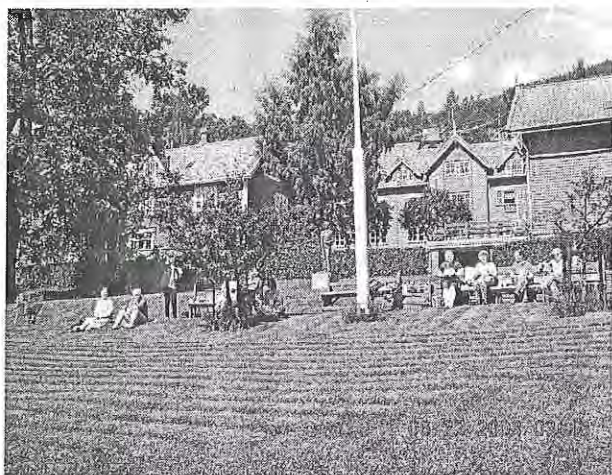


Signe Aarhus, co-owner of Oleana, describes one of the company's early knitting machines.

During our top to bottom tour of the factory, the delicate balance of machinery vs. handwork was evident. Fifteen expensive Japanese knitting machines (acquired after Oleana began to prosper) produced sweater pieces in one room, while employees closely inspected and trimmed completed pieces in another. We walked past tables stacked high with sleeves of one pattern, sweater backs of another, into rooms where other employees worked on linking machines (for producing a knit-like join between sweater pieces), or sat at sewing machines attaching decorative ribbon. Aarhus explained that many of their employees are cross-trained at these various tasks to provide a more stimulating work environment. Huge steamers produced the finishing touch before each sweater was inspected for the last time, folded with tissue paper, and fitted with an Oleana wrapper. The



factory tour concluded with a very satisfying visit to the sales showroom, after which we enjoyed a light meal in the company lunchroom. There we received Aarhus' personal instruction in the proper method for assembling and wrapping a *mat pakke* (lunch packet: several slices of bread, cheese, and sliced meat wrapped in parchment paper), an essential skill for our upcoming stay at Voss Folk High School.



Lunch break—workshop participants enjoy the lake view while eating lunch on the lawn at Voss Folk High School.



An Oleana employee sews decorative ribbon onto a sweater. Like many of the employees at the factory, she is wearing an Oleana sweater.

Our arrival at Voss Folk Museum, our next stop, was circuitous to say the least. Astray on the little community's back roads in a 45-passenger bus, our intrepid driver exhibited his virtuosity in vertical backing, 20-point turning, and judging distances to a micron, while extracting us from situations that came close to requiring an industrial crane. Once we arrived at the Museum, a steady rain kept some from exploring the

collection of farm buildings, but the display inside the museum included many interesting folk art exhibits. Of particular note were the following words to live by: "Necessity can teach the naked woman to spin," "One must know how to spin before one can knit," and the all-time favorite, "When the sock is thrice darned, it is enough." With the wells of wisdom refreshed by generations of women's hard-won experience, we proceeded to our comfortable lodgings at Voss Folk High School, met our teachers, and, since it was midsummer's eve, some of us gathered 7 wildflowers to put under our pillows in hopes of dreams of the future. (Excerpt from diary: flowers sopping wet, me too, no dreams came thru plastic baggie.)

#### JUNE 24-29: Voss

What a beautiful location for a week of weaving! The school, a collection of quaint, red-painted buildings, is set on a hillside overlooking the mirror-like Lake Vangsvatnet. Each morning after breakfast we faithfully made our *mat pakke* for lunch (as instructed), and devoted the rest of the day to our individual workshops, ranging from the primitive (warp-weighted loom) to the complex (*skillbragd*) to the exacting (tapestry), each detailed in individual reports.

It so happened that we arrived in Voss at the same time as the international sporting event *Extreme Sports Week 2003*. This meant that by midweek, when the weather cleared, we could regularly see 20 to 30 (and sometimes over 60) colorful paragliders serenely sailing overhead, having just leaped off the towering cliffs behind the school. Daytime breaks and evenings were further enlivened by presentations from our talented fellow tour members and teachers: Katharine Dickerson's involved and imaginative textile artistry and research into Salish (Native American) weaving; Bonnie Datta's 6-hole tablet weaving system recorded on Excel, and 4 shaft, 12 block crackle weave; Judith Krone's overshot blended drafts; tapestry teacher Ingebjørg Vaagen's presentation on Norwegian tapestry weavers; and warp-weighted loom teacher Marta Kløve Juuhl's show on ryas from Hardanger. The knitting group also coalesced in breaks and evening gatherings, knitting and ripping (some ripping more than knitting) until most had mastered the dreaded, but very cool, cable cuff.



Towards the end of our stay we enjoyed a traditional Voss dinner that featured potatoes and bacon with *flatbrød* over *gammel ost* and syrup (the latter pair definitely an acquired taste),



Tour members and local residents admire the results of the study tour's three workshops at Voss Folk High School.



**KAFFI-BUSKE:** 82 år gamle Lila Nelson hadde vove eit bilete som ho kalla coffee-bush, eller kaffibuske på godt norsk. Foto: Jan-Egil Dyvik

Lila Nelson and her tapestry, "*Coffee Bush*", made an appearance in the Hordaland newspaper, along with an article about the tour's week-long workshops in Voss.

*rommegrøt*, potato-cauliflower dumplings with rutabaga, smoked sheep, smoked pork, and smoked salmon, a boiled milk curd known as *dravla* (another acquired taste), with a dessert that everyone could appreciate, *molte* cream and *krumkake*. The evening program of entertainment included local stories and songs by our lively

school representative Kiss Gjersvik, and a delightful bit of fiddling by tour member Barbara Overby on her new Hardanger fiddle. For a finale to our Voss experience, we proudly displayed the efforts from our week of hard work in an evening "workshop show" that attracted members of the community and the local newspaper.

## WARP-WEIGHTED LOOM WORKSHOP

Kay Larson

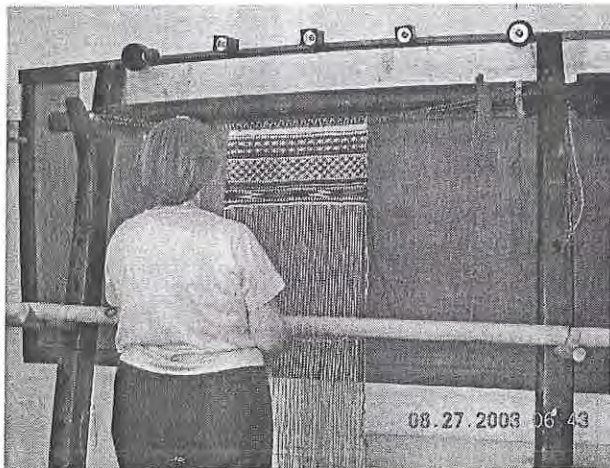
Our teacher was Marta Kløve Juuhl, a high school art teacher and talented textile artist who weaves church textiles and traditional fabrics as a sideline. It was this latter specialization that led her to document a warp-weighted loom coverlet-weaving tradition in the community of Arna, a tradition that was in danger of disappearing. The resulting exhibition, *From Bed to Wall*, is represented in a colorful poster with informative text, a translation of which appears in the *Norwegian Textile Letter*, February 2001. We were all quite eager to learn from such an expert, and soon discovered that in addition to her other qualifications, Marta is an excellent teacher with a wonderful sense of humor.

Marta brought five large warp-weighted looms that were assembled and attached to the walls of our classroom with boards and brackets. These looms typically leaned against the wooden wall of a home and were nailed to a beam or the wall, not a desirable option at the school. Ann Haushild's loom was an actual antique, blackened by smoke and perforated by insect holes, the rest were reproductions. Since the looms were so tall, Marta brought 5 low benches for us to stand on for the early part of our weaving, a convenience used by the Liarbøs as documented in Hoffmann's *Warp-Weighted Loom*. Also provided were the warping material, a coarse unbleached 10/3 linen, and the weft material, Hillesvåg Thick 2-ply spælsau-blend wool yarn in 6 traditional colors: red, gold, green, blue, brown, and white.

The first step in the warping process was to make a braided cord twice as long as the width of the loom's top beam. Tripled strands of weft yarn were used for the braid, and a single length of warp was included with one of the strands. Next we inserted



pegs into the side pieces of the loom on which to measure the warp, one peg on one side and three on the other one side to make the lease cross. The warp was approximately 6 feet in length and

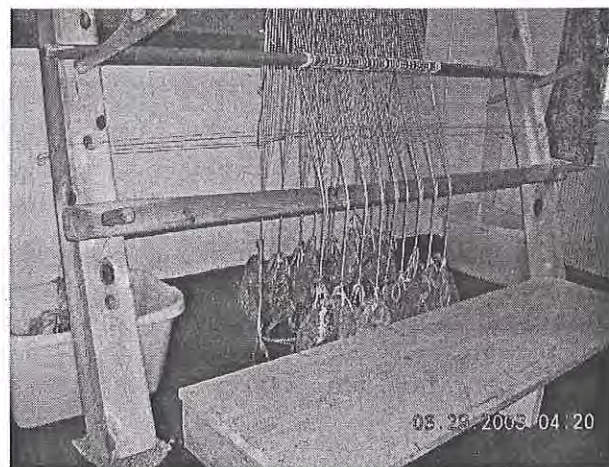


*Ann Haushild works at her antique warp-weighted loom.*

composed of 100 doubled strands. The single peg on one side produced a slight shed that separated the warp stretched across the loom into two halves, which we tied tightly with a length of weft. The braided cord was passed through the two halves of the lease cross, and the warp was then carried to the top beam, where the cord was strung between pegs at either end of the beam. The warp loops were dispersed along the cord, about 2 doubled loops per cm, and a large rug needle threaded with a strand of warp material was used to attach the cord to the beam by sewing through holes drilled along the beam's length.

With the warp suspended from the top beam, the warp loops near the floor were cut to separate the two tied groups (now front and back), the shed rod was placed on pegs towards the bottom of the loom, and one group of warp threads was placed in front of this rod while the other hung behind. Next the warp was weighted with stones, which were pre-measured, with weights written on them and loops of string tied through holes drilled in each stone. Warp bundles were weighted in pairs, front and back, with 4 or 5 doubled warps in each bundle, and it was important that each half of a pair had a similar weight. A weight of approximately 250g was figured for each doubled warp thread, so that a stone of 1 kg (or pair of

stones equaling 1 kg) would be tied to a 4 warp-thread bundle. After all the warp threads were weighted, a length of warp was used to make two separate crocheted bands across the front and back warp threads, one doubled warp per stitch, except for the warp threads at the edge of each bundle, which were combined into one stitch. The heddle rod supports were then inserted into the sides of the loom, and the heddle rod placed on top of the supports in front of the warp threads. A ball of cotton seine twine was tied to the heddle rod, and heddles were formed by passing the ball behind a warp in the 'back' group, bringing the heddle ball forward and under the heddle rod and back under the previous heddle in a buttonhole stitch, then passing it through the forward warps again to catch the next 'back' warp thread. When heddle tying was complete, the heddle rod was brought forward and place in the Y of the supports to check that there were no mistakes in the shed.



*The working mechanism of the warp-weighted loom—heddle rod, shed rod, and stone weights.*

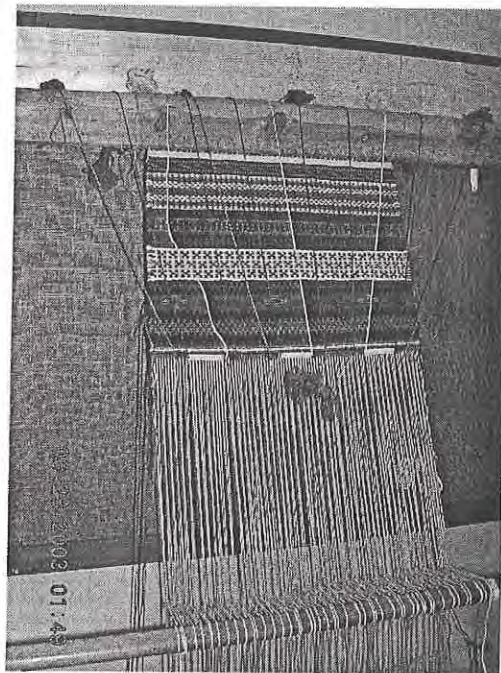
Weft bobbins, or *dokker* (dollies – and they did look a bit like the knot dolls tied from the corner of a scarf) were made by wrapping weft material in a figure 8 around forefinger and thumb to form the beginning of the 'head,' then making loops of about 18 inches, wrapping the weft material tightly 2 times around the head after each loop. Weft was drawn from the outside of the dokker.

Finally we were ready to put into practice those efficient hand movements and master-weaverly techniques that seemed so natural on the Liarbø film. For most of us (with the exception of Mary Erikson, an experienced warp-weighted loom weaver) it was our first encounter with weaving from the top down. Operating the sheds was quite easy and natural, if a bit more time consuming than tromping on a treadle. Similarly, the dokker seemed to be a very efficient method for handling a lot of weft material. Weft was easy to drawn out and, more importantly, it was convenient to deposit the dokker in a peg hole, resting on top of the beam, or on the heddle support pegs, not a possibility if using a stick or boat shuttle. Waving the weft also proved to be no problem when working from the top down, since the decreasing shed close to the weaving gripped the waves sufficiently. Beating the weft into place after several rows using the slightly curved wooden sword-like beater was not only efficient, it was fun—too fun as it turned out, since the weft could easily be over-beaten with this mix of warp, weft, sett, and enthusiasm.

The part that seemed most unusual about this form of weaving was the necessity of carrying the weft material along the selvage. When a new color was introduced, a sizeable weft end was left dangling, to be absorbed in the selvage. Similarly, bobbins that were discontinued were not broken off but added to the selvage (hence the importance of having a convenient place to put the idle bobbins). This meant that at any one time there could be 6 or more weft threads in each selvage. Additionally, each time the bobbin exited the shed it was looped around the selvage bundle in such a way that the weft was locked in place. At first it seemed bothersome and awkward to continually check that dangling weft threads did not bunch up when locked by each subsequent bobbin. However, with practice the technique became more automatic, and the advantage in easily adding and discontinuing colors in pick and pick became obvious. In addition, once adjusted to the idea of having a thick selvage (about the size of your little finger), it seemed eminently practical as an edge for a utilitarian piece of weaving. Such an edge would clearly not be as efficiently executed on a

horizontal loom, where lifting the ends to carry them along the selvage would require constant attention.

Horizontal stripes, pick and pick, and the supplemental weft technique that combines with pick and pick to extend the patterns were all used in our weavings. Some experimented with krokbragd, which requires much picking of the additional sheds, others tried the interrupted weft techniques of lightning weave and square weave. These were surprisingly simple once the idea of placing the bobbins one after another on the top beam was mastered (they can't hang down when weaving from the top down). It even developed a rhythm reminiscent of an aerobics class, reaching for the beam every few seconds (3 more...2 more....1 more).



*Square weave in progress on Kay Larson's warp-weighted loom.*

We finished our pieces with a broad, solid-colored band of weaving, embellished with a row of cross stitch that was both decorative and served to secure the bottom selvage. Surprisingly, given the limited color choice and the same basic pattern possibilities, all the pieces produced in our workshop looked distinctly different. And although our weaving techniques may not have been quite as masterly as



Liarbø's, we had each gained valuable insight into the use of this simple yet effective loom.



*A row of cross stitch secures the bottom selvage of the warp-weighted loom weaving.*

## BILLEDVEV WORKSHOP

*by Barbara Stam*

Arriving on a drizzly afternoon in June at the Voss Folk High School, full of anticipation about the billedvev class I was soon to take, I saw a tall, white haired lady picking an armful of wildflowers--blue and pink lupine and white daisies-- that were growing abundantly on the school grounds. She was not one of the skilled kitchen help obtaining table decorations, I soon discovered. She was our instructor, Ingebjørg Vaagen, the Husflid consultant for Telemark, preparing our classroom! It was a clue that she would be teaching her class of eight about color, beauty, design and the value of art as well as tapestry [billedvev] techniques.

On day one we sat in the school's computer lab classroom with light streaming across the large wildflower arrangements on the window ledges and were inspired by the life affirming things Ingebjørg began to tell us. She had taught weaving to women of Botswana for nine years and had come to believe that art and craftsmanship are ways for differing cultures to see and respect each other. She wanted us also to recognize that our endeavors are a personal communication between ourselves and our creation. [No need to compare one's work with another's efforts]. So with

philosophy in mind, we sat near a long shelf filled with a riot of vibrantly colored yarns and inspiring art books and prepared a colored drawing [cartoon] to weave into a tapestry.

Each student had a sturdy frame loom, most of which were constructed from picture stretchers. [The size was determined by what would fit in one's suitcase!] Our first assignment after drawing our motif was to enlarge it into a cartoon to fit the size of our loom. This was done by measuring a grid on the original drawing and another on the proper size paper for the cartoon, then transferring the colored motif, square by square. Step two was to wind a 5 ply linen warp around our frame looms at about 8 EPI. A long length of linen warp was then tied to the lower left side of the loom, looped at the left-most warp thread, then finger looped over each



*Carol Koscik and Barbara Stam hard at work in the billedvev workshop*

warp thread, as in single crochet, moving to the right where it was wound around the lower right side of the loom and knotted. This spaced the warp yarns and provided firmness to build on. About eight more rows of warp linen were then woven in tabby to provide more stability and a place to pin a cartoon before the tapestry was begun. On the upper reverse side of the loom the "crochet" spacing around each warp thread was repeated. A one inch wide by loom width length of cardboard was inserted under the warp on the top and bottom of the loom to support the weaving and provide a possible tension adjustment if the warp becomes too taut as the weaving progresses. The cartoon was placed behind the warp and secured with sturdy straight



pins. As the weaving progressed, these pins were to be moved up to keep the cartoon in place.

Ingebjørg explained that billedvev, the Norwegian tapestry technique, differs from Gobelin in that the joins used permit the tapestry to be reversible without ends hanging on the reverse side. She gave us wonderful Norwegian language written explanations of the technique accompanied by equally fine diagrams [my comprehension level]. I would say the preferred tapestry joins were some variation of shared warps or dovetailing. Yarns could "meet and separate" no more than four times before being secured by a shared warp. Lower areas of an image were woven first in small sections, sometimes building angles, then filled in with tapestry, stair step fashion above them. Forks or just our fingernails were used to snug the yarn down. Billedvev produces a flat image with limited hatching and perspective. Later, on our textile tour, we saw example after example of "The Wise and Foolish Virgins" motif from the 16th and 17th centuries woven with this simple child-like effect. But I, as a novice, had come to the class expecting a greater level of complexity. Ingebjørg kept insisting that I need not be concerned with logic, with yarn direction, with multiple joining techniques--"Just follow the lines of your cartoon" she smilingly said each time she passed my shoulder! It became akin to a mantra as we wove on day two and three. We used Norsk Kunstvevgarn which has a unique luster because of the qualities of the spelsau Norwegian sheep breed. This yarn was also typically used in old billedvev.

The class noticed on day four that Ingebjørg was returning to our classroom at every opportunity: before we finished breakfast, as we ate lunch, in the evening as the rest of us were writing journals or knitting. She had admonished us NEVER to unweave our tapestry. "Just continue to follow the lines". Was she unweaving the mistakes we were forbidden to? Was she weaving on the work of slow students to give them a sense of accomplishment? Was she so enthralled with the process of tapestry and the feel of yarn in her fingers that she was addictively drawn to our looms? It was an unsolved mystery, but during

class we nibbled on the bag of chocolates she brought to the classroom and happily wove on. Ends of yarn were threaded into a tapestry needle and worked vertically into the woven areas. In the quiet times she told us of tapestry happenings elsewhere. The Danish Queen was gifted with an immense sum of money for her 50th birthday and chose to have the history of the Danish people told in 17 gigantic tapestries that took 10 years to design and weave.

On day five Ingebjørg disappeared about 2 P.M. and returned 45 minutes later with a box of wine. "Until yesterday" she said, "I was discouraged about this class, but now I see you all are getting the technique. So let's celebrate". We peeled with laughter, found glasses, locked the door and had a nip! Then we hid the box under a plastic fireman's hat we found on a shelf! As we wove on, she would look over our shoulders and softly repeat "super", as though we had arrived at a milestone. The final step before cutting the tapestry from the loom was to weave rows of a tabby heading with linen, especially if the work needed a sleeve for hanging. Then needle weave in the cut warp ends and any yarn ends that remained.

By the conclusion of the class only one star student, Lila Nelson, had completed her tapestry. To honor her achievement she was awarded--the fireman's hat! But whether our billedvevs were finished or not, we all, even novices, were instilled with the joy of creativity and a sense of looking at our surroundings with "artist eyes". Ingebjørg had inspired us with her personal affirmation of life lived with art and joy, and we were all the richer.

## **SKILLBRAGD WORKSHOP**

by Lisa Ellis (as revised by Barbara Overby, 11/18/03)

This past summer, Judith Krone and I hopped on one of many planes to begin our 19 day Norwegian Textile Tour with the Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum. Little did we know the treasures that had been so carefully planned for us in Norway. We knew from the trip itinerary we would begin our tour in the western coastal historic city of Bergen, and make our way down the Norwegian peninsula to the southern coast and then

head back up to Oslo, the capital. We also knew that we would be weaving for a week at a Folk High School in a town called Voss.

Our week at the Folk High School in the beautiful town of Voss was a major highlight of the trip. The setting alone was breathtaking with its blue and red barn-like classroom building situated on the side of a mountain. Our weaving room had huge windows that overlooked meadows leading down to a lake that was backed by snowcapped mountains. The architecture de me feel like I was in a Carl Larson village, even though his home is in Dalarna, Sweden, just across the border. Folk High Schools play an important role in keeping the traditional arts and culture of Norway alive and students attend Folk High Schools for a year or so to engage in the education of these traditional arts. Weaving was an art that at one time had its own schools and two of our three of our teachers in Voss (and Annemor Sundbo) had graduated with advanced degrees in weaving. Apparently, weaving curriculums are being cut back and are receiving less funding than a generation ago and weaving programs are being taken out of traditional education and being made into an elective in regular high schools. But to us, the number and variety of programs in weaving was still impressive. It was such a gift to have our extremely talented teachers with their traditional education in weaving at our disposal for an entire week. They had all found creative ways to carry out their careers in textiles: the warp weighted loom teacher, Marta Klove Juuhl, is an accomplished floor loom weaver and had recently been commissioned to weave the fabric for chair cushions for chairs in the Royal Museum in Oslo; the tapestry teacher, Ingebjorg Vaagen, is the head of the textile department for the "Husfliden" in her region of Telemark; and the skillbragd teacher, Ashild Fjose Klove, supplements her weaving instruction with classes in sewing and other textile arts. I really enjoyed learning about the lives and inspirations of our teachers, and the other amazing Norwegians we met along the trip who are preserving their cultural history in other crafts such as traditional shoe making arts, knitting arts, and silver jewelry making.

As for our own journey into traditional forms of weaving at the Folk High School, we had a choice of studying three different types of weaving: tapestry, warp-weighted loom, and skillbragd. Voss has a long tradition of weaving skillbragd textiles used for special occasions, such as christenings, weddings, and funerals. Many places in Norway have their own variety of skillbragd patterns using colors specific to those regions. In Voss, the traditional colors, which were the colors we mostly



Judith Krone displays samples fresh off the loom in the skillbragd workshop.

wove with, were a type of navy blue, an olive green, gold and a deep, warm red. The wool for our weavings and the colors is created specially for Voss by one of the last family owned spinneries in Norway, Norsk Kunstvevgarn. We visited this spinnery toward the end of our tour.

Being lovers of overshot, both Judith and I chose the skillbragd class. Before we began weaving, our first assignment in class was to thread the looms that were already partially threaded by our teacher, Ashild Fjose Klove. This task took a little more than a day and in order to do it, we basically climbed inside the room-sized loom and sat on the floor organizing foot treadles and heddles and the many strands of warp that were already waiting for us on the back beam. We wove our skillbragd on the school's counter balance floor looms using nine harnesses with both regular and long-eyed heddles.

Katharine Dickerson, who heads the textile department at the University of Alberta in Calgary, wrote this description of skilbragd and very



interesting suggestions for using skilbragd in new and different ways: "Skilbragd is a weave structure with a tabby warp and weft in linen and a pattern wool weft that floats above and below the tabby. The pattern weft is held in place by the interlacement achieved by moving it above and below the basic tabby linen. The traditional colors of these patterns are related to the folk costumes of the various regions. We wove these pieces on counter balance looms. This type of loom has a harness action that allows the warp to both rise and sink. Each warp thread passes through two heddles: one through a long eyed heddle on a front or pattern harness, and one through a short or small eyed heddle on a back harness. This allows the warp to move both up and down in the pattern heddles for each tabby shot. The pattern harnesses are attached to elastics (cut from old inner tubes) at the top of the loom and only the sinking lambs below. In this way the harness action was only downward, depressing the selected pattern warp threads below the woven tabby structure. The skilbragd weaving was woven the reverse side up so that the least number of pattern harnesses would have to be depressed.

We worked with five patterns, some of them traditional, and some were variations on traditional patterns from Hordaland, another province in Norway. Most of the patterns were characterized by a rose, or rosepath, and various diamonds. The tabby creates its own pattern and makes skillbragd an extremely intricate weave structure. As someone who has only been weaving for about a year, I was in awe of the process, and of the final products from our class. We had several weaving teachers in class, including Katharine Dickerson who has lived with indigenous cultures to learn about their weave structures and who creates her own art from these experiences. Another woman in our class, bought a Hardanger fiddle and she played for us. Another student in our class teaches weaving at Vesterheim. It was so interesting to hear stories from everyone about how they started weaving and what drew them to sign up for the trip. Since it was only dark for about an hour at midnight and we definitely took advantage of weaving on into the night, we had plenty of time to share our

stories and get acquainted. It was a very special week.

## NEW STUDY GROUP FORMING

This summer, the Textile Study Tour stopped at the Lågsdal Museum near Kongsberg in the district of Telemark. There we were shown some unusual coverlets from the small community of Flesberg. Although obviously resembling krokbragd and bound rosepath, the coverlets proved to be an interesting blend of the two, with the unusual addition of intermittent reverse treading that enhances the pattern possibilities.

A group of local weavers, the Flesberg *Bondekvinnelag* (Farm Women's Organization), have spent several years researching the technique, which they call the Flesbergplegg, and they have produced a notebook of drafts and samples from these lovely coverlets. With the basic threading and photographs from this summer's trip, plus the possibility of acquiring the weavers' book of drafts through Vesterheim Museum, members of the tour decided to form a study group to explore this interesting weave structure. If all goes well, an informal exhibition of the Flesberg Pattern Study Group's work will appear at the 2005 Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles in Decorah.

Those interested in learning more about the Flesberg technique can contact Kay Larson ([kaylarson@hotmail.com](mailto:kaylarson@hotmail.com)) for details about weaving the pattern illustrated in the photo, or for further information about joining the study group.



# Looking Ahead

## Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

### Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles

What do you think about coming to Decorah, Iowa, for a Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles? The first CNWT was held here in October of 1997. The Norwegian keynote speakers were Aagot Noss (bandweaving and Setesdal folk costumes) and Amy Lightfoot (wool ship sails and coastal textile traditions). The second CNWT was scheduled for Seattle in October 2001. Kay Larson and Nordic Heritage Museum developed a fantastic program that included presentations by six Norwegians. Unfortunately, that conference was canceled.

So what do you think? Is it time for another conference? Do you prefer Fall (October or November) of 2005 or Spring (March or April) of 2006? (Note: 2006 is a Convergence year and it will be held in Michigan.) Are there speakers that you want to hear? Are there topics that you'd like to learn more about? Should we include other techniques, like knitting?

Please share your ideas by filling out the enclosed postcard and returning it to Laurann at Vesterheim. Feel free to send longer comments by email or snail mail. We hope to have dates selected by summer so that we can discuss the program at our meeting held during Convergence in Denver. Regular updates will appear in the Norwegian Textile Letter.

### Special Exhibitions and Workshops

A Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles will include special exhibitions and hands-on workshops. Think about what you might like to experience and share your ideas.

Exhibitions: Fall 2005 - Already on the schedule is a judged exhibition of embroidery. Gallery space remains for two more exhibits. Spring 2006 - The exhibit schedule is clear, so there would be space for three exhibits. A few ideas have been suggested: an exhibit to explore the similarities and differences of Norwegian and Swedish handweaving, a retrospective exhibit of weavings by Lila Nelson, and the series of 10 tapestries designed by Gerhard Munthe and woven by Ragna Breivik. We'd also like to save space for a display of projects from the Flessbergplegg study group and other study groups.

Workshops: There would be space for one or two floor loom classes plus one or two classes that do not require floor looms. Requests? Warp-weighted loom weaving, tapestry, skinnfell making, nålbinding, 2-day classes, 3-day classes, 5-day classes... Suggestions welcome!

### Textile Study Tour to Norway

Just approved for the summer of 2005 - a "lite" version of the popular 2003 Textile Study Tour. What makes it "lite"? The tour will be shorter (11 days), less intensive (no hands-on weaving classes), and more geographically focused. But many of the museums, studios, artists, and hotels will be revisited. Watch your newsletter for more information. The 2005 tour will explore historical and contemporary textiles, including weaving, knitting, embroidery, folk costumes, and jewelry. Featured are Hardanger, Setesdal, Numedal, and West Telemark, plus the cities of Bergen and Oslo. Dates in May and June are being considered.

Laurann Gilbertson, Vesterheim, Box 379, Decorah IA 52101, 563-382-9681, [textiles@vesterheim.org](mailto:textiles@vesterheim.org)



## THE NORWEGIAN TEXTILE GUILD MEETING

OSLO, JULY 7, 2003

An informal meeting of the Norwegian Textile Guild was held in Oslo on the last night of the Textile Study Tour. The group expressed its thanks to tour organizer and leader Laurann Gilbertson for a wonderful job of arranging the 2003 Textile Study Tour. Two other topics were discussed: the formation of a new study group and the Convergence 2004 meeting in Denver.

Study Group It was decided to call the new study group "Flesberg Pattern Study Group." The following people volunteered to help with the effort: Kay Larson to head communications, with help from Jan Mostrom, and to prepare an article about the new group for the Norwegian Textile Letter; Bonnie Datta to do computation of the patterns on Excel, Katharine Dickerson to weave samples in gray scale, and Laurann Gilbertson to contact either Lågsdalmuseum or the Flesberg Bondekvinnevalg to inquire about getting a copy of the Flesberg weaving notebook for Vesterheim. It was suggested that the group remain in communication with the Bondekvinnevalg to share the study group's progress with the technique, and that the group communicate as much as possible online to save expense. It was further suggested that the study group present an informal exhibition of its work at the 2005 Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles in Decorah.

Convergence 2004 Meeting The following agenda items were suggested: an update on the 2005 Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles in Decorah; a progress report on the Flesberg Pattern Study Group; and a report on the 2003 Textile Study Tour, possibly through an informative poster instead of a formal tour report.

## ARTISAN CLOTHING: WEAVING AND DESIGN IN NORWAY MAY 23 TO JUNE 5, 2004

Participants in this summer weaving program will spend two weeks in a rural mountain setting in the

community of Vinje, Telemark, Norway. The workshop will focus on developing contemporary clothing designs inspired by Norwegian fiber arts traditions. This program will be held at the Vesaas Farm, a working farm with handcraft traditions dating back to the 16th Century. The workshop will be taught by Designer Carol Colburn in collaboration with two Master Weavers from Norway; Ingebjørg Vaagen and Eli Vesaas. Participants will share fully equipped houses on the Vesaas farm or at two nearby farms. Field trips to experience cultural offerings such as music, fine art, and craft events will be included in your stay. The Vesaas farm is beautifully situated at about 550 meters above sea level with a magical view of the mountains. For details contact:

Carol Colburn  
University of Northern Iowa  
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613  
(319) 273-2390  
carol.colburn@uni.edu

Don't miss the Fall 2003 issue of  
*Vesterheim*  
Vesterheim Museum's full-color magazine

Featuring:  
*Incarnations:*  
*A Nancy Jackson Retrospective*  
Exhibition Catalog  
*Gerhard Munthe's*  
*Folk-Tale Tapestries*  
by Gilbertson & Stokker  
*Defining the Norwegian Immigrant Loom*  
by Janet Meany

Free to all Vesterheim members  
Or for the single-issue price of \$5 (+s.h.)  
To order call the Vesterheim Museum Store  
at 1-800-979-3346

**NEW.. NEW... NEW ... NEW..**

from Syvilla Tweed Bolson

512 Locust Road

Decorah, IA 52101

563/382/3711

smtweed@willinet.net

RAUMARAGG for Knitters: 3 ply strikkegarn  
of 80% wool and 20% nylon.

Great for socks and especially the heels, toes.

Colors are pure or blended.

50 gram balls/ 90 m per ball, \$5.00 each

Rauma Vamsegarn Nm. 5/3 for Knitters  
and Weavers, wool, 50 gram balls/83 m /\$5  
Color cards \$4, soft wool, luscious colors.

Available by special order for heavy sweaters:

4 TR. SPÆLSAUGARN STRIKKEGARN

Nm. 6/4 for knitters. Seven colors

And don't forget the ever popular Rauma

Gammelserie Nm. 6, 5/2,

2 tr. Strikkegarn, wool, 50 gram/160 m/\$5.00

Note: Strikkegarn is Knitting yarn in the  
English translation.

**EDITORS:**

Betty Johannesen

Donald Johannesen

51577 Bridgewater Ct.

South Bend, IN 46637

(574) 272-9806

e-mail: [bettydon51@aol.com](mailto:bettydon51@aol.com)