The Loom is her Guru

Posted on

Few visitors to Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) leave this beautiful Indian Ocean island nation without having seen or purchased a price of handloomed cotton designed by Barbara Sansoni. Her textiles are internationally known, having been exhibited in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States.

Words Ellen Dissanayake and Barefoot.
Photography Dominic Sansoni.

Barbara Sansoni

Barbara Sansoni’s talents and accomplishments are highly developed and widely admired. So it is especially interesting to discover that she originally came to weaving almost fortuitously as part of an endeavor to teach a skill or trade to women in Sri Lanka so they would have a brighter future. Her life was transformed by this venture, and she learned as much as the girls. “The loom has been my guru,” she says, “teaching me things about colour and even about life that I could have learned in no other way.”

Her eminence as a Third World textile designer is unquestioned, yet she has established her individual vision and made her international reputation without parasitising folk motifs or even adopting or adapting a traditional craft.

Historically, weaving in Ceylon’s villages was confined to reed and rush baskets and mats since cloth was readily available from India. Barbara Sansoni’s achievement has been to apply her own Asian sensibility and the intimate individual touch inherent in weaving with natural fibres to the creation of wholly contemporary works of fabric art. The mixture of traditional and modern, local and international, destiny and chance in Barbara Sansoni’s work and life is fascinating to categorize. She is clearly of her region, with South-Asian background and values, yet she has a Western artist’s individuality and has been able to communicate this to the developed world. “From the day I could hold a pencil, I never thought of myself as

anything but an artist," she says. "I never thought I could do anything else." Her drawings of people and animals today have a freshness, charm, and delightful gently humour.

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After returning from England, Barbara married and started a family. She began her own weekly feature page in the Daily Mirror, a Colombo newspaper, where she published the stories she had invented for her children, adding her own illustrations. She also wrote theatre and art reviews and sketched old architecture and furniture to draw people's attention to their beauty. Known as an artist, she was approached by an Irish nun, Sister Good Counsel, Provincial of the Good Shepherd Sisters of Southeast Asia, who asked Barbara if she could liven up and make more saleable the weaving of women who were being taught to weave in order to help them become independent and make a living. At the time, they were weaving only towels and "dusters" (dishcloths), plain or with a simple stripe at one end.

Vibrant range of fabrics.

Vibrant range of fabrics. Barbara decided to establish four village weaving centers, setting up looms and providing the yarn. A village nun taught Barbara the elements of weaving, and she then directed the girls, teaching them how to work smoothly, rapidly, and with reliable, high-quality results. From this work with totally untrained, unsophisticated beginners, she learned about occupational therapy first hand a skill like weaving can develop the whole person.

At the same time, she discovered an unexpected artistic medium for herself. "My interest and curiosity is in colour and colour relationships," she says, "but my training was in drawing. One cannot draw on a primitive two-pedal loom, so a bird, a tree, a complicated view of a river, sky, fields, plants, and forest, whatever has

colours that interest and excite me, had to be ordered into a geometric form for weaving. The very limitation of the loom forced me into a deeper and deeper exploration of colour – there are no motifs or decorative forms to distract me. Thus, crossing an orange warp thread with a yellow causes a new gold to be born.

Having financed the enterprise, Barbara and her husband sold the items from their home until 1972, when she expanded her wares and started two separate ventures. Her retail outlet, House, carried everything one would need in a house – glassware, ceramics, and simple wooden items (all of which were designed or selected by Barbara and made by local craftsmen) and handloomed textiles by the yard.

A second shop, Barefoot, displayed items derived from a concept of an entire way of life that Barbara call floor living. The idea is to make one's surroundings (and hence life) as uncluttered and flexible as possible. Hence soft furniture made of cloth (unlike the heavy status furniture of colonial Ceylon) could be easily moved around or even rolled up and stored away. As tourism expanded during the 1970s and '80s, hotels across the country ordered kilometers of upholstery and drapery material, bed and table linen. Barbara's hand-woven repertoire expanded to hand-sewn toys and small embroidered items like key cases and practical bags, all made of her marvelous cloth. Her other artistic contribution, she feels, has been to encourage the enjoyment and appreciation of architecture. She has continuously, from childhood, made magically beautiful drawings of local buildings, vernacular and colonial, secular and religious, and published some of these in 1978 in a limited-edition volume called Verandas and Viharas. (a vihara is a Buddhist temple). It is perhaps not surprising that she is married now to an architect and historian of architecture, Ronald Lewcock, whom she met while he was doing research in Sri Lanka from Cambridge University.

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Barbara Sansoni has observed first-hand the beneficial effects learning to weave can have on a person's intellectual and emotional development. Weaving requires

such skills as winding the warp onto the loom at an even tension, threading the loom and knotting a warp, and much more, and managing these tasks with coordination and dispatch.

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Mastering weaving gives a person the chance to recognize and then solve problems and consequently develops a part of the mind that was previously unchallenged. The loom has taught hundreds of girls to count, to multiply and divide, to be literally true and straight. Such discipline and practice are applied to more abstract things in their lives. Weaving skills expand the ability to do other things well, Barbara notes. “Once you have a craft, a skill, you have it forever. And it’s the beginning of a climb upward.

It’s like money in the bank – an identity. Eventually, some of my weavers have the courage to leave and go out and make a life for themselves on their own.”

Jaffna Kitchen.

From the collection: A Passion for Faces (1993).

Jaffna Causeway