

Cranbrook connection

'Functional' training basis for success, designer says



JAY ASQUINI/PHOTO

Learning to work on your own and develop your own point of view was the most important thing I learned there (Cranbrook). When I was in undergraduate school that wasn't stressed as much as perhaps it would be right now.'

—Gretchen Bellinger
fabric designer

By Barbara Ziemba
special writer

WITH THE dexterity of a skilled magician performing an illusion, Gretchen Bellinger obligingly whipped the sample of her latest textile design into a neatly folded rectangle for the benefit of the photographer.

"We even have a special way of folding the samples when we're showing them to clients," she said, illustrating the same attention to detail that has brought her company, Gretchen Bellinger Inc., into the forefront of the textile design industry.

Bellinger was in the area recently to speak at the Michigan Society of Architects' annual convention at the Fairlane Manor in Dearborn.

An alumna of Bloomfield Hills' Cranbrook Academy of Arts, Bellinger earned a master's degree in fine arts after completing undergraduate work at Skidmore College.

After graduation from Cranbrook, where she first stirred the interest in the art community for her work in textile design, she joined the interior design staff in the Chicago office Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, a leading architectural firm.

AFTER A MOVE to New York, where she managed textile development for Knoll International, Bellinger took the plunge and opened her firm in 1978. Flying in the face of entrenched marketing formulas, Bellinger launched her company using only natural fibers in her collections. At a time when synthetics swamped the market, it was a bold move by budding entrepreneur.

"I just sort of jumped in," Bellinger recalled. "The things I want to sell (natural fibers) I was advised not to. Now that doesn't seem so strange, but 12 years ago we were in the heyday of the synthetics."

"I think if you analyze it too much, you would probably never do it. If you did too much of a market study, you would never go ahead. The idea that I wanted to start a company with only understated, tailored, natural fiber fabrics, well, competitors told me I'd never be able to make it."

But the young designer followed her own instinct and was rewarded when her company became a success

—almost overnight.

"I've been very blessed," Bellinger said. "We really took off instantly. I was acutely aware of it when everyone started copying us."

Learning to trust one's own intuition was very much a part of the teaching philosophy at Cranbrook. "Learning to work on your own and develop your own point of view was the most important thing I learned there. When I was in undergraduate school that wasn't stressed as much as perhaps it would be right now."

It was during her Cranbrook days that Bellinger became thoroughly grounded in textile work and design. She acquired a reputation as a "functional" weaver, rather than a "creative" weaver, and in the pop art-mad '70s, Bellinger's road was definitely the one less traveled.

"A LOT OF pre-form artistic pieces were being done, but I knew that I wanted to do woven textiles. And that's not so negative anymore. Now being a functional woven textile designer has a lot more status than it did then."

Bellinger, tall, slim and fashionably dressed in a simple black dress accented with a print scarf and plain gold jewelry, looks more like a designer of haute couture rather than textiles.

Why textiles and not fashion? "It wasn't a conscious decision. It just sort of evolved, step by step," she said. "At Skidmore, I won an award for textile design and at the time I hadn't even aware of this award. I hadn't planned on going to graduate school, but during the summer after I graduated from college, I decided to apply. Cranbrook called and said there was a space available and I took it."

AFTER CRANBROOK, Bellinger moved to Chicago and a position with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. "Working at SOM was almost like getting my doctorate degree," she smiled. "I wasn't familiar with much of the terminology, but I worked in an excellent office with superior designers and learned on the job."

The graphics of architecture had a profound influence on the young designer, an influence that helped form the basis for her concepts of textile design. Today as well as in the past, many of Bellinger's fabrics are

based on the architectural grid.

In fact, during her presentation before the Michigan architects, Bellinger said that when her firm introduced a new fabric, "Can Can," a Swiss dot pattern on woven cotton, a young mill owner familiar with her work said, "Just as I associated Bellinger with the grid, you do too."

"Vieille Garde" and "Diva" are two examples of the architectural influence in Bellinger's textile designs. The former, a design woven from wool, is shot through with strands of bronze, gold and silver lurex in a classic windowpane effect. The popular "Diva," two years in the designing process, is woven from 100 percent silk and is scattered with rhinestones or faux pearls. Accented with a matte finish line tracery grid, the stones are clustered only in the corners of the grid to allow workers to have a cutting and sewing area.

Not stopping with traditional woven textiles, Bellinger even figured out a way of weaving 100 percent stainless steel into a window and wall treatment. Her "Architectural Screen," an extremely fine mesh that comes in only one color — steel — won her a 1985 Roscoe, an award given by the fabric industry in recognition of outstanding product design.

Not all of Bellinger's fabrics follow a grid pattern. Along with "Can Can," "Garlands" and "Bux Bux" are making their bows in the Bellinger fabric lineup. "Garlands" is a 100 percent silk jacquard floral weave, while "Bux Bux" sports a stylized bee woven in wool, although clients are not limited to bees as a design. Names or company logos can be woven into the cloth according to the client's design and color specifications.

Bellinger's inspiration for her designs and color palettes come from many sources, and she christens them with names rich with mood-evoking sensations. Bold "Camp" buffalo plaid, pastel "Skimmer" Belgian linen and dreamy "Fustile" pointelle, "Blue Suede Shoes" blue and "This Is the Army" khaki reflect her sense of humor and independent spirit. Bellinger creates her own dyes and does not use color forecast bureaus or color market analysis for her palettes.

"One of the things that's unique about Gretchen Bellinger Inc. is that we do consciously work on stylizing

every single fabric and we completely color every fabric," she explained. "Everything we do is made exclusively for us on a specialty basis. I understand the principles of weaving and I can talk to mill people."

While the emphasis has been on Bellinger the designer, she is also a savvy businesswoman with a profect to promote and sell. She is closely identified with her fabrics, and the advice of the advertising agency that handles her account, she has participated in photography shoots for magazine layouts.

ONE SHOT HAS Bellinger reclining languorously on a pile of huge pillows upholstered in "Skimmer" fabric. The day ad ran coincided with an industry party, and Bellinger garnered a lot of attention, and, of course, "Whatever people said, it generated a lot of controversy and made people stop and comment," she said.

Producing specialty items that reach only 2-3 percent of the market means that Bellinger must choose with care the fabrics, designs and colors her firm will manufacture. She loves all her designs, but they must be able to stand on their own merits.

"When you begin, you jump in just thinking about what you want to do," the designer explained. "But we also have to consider that we are a small firm and cannot introduce a fabric line, nine colors. We can do three."

Most companies view expansion as a desirable goal, and Bellinger isn't ruling out that possibility for her own firm. But she said that staying small permits her greater quality control and keeps her tightly focused.

What direction is texture design heading in the future? "I'm really playing with bringing texture back and recalling glamour and the kingly attitude," said Bellinger, citing "Bux Bux" as an example. "Everything we were very instrumental in (introducing) were flat things, like Limestone cloth and Yachting Cotton."

As for herself, Bellinger never fears running out of design ideas. "My grandmother is 102 and she's full of ideas. Every spring she plants her seeds and she knows they're going to come up again. I think I come from that strain."



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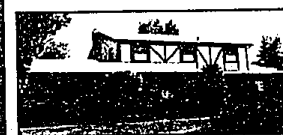
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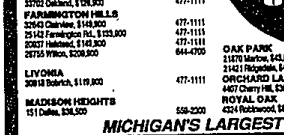
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