THE LOOM IS HER GURU

by Ellen Dissanayake

Few visitors to Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) leave this beautiful Indian Ocean island nation without having seen or purchased a piece of handloomed cotton designed by Barbara Sansoni. Her textiles are internationally known, having been exhibited in Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Poland, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong and the United States. In 1970 she received a one-year travel award from the Rockefeller Foundation to study craft and folk art in fourteen countries, and she spent 1974–75 on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia under the auspices of the United Nations as a textile advisor. She was involved with the development of a cottage industry using resist dye techniques on textiles.

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 orphaned, abandoned, or otherwise disadvantaged girls 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 color 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 parasitizing 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. In the 1950s, the Ceylonese Government, aware of Gandhi's emphasis on spinning and weaving in Indian villages, tried to establish weaving as a rural industry, but this was not a great success. It might have been easy for a clever entrepreneur to step into this situation intent on creating "traditional textiles," by mechanically printing ancient designs from Buddhist temple paintings, brass or copper incising or embossing, and woodcarving on local cloth. Barbara Sansoni's achievement has been to apply her own Asian sensibility and the intimate individual touch inherent in weaving with natural fibers 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, and makes her artistry difficult 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." With an early penchant for drawing, she wrote letters to her parents from school (first in India, later in England) using cartoon-like figures, finding a drawn posture or face more easily expressive than words. Her drawings of people and animals today have a freshness, charm, and delightful gentle humor.

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 theater 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 village girls 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. Barbara and her husband, Hildon Sansoni, decided to establish and finance 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 firsthand — a skill like weaving can develop the whole person (See box on page 21.) At the same time, she discovered an unexpected artistic medium for herself.

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The young trainees wove things they themselves had never used — curtains and tablecloths — items that would be attractive to urban middle class customers. Barbara developed a standard length, 54 inches by 98 inches, as her original, or cartoon, for experimentation and variation. Called by her a *reddha* (piece of cloth), it could be used as a tablecloth or bed cover, but it was beautiful enough to be displayed as a work of art.

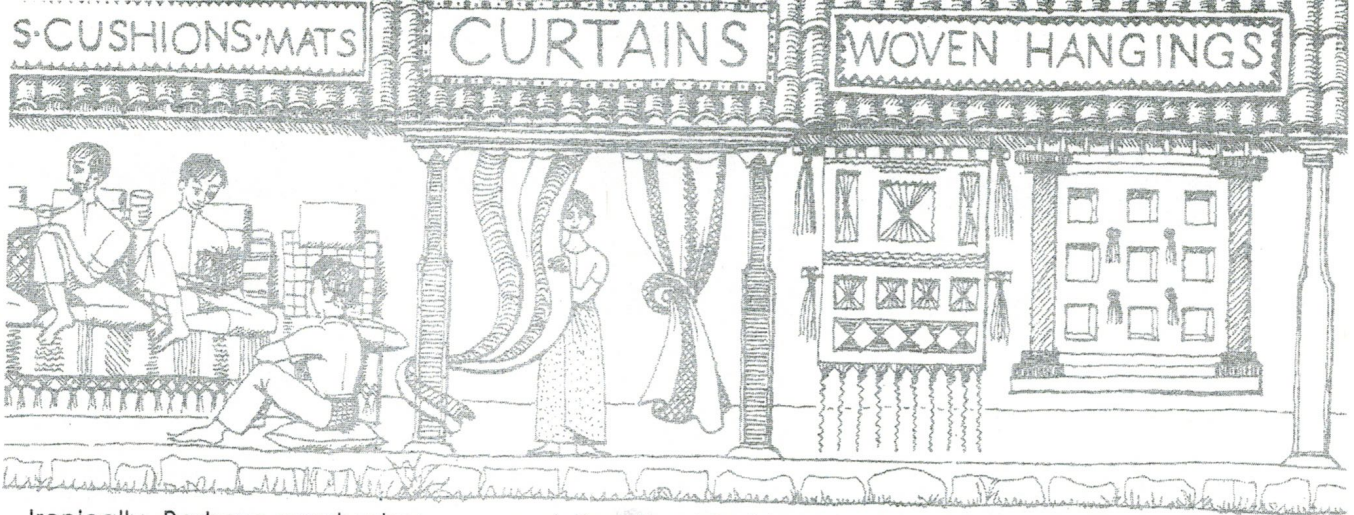
For Barbara, the discipline of the *reddha* format provided a perfect field of composition on which to combine color, line, and proportion — something that she had not been able to do satisfactorily before. "My interest and curiosity is in color and color relationships," she says, "but my training was 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 colors 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 color — 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. The challenge becomes even greater when eight or ten colors are used in a warp, and yet only one color weft can be used across at one time; this one color weft affects each of the eight warp colors differently. Composing these compound color arrangements becomes the challenge of my woven designs."

To this day she has not been interested in "clever" weaving — making curves, embedding beads and novel items, or using shaggy yarns. She considers her work austere, if cloth so brilliant and gorgeous can be called austere. For Barbara, the ultimate sin is to make colors that are muddy, ashen, or "greige." Creating light, clarity, and brilliance of color is her primary interest and undisputed achievement. Her fabrics, made into enormous banners, adorn a bank and shopping plaza in Colombo and the wall of an airport lounge in Singapore. Barbara Sansoni handwovens are instantly recognizable in home and hotel draperies, in upholstery, and in bed and table coverings all over the island of Sri Lanka, in Scandinavia and in many other countries.

Barbara Sansoni has observed firsthand the beneficial effects learning to weave can have on a young person's intellectual and emotional development. In Sri Lanka, many girls who come to learn weaving are from disadvantaged backgrounds — they may have been maltreated or neglected, even abandoned. Many cannot read or write, count or measure.

Weaving requires such skills as winding the warp on the loom at an even tension, winding the thread smoothly and evenly on the bobbin, threading the loom and knotting a warp, rolling the warp roller, lifting the sheds, and managing these tasks with coordination and dispatch. Any mistake is immediately apparent. Mastering weaving gives a girl the chance to recognize and then solve problems, and consequently develops a part of the mind that was previously unchallenged. The girls learn decision making by assessing the tension, stress, and weight-bearing needs of the loom. They learn not only manual dexterity and a practiced eye but a larger physical rhythmicity. The body becomes part of the loom, so the girl adjusts and entrains her movements to the rhythmic requirements of the activity. The loom has taught hundreds of girls to count, to multiply and divide, to be literally true and straight. Such discipline and practice are then applied to more abstract things in their lives.

Weaving skills expand the ability to do other things well, to solve more complex problems and eventually to deal with life in all its intricacies. As pride and independence develop, the girls take better care of themselves. "When you are poor and unskilled and have nothing, absolutely nothing, then all you can turn to is prayer," Barbara notes. "Once you have a craft, a skill, then 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."



Ironically, Barbara emphasizes that she is not a weaver. She uses the loom and her weavers as her artist's medium, in the same way a composer creates music for an instrumentalist to realize. "Just as an architect would find it impossible to build every house he designs and has to employ masons and carpenters to carry out his ideas, so I have continued to design for weavers, working alongside them," she says. "No thread is placed that I haven't chosen. Over the years wonderful weaving mistresses, Sisters Loyola, Veronica, Marietta, and Eustelle, have been both technical and psychological teachers and friends to the weavers and myself and my young designer counterparts.

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), as well as handloomed textiles by the yard. She also started making simple Asian–type clothing from her fabrics, remembering the advice of Bonnie Cashin, who had warned that the Western attitude toward clothes which are cut, darted, and fitted is very different from that in the East, where garments are draped, wrapped, and tied.

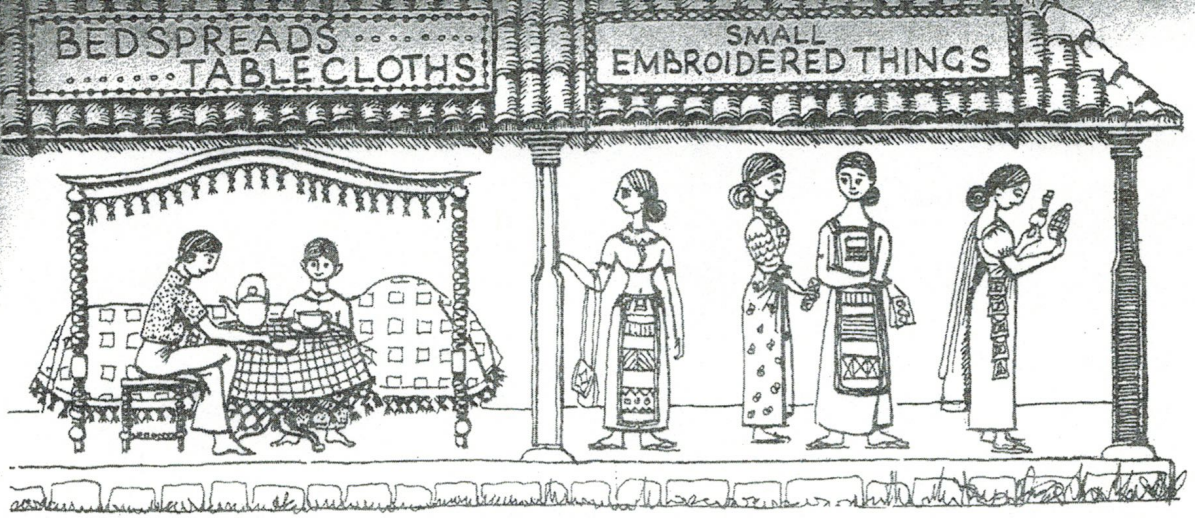
A second shop, *Barefoot*, displayed items derived from a concept of an entire way of life that Barbara calls *floor living*. The idea is to make one's surroundings (and hence life) as uncluttered and flexible as possible. Hence soft furniture made of cloth that (unlike the heavy status furniture of colonial Ceylon) could be easily moved around or even rolled up and stored away. Traditional Sinhalese villagers, of course, were floor livers without knowing it; they slept on mats that were rolled and stored during the day, used movable small, low, round stands called *serak kale* for their individual plates of rice at mealtime, and stored their clothes in suspended bundles.

Not only rugs, mattresses, cushions, and pillows are used in floor living, but one of Barbara's most inventive creations, which she calls Storage Banners. Similar in concept to the American plastic, many–pocketed shoebags, Barbara's storage banners are wonderfully durable and attractive. They can be used for desk supplies, workshop or sewing essentials, odds and ends of any type, for guests' weekend socks and underwear, and (in the smaller, portable version called boudoir banners) for toiletries and cosmetics to take from bedroom to bathroom and back again. Too beautiful to hide away in a closet, they are a kind of wall furniture or cupboard to display with pride as works of art in their own right. A logical extension of the banner is her *body furniture* — artists' aprons with many varisized pockets. Wearing one's studio allows the artist (or gardener, or householder) to set up and work anywhere.

Using small pieces of fabric as pockets, loops, or straps in *soft* and *body* furniture led to the same concept on a much larger scale: huge, non–utilitarian, one–of–a–kind wall hangings. "These grew partly from my reaction against small pictures framed on walls. I wanted to build fabric in an easily handled way, away from the loom — to make compositions as large as walls, to be a part of the room and yet not be tied to huge, immobile, and heavy glass and wooden frames." These fabric constructions, a logical extension of the *reddhas* with their geometrical transformations of visual objects and scenes, are made in a mosaic of small doubled pieces selected from scraps of already woven cloth, or, in many cases, specially woven. As works of art, they can be taken down and changed, moved from room to room or house to house, cleaned, carried as easily as luggage, and yet are enormous enough to fill or even replace a wall. In Asia, of course, cloth has traditionally been used to divide rooms and verandas.

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 handwoven repertoire expanded to handsewn toys and small embroidered items like glasses and key cases, belts, hand and shoulder bags, cosmetic or pencil bags, all made of her marvelous cloth. The rural industry grew into a thriving business, with five hundred people on the payroll, which, after the death of Hildon, has been directed and managed by their sons, Simon and Dominic.

For Barbara herself, the creation of useful and beautiful things, not commercial profitability, has always



been the sole motivation. She has successfully resisted any attempt to persuade her to incorporate local motifs and themes in order to make her works more attractive to overseas customers. She does not wish to return to or even suggest the past or belong to a recognizable school. (Yet her work is unmistakably her own). She has never done market research to find out what is commercially viable, nor copied the successes of others. "If I can buy it, I won't make it," she says. "An article like a windbreaker is better from a shop." She has been called the Marimekko of Sri Lanka, and is proud that during her Rockefeller Travel Award she was sent to visit Jack Lenor Larsen, because she did in Sri Lanka what he has done in America.

To Barbara, clothes or furnishings made from commercial synthetic fabric look all the same, but with handloomed natural cloth these can never look commonplace or cheap. To people who use synthetics "because they don't show the dirt," she replies that age is not dirt but rather natural wear and tear which should be a pleasure to keep clean. Shabbiness is different from sordidness, she claims. Natural fibers become more beautiful with age, where synthetic materials just become dull and unsightly.

Barbara's art has not been confined to textiles. In 1963 she collaborated with a distinguished local architect, Geoffrey Bawa (who later went on to design the Sri Lanka Parliament Building), and a Danish architect, Ulrik Plessner, in the design of a chapel in Bandarawela, headquarters of the Good Shepherd Convent. She made a larger-than-life-size clay sculpture (cast in cement) of Christ Resurrected, and fourteen small clay reliefs of the Stations of the Cross, as well as a 30-foot clay engraving and relief of the 23rd Psalm. Bandarawela is off the beaten track, in the central hills of Sri Lanka, and the chapel remains known to few local residents and almost no tourists.

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 Vihares.* (A *vihare* is a Buddhist temple). After publication, UNESCO and the Asia Foundation each gave Barbara grants to do more drawings, with measurements, of Ceylonese architecture. 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.

Barbara finds textiles and architecture to be closely connected ("as they are in tents"). Not only has she devised an inlay or brick-building technique to make fabric *walls*, where one can see *windows* and *doors*, open and closed, sometimes with views or shutters, but she discerns a more fundamental similarity between weaving and building. "There is a closeness between the way a loom works and the construction of a simple house. Both are supremely rational and absolutely honest. They each have to do with tension. In the loom a frame holds the threads, and in the house, the frame holds up the roof." A brick pattern, staggered and alternated, is like a weaving pattern enlarged.

Barbara's husband was appointed five years ago to a professorship in a program sponsored by the Aga Khan at MIT and Harvard, to train Third World architects and encourage them to know and use their own traditions. She now resides for much of the year in Boston. Describing her work after she has lived in America, Barbara notes that Western artists today live in a society of endless choice among unimagined and easily-discarded riches. By contrast, she continues to respect, value, and find nourishment in the essentials of her craft and "has nothing to throw out." She finds that combining and constructing simple and pure colors in satisfying proportions, without gimmickry or artiness or burlesque, remains eternally intriguing and satisfying. "What I continue to seek is the honesty of making a plain piece of cloth — but making it divinely and simply beautiful."■

Ellen Dissanayake lived in Sri Lanka from 1970 to 1985, with periods of residence in Nigeria and Papua New Guinea. Her book ***What is Art For*** *(University of Washington Press) was published in 1988.*