

# SDA'S 20 Years: Looking Back

## I. In the Beginning: Generous Spirits

By Elsa Sreenivasam

*It was an honor to work with so many earnest, hard-working, far-sighted, resourceful people. Special thanks to Pat Campbell, Sara Edmiston, Dorothy Fix, Earl Snellenberger, Derwin Edwards, Don Bujnowski, Glen Kaufman, Lois Brooks, Maribeth Dietrich and Nance O'Banion, and the many others who gave so generously of their time and energy those important first years.—ES*

*(Recollections by Bee Colman and Stephen Blumrich will be published in the next issue of the Newsletter. Other submissions are invited.—ed.)*

I have been asked many times by surface designers, "Just how did it all get started?" or "What was the impetus that set in motion the forming of the Surface Design Association?". Frankly, the time was right. Twenty years ago it was a different scene. Patricia Campbell, teaching in the Fiber area of the Kansas City Art Institute, and I, teaching textile courses in printing, dyeing, and resist processes at the University of Kansas, met occasionally to discuss our programs and exchange ideas. We felt somewhat isolated since the emphasis then was on constructed textiles, and found available information limited. There were very few exhibitions where our area of textile art was included. We did not know who was "out there" and what was happening around the country with it.

We finally decided that a regional or Midwest conference would help the situation. However, various friends urged us to include the entire country, pointing out the real need of coming together. Our work deserved a face of its own instead of being designated as a weavers' "special interest group!"

In getting started, we spent too many hours to count on the telephone contacting people we did not know, names referred to us by others. Gradually, a momentum built up and soon artists and educators were calling us, offering ideas or their topics for a slide presentation. We realized that we needed a name for our field, and invited suggestions. The name "Surface Design" came from Jack Lenor Larsen, our keynote speaker. Students in our classes became involved; in fact, several gave demonstrations at the conference. While attending an industry textile conference in New York, I met Frank Darlington from England, and Larry Muhlberg, a KU Alumnus, who were delighted to be asked about aspects of industry's textile printing.

Soon a theme emerged, as if propelled by itself: "Communication in Art, Education and Industry!" A conference fee of \$45 was set to cover expenses since we had no budget to start with except a small "cushion" offered by the chairman of the Art and Design Department at KU. However, he made it clear that any red ink was my responsibility! Fortunately, an NEA grant funded the catalogs and exhibits and the KU Conferences Office took care of the mailing costs. That office was an immense help in providing services.

Since we had no "history" and so little backing, the registration number projected was set at 200. April

1, 1976, proved an April Fool's Day indeed when we ended up with 600 conferees!

Imagine the commotion, the lines, the confusion, the waiting, the delays. Amazingly, these problems did not seem to matter. Above all, there was excitement, enthusiasm and expectation. No one minded the inconveniences because it was a joyous occasion, so wonderful for people to have "found each other". The conferees, who came hungry and eager to absorb everything they could, were overwhelmed with the abundance, diversity, and high quality work being done in the field. The presenters were genuinely giving and sharing with their information and experiences at every session. It was inspiring to see the professional, student, designer, and historic surface design exhibitions. As Sara Edmiston put it, "We all felt this was a breakthrough. At last there was communication."

Our surface design organizational meeting also surprised us. Pat and I had started out with only a conference in mind, but then began to realize the potential for continuity. We expected only 30 or 40 conferees to be interested in forming an organization. However, the enthusiastic 400 who filled the auditorium were supportive, full of ideas and willing to help.

A planning committee of volunteers from various regions agreed to meet in September, 1976. Joan Sterrenberg, University of Indiana, and Earl Snellenberger, University of Indianapolis, generously agreed to host the group in Bloomington for three days. Arrangements would be made for stays in homes—even our meals would be provided by our hosts!

During those days, we met for long hours, concentrating on basic topics: incorporation, constitution and by-laws, membership fees, national and regional meetings, budget, slide kits, industry's role. Stephen Blumrich and Don Blake offered to create and co-edit the new *Surface Design Journal*. We projected another meeting for Spring 1977 in Chicago to complete our constitution (being developed by Derwin Edwards) so we could be incorporated as a non-profit organization that year.

At the Chicago meeting, hosted by Fern Samuels, we finalized the wording of the official constitution and by-laws. Our preamble began with the words: "Our express concern is to improve communication among artists, designers, industry and teachers—" That was our vision: communication. And that is what Pat and I had been looking for so many months earlier.

Photo: Marna Goldstein  
*Kale*. Exhibited in student show, 1975 SDA conference.