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Mary Walker Phillips and the Knit Revolution of the 1960s

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The talk I delivered at the Textile Society of America's 13th Biennial Symposium on Thursday, September 19, 2012, entitled "Mary Walker Phillips and the Knit Revolution of the 1960s," was part of an Organized Session entitled "Knitting: New Scholarship, New Direction," moderated by Karen Kendrick-Hands. The material I presented is distilled from several chapters of my Master's thesis, "Mary Walker Phillips: *Creative Knitting* and the Cranbrook Experience" completed in 2010, which is the first scholarly examination of Mary Walker Phillips and her work.

My thesis research was supported in part by a 2008 Craft Research Fund Grant from the Center for Craft Creativity and Design, Hendersonville, NC, that made it possible for me to visit archives and museums holding artworks and papers by Mary Walker Phillips, including Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum and Archives, The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Division of Home and Community Life, Department of Textiles, and the Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Textiles. I also conducted interviews in person and by phone of friends, family members, and colleagues of Mary Walker Phillips, 1923-2007, including Glen F. Kaufman and Jack Lenor Larsen. I am grateful to all the individuals and institutions that generously facilitated and funded my scholarship.

"Knitting" and "modernism" are inextricably linked in Mary Walker Phillips and her abstract, architecturally inspired wall hangings. Mary Walker Phillips's work in the medium of knitting emerged in the 1960s out of two parallel knit revolutions – a revolution in mass-produced fabrics away from woven fabrics and toward knits, and a hand-craft or "DIY" revolution, similar to today – a period when not only trained artists, but also everyone else, wanted to experience the joy of creating something by hand.

Today, Mary Walker Phillips, Elizabeth Zimmerman, and Barbara Walker are generally recognized as the three most influential hand knitters of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s these women revitalized and popularized hand knitting through mass-market knitting books and hands-on workshops. But in addition to making the techniques and artistic potential of knitting accessible to a wide audience of contemporary hand-knitters through books and workshops, Mary Walker Phillips was an artist on the vanguard of the American Studio Craft movement.

From 1946-47 and again from 1960-63 Phillips attended Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan to study contemporary weaving and textiles. Starting in the 1930s, studio artists like Phillips were trained in traditional crafts like weaving, metals, wood, and ceramics at a handful of progressive schools like Cranbrook Academy of Art and Black Mountain College that developed in America, based on European models, to create new forms appropriate for modern living.¹ The post-war generation of artists trained in craft media typically designed for industry or did work in their medium of choice,

¹ See generally, Jennifer Lindsay, "Mary Walker Phillips: *Creative Knitting* and the Cranbrook Experience" (master's thesis,

teaching and exhibiting in local and national craft competitions, independent galleries, and museums. The Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York and the de Young Museum in San Francisco were among the earliest leading institutions promoting contemporary art, craft and design through exhibitions. These artists and supporting institutions subsequently fueled the public's appetite for good design in modern, industrially produced products, in hand made art objects for the home, and ultimately for making things themselves.

Phillips's education in contemporary weaving and textile design at the Cranbrook Academy of Art shaped her vision and her work throughout her life. Cranbrook's curriculum emphasized the individual artist's development of form through direct, hands-on experimentation with materials and techniques.² The Weaving Department, established in 1928 by Loja Saarinen, wife of Cranbrook's principal architect and first president Eliel Saarinen, was internationally renowned.³ At Cranbrook, Phillips studied with Marianne Strengell, an award-winning Finnish weaver and textile designer who succeeded Loja Saarinen in 1943 as Head of Cranbrook's Weaving Department.⁴ In the 1940s, Strengell modernized the curriculum at Cranbrook to teach students the skills needed to design prototypes for architects and industry rather than to make one-of-a-kind art textiles.⁵ Strengell's aesthetic hallmark was known as "Scandinavian modern."⁶

During the post-war era, textiles designed by Marianne Strengell, and her noted cohort in contemporary weaving, including Dorothy Liebes, Anni Albers and others, defined America's domestic and corporate interiors.⁷ For example, in the late 1940s at the General Motors Technical Center, a project of the architect Eero Saarinen, Marianne Strengell's custom-woven upholstery and rugs were featured in the ultra-modern lobby of the Research Administration Building.⁸ Strengell also designed upholstery for use in automobile interiors.⁹

Phillips's work throughout her life was distinguished by exceptional and meticulous craftsmanship. As a special student of Marianne Strengell's at Cranbrook in 1946-47, Phillips received high praise for her design ability, her speed, and her fine workmanship.¹⁰ She won an award at Cranbrook in 1947 for a fabric woven in an abstract linear style that Strengell favored, and that is still in the collection of the Cranbrook Art Museum.¹¹ After attending Cranbrook in the 1940s, Phillips developed a following in her

² Ibid. See also, Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapter 5.

³ Ibid. See also, Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapter 8.

⁴ Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 28-40; Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapter 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., and Interview of Glen F. Kaufman by Jennifer Lindsay, Athens, GA, February 23-24, 2009. See also, Ed Rossbach, "Marianne Strengell," *American Craft*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April-May 1984): 8-11.

⁷ See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 28-48; Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapters 5 and 8. See also, Ed Rossbach, "Fiber in the Forties," *American Craft*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (October – November 1982): 15-19; "The Glitter and Glamour of Dorothy Liebes," *American Craft*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (December 1982 – January 1983): 9-12; and "Marianne Strengell," *American Craft*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April-May 1984): 8-11.

⁸ Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapter 5, pp. 114-16 and Fig. 98; Chapter 8, 198-99.

⁹ Clark, et al., *Design in America*, Chapter 8, pp. 198-99.

¹⁰ See, generally, the comments of Phillips's instructors. Mary Walker Phillips Excerpts and Miscellanea File, Cranbrook Archives.

¹¹ Mary Walker Phillips, *Yellow Curtain Fabric*, 1947. Woven, 113 x 34 7/16 in. CAM 1964.17. Bloomfield Hills, MI, Cranbrook Art Museum. Rossbach, "Marianne Strengell," *American Craft*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April-May 1984): 8-11.

hometown of Fresno, CA in the 1950s for her custom-woven, award-winning suiting fabrics and fine table linens.¹²

Today, however, Phillips is best known for “tak[ing] knitting out of the socks-and-sweater doldrums,” as her long-time friend Jack Lenor Larsen quipped.¹³ In 1978, she was admitted to the American Craft Council as a Fellow for being “the first to introduce knitting as a form of artistic expression.”¹⁴ What distinguishes Mary Walker Phillips’s work in knitting is that it is so firmly grounded, through Cranbrook Academy of Art, in the emergence of modern design, studio craft, and “fiber as art” in America. Phillips’s boldest contribution to knitting was to divorce it from the human body and push it into the realm of architecture, interior design and fine art. A monumental, restrained wall hanging in linen and silk, entitled *Shells*, 1967, in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Textiles, is characteristic of her work.¹⁵

By 1960, when Phillips returned to Cranbrook to obtain her BFA and MFA degrees in Weaving, a revolution in contemporary textiles was already underway that ultimately changed her focus from weaving into knitting. In part in response to more limited professional opportunities in industry, artists and designers emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s sought to create fabrics that could not easily be replicated by machines and to weave one-of-a-kind art textiles for the first time since Loja Saarinen’s pre-war heyday.¹⁶ They looked to natural and new materials and to older techniques like knitting, netting, knotting and crochet to produce new fabric structures and an expanded vocabulary of multi-dimensional, sculptural and textural effects. Weaver Alice Parrot, a Cranbrook graduate who settled in New Mexico to study Navajo weaving, commented at this time that she had grown tired of what she termed Cranbrook’s emphasis on “placemat neatness” in her work.¹⁷

Fellow Californian Ruth Asawa, who studied with Anni Albers at Black Mountain College in the 1940s while Phillips was first at Cranbrook, is another example of this shift. Asawa began using a crochet hook in the 1950s to make modernist sculptures out of metal wire.¹⁸

In 1961, after Phillips had been at Cranbrook for one year, Marianne Strengell retired. Glen Kaufman, one of her students, succeeded her. He was open to a wide range of historic and contemporary methods for producing fabrics both on and off the loom, and Phillips was given far greater freedom to experiment and to grow as an artist.¹⁹ In her B.F.A. thesis completed in the Spring of 1962, Phillips explored several of these new trends, including a return to natural fibers, which she had always preferred over

¹² Mary Walker Phillips to Wallace Mitchell, 12 February 1957. Mary Walker Phillips Excerpts and Miscellanea File, Cranbrook Archives. See also, Julia Weissman, “Mary Walker Phillips: Doyenne of Art Knitting,” *Knitters* (Spring – Summer 1985): 16-18.

¹³ Mary Walker Phillips, *Step-By-Step Knitting: A Complete Introduction to the Craft of Knitting* (New York: Golden Press, 1967) with a Forward by Jack Lenor Larsen.

¹⁴ Press Release: American Craft Council Public Information, “10 Cited in 1978 for Nation’s Highest Award in Craft,” undated. Mary Walker Phillips Excerpts and Miscellanea File, Cranbrook Archives.

¹⁵ This hanging, 1984.87, measuring 218.3 x 106.1 cm, or approximately 7’ x 3.5’, was a restricted gift to the Art Institute of Chicago’s Department of Textiles by Mrs. Edward K. Aldworth in honor of Christa C. Mayer Thurman, then Curator, who authored the chapter on “Textiles” in Clark, et al., *Design in America*.

¹⁶ Telephone Interviews by Jennifer Lindsay of Adela Akers, May 21, 2009, and Eleen Auvil, June 15, 2009.

¹⁷ Alice Parrott, “... the right, unhurried place,” *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XX, No. 1 (January-February 1960): 20.

¹⁸ See generally, “Asawa’s Life,” [ruthasawa.com](http://www.ruthasawa.com), with site content developed by Addie Lanier and Peter Weverka. <http://www.ruthasawa.com/life.html>.

¹⁹ Interview of Glen F. Kaufman by Jennifer Lindsay, Athens, GA, February 23-24, 2009.

synthetics; hand-spinning; tie dye; natural plant dyes; and the use of traditional weaving drafts, which Strengell had abjured, preferring that her students “do their own thinking and creating, without outside sources.”²⁰ A coat fabric Phillips showed in her B.F.A. thesis featured hand spun Mexican wool woven in a traditional M and O pattern; the irregular quality of the handspun yarns emphasized its luxurious, handcrafted qualities. Phillips’s classmates Eleen Auvil and Adela Akers were among those who introduced and pursued hand spinning and plant dyes during Marianne Strengell’s final year at Cranbrook, and they were not alone.²¹ These seldom-used techniques were now considered the cutting edge in fiber.²²

Woven Forms, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in the spring of 1963, showed work emerging around 1960 from this new generation of weavers, including Dorian Zachai, Claire Zeisler, Alice Adams, Lenore Tawney and Shelia Hicks – none of them Cranbrook trained – who used both ancient and modern materials and techniques, on and off-loom, to weave works of art that defied weaving’s traditional boundaries as a flat fabric. Their work also showed an interest in narrative content – the textile form as a sentient presence. Installation shots of this exhibition from the on-line archives of the American Craft Council show a gallery of fiber objects made and exhibited as sculpture.²³ In the exhibition catalogue, now available on line, tapestry weaver Alice Adams, one of the artists featured in the exhibition, is shown seated at the spinning wheel. In a close-up image of an untitled work by Claire Zeisler that was exhibited in Woven Forms, we can see the woven fabric interrupted and cascading at the edges into crocheted fringe.²⁴

In 1963, the implications of this work seemed ambiguous. As Jack Lenor Larsen commented in a review of the show, “[a]ll this personal nonsense may be regarded as a durable art form and the prototype of shape woven garments, or even houses.”²⁵ By the early 1960s, Larsen, a Cranbrook graduate, was the owner of the hugely successful Larsen Design Studio in New York. A respected industry commentator, Larsen was among many individuals in the textile industry who saw machine-knit textiles as opening a world of unlimited possibilities for new forms, materials and technology. But as an emerging scholar and a curator of contemporary fiber exhibitions, Larsen also soon embraced fiber as art, co-authoring, with Mildred Constantine of the Museum of Modern Art, several influential art books that documented the emergence of this new genre.

Phillips was one of the first Cranbrook students to work off-loom. She began to knit as an alternative to weaving in the fall of 1962 when little had been done in knitting contemporary textiles for interior use, other than some experiments in machine knit window treatments. Fabrics International, a traveling exhibition prepared by Jack Lenor Larsen and the Museum of Contemporary Craft that came to

²⁰ Mary Walker Phillips, “Wool” (bachelor’s thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1962), Cranbrook Academy of Art Library. Marianne Strengell, untitled document, 2 pages, outlining her approach to weaving instruction, n.d. Marianne Strengell Excerpts and Miscellanea File, Cranbrook Archives.

²¹ Telephone Interviews by Jennifer Lindsay of Adela Akers, May 21, 2009, and Eleen Auvil, June 15, 2009.

²² Ibid., and see generally, Hans Namuth, “Fabric is the Fashion,” *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXI, No. 3 (May - June 1961): 18; Rose Slivka, ed., “Fabrics International: Catalogue of the Exhibition,” *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXI, No. 5 (September-October 1961): 21.

²³ *Woven Forms*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Craft, New York, March 22 – May 12, 1963. American Craft Council Library Digital Collections, <http://digital.craftcouncil.org>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jack Lenor Larsen, “Woven Forms,” *American Fabrics*, No. 61 (Summer 1963): 93-95.

Cranbrook in the fall of 1962 was Phillips's epiphany, and her dormitory pastime of knitting became her new experimental terrain.²⁶

In *Fabrics International*, Jack Larsen characterized machine knitting as the next industrial revolution – a revolution that would challenge the primacy of woven fabrics based on speed and economy.²⁷ The thinking was that knitting machines could eventually be programmed, much like the 3D printing technology we see today, to make almost anything, including cars.²⁸ This idea appealed greatly to Phillips, and she took on experimental knitting in the spirit of accepting a “challenge.”²⁹

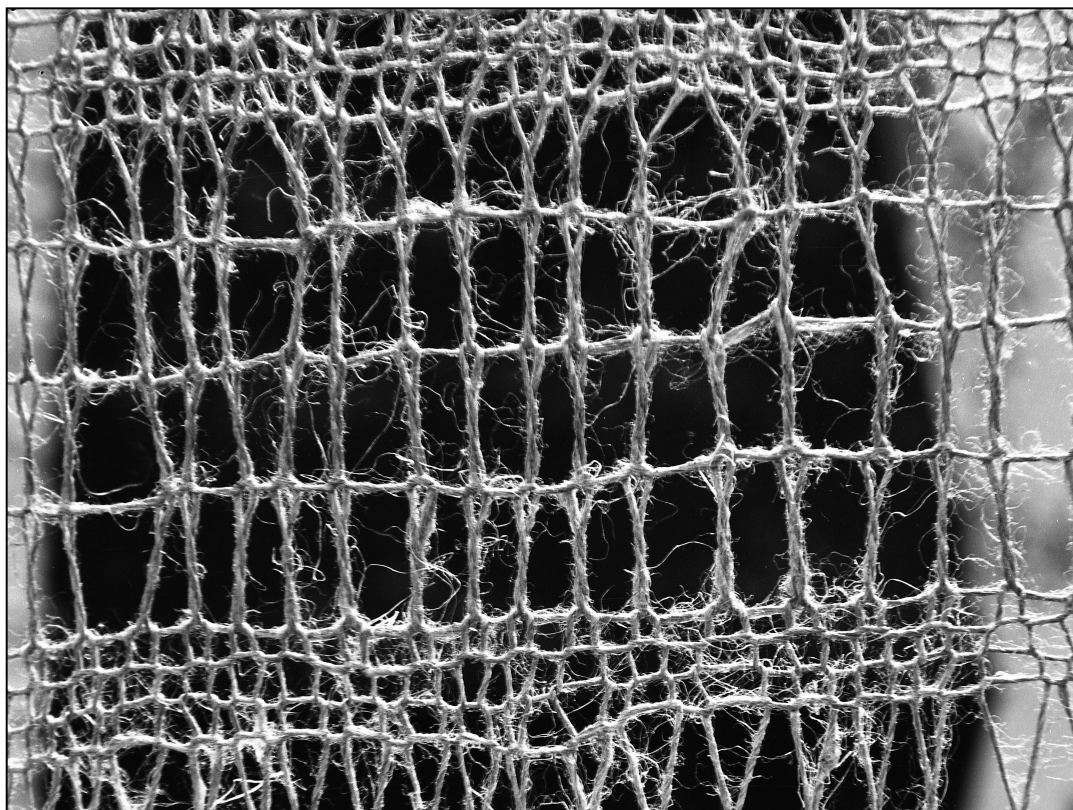


Figure 1: Hand knitted casement by Mary Walker Phillips. © Cranbrook Archives, Harvey Croze, photographer. AA3403-42.

Using her weaving materials – linen, wool, silk – and other experimental materials, Phillips scoured *Mary Thomas's Book of Knitting Patterns*, a British compendium published in 1938 that she found in a used book store, for stitches she could use or adapt to have a modern look.³⁰ Phillips's thesis portfolio shows she worked directly from the examples of contemporary fabrics shown in *Fabrics International*. One window casement sample hand knit by Anni Albers made it into the show; the rest of the examples

²⁶ Mary Walker Phillips, “Experimental Fabrics” (masters thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1963); Telephone Interview by Jennifer Lindsay of Adela Akers, May 21, 2009.

²⁷ See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 101-02, 141-47, and Jack Lenor Larsen, “The Future of the Textile,” *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXI, No. 5 (September-October 1961): 7.

²⁸ See, e.g., Cora Carlyle, ed., “The Computerized Knitting Machine,” *American Fabrics*, No. 70 (Winter 1965): 71.

²⁹ Phillips, “Experimental Fabrics” (masters thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1963).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Phillips cited as inspirational were woven or machine knit.³¹ For example, a machine knit casement designed by Jack Larsen inspired this hand knit example by Mary Walker Phillips.³²

Glen Kaufman stated that this example (which Phillips later made into a full-sized casement) was most appealing because its irregularities could never be duplicated by machine.³³ This photo of Phillips's knitted sample was used for several years in Cranbrook's course catalogues.

Further, experiments Phillips conducted in her M.F.A. thesis included knitting with asbestos yarns as a test case for fully-fashioned fireproof garments, and with glass insulating roving. Phillips also used Rovana, a fire-proof synthetic straw made from Saran and often used in woven casements, to produce crisp and appealing openwork structures for several prototypes of knitted casements that received coverage along with the Woven Forms exhibition in the Summer 1963 issue of *American Fabrics*.³⁴

She even created modern lampshades of knitted linen inspired by Bauhaus designs.³⁵ In the spring of 1963, Glen Kaufman wrote, "Mary . . . concentrated this year on other fabric constructions, primarily knitting. Her work in this field was outstanding. She showed great imagination and sense of design in her experimental work."³⁶ And Phillips herself stated, "The last two semesters have opened up a whole new way of working for me," and "I do not feel this thesis is a conclusion, but the beginning of things to come."³⁷ At Cranbrook, Phillips used knitting not for making art, but primarily to develop knitted prototypes for industrial production, stating: "[S]hould there be sufficient interest in my knit fabrics, they will be able to figure out a way to manufacture them or will invent a machine that will do the job."³⁸

Photos of a solo exhibition in 1963 – Mary Walker Phillips: Architectural Knitting, Hand Woven Textiles and Ceramics – at the Fresno Arts Center (now the Fresno Art Museum), reveal the atmosphere of contemplative, almost zen-like modernism that her vast knitted casements, exquisitely loomed cushions and rugs, and knitted lamps created.³⁹ By this time, Phillips had begun to see the interior design world in terms of knitted rather than exclusively woven structures. Phillips continued to use the look of the contemporary textiles shown in *Fabrics International* as a design resource for creating works of art after she left Cranbrook. There was nothing old-fashioned about her knitting. For example, one can compare the look of a crimped mohair casement by woven by Sue Goldberg exhibited in *Fabrics*

³¹ Ibid.

³² Compare the detailed image of a Larsen Design Corp., USA, flameproof casement, Raschel-knit of "Rovana" (a flat Saran monofilament made by the Dow Chemical Company) shown in the Rose Slivka, ed., "Fabrics International: Catalogue of the Exhibition," *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXI, No. 5 (September-October 1961): 24, #142, to Phillips's hand knit prototype. Phillips used a stitch from *Mary Thomas's Book of Knitting Patterns* called the "Double-crested Garter Insertion Stitch" to reproduce the look of some of the woven structures in Larsen's machine knit casement. Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 110-11; Mary Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Book of Knitting Patterns* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., 1938), reprinted by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1972, pp. 111-12.

³³ Interview of Glen F. Kaufman by Jennifer Lindsay, Athens, GA, February 23-24, 2009.

³⁴ Phillips, "Experimental Fabrics" (masters thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1963). See also, Cora Carlye, ed., "The World of Textiles," *American Fabrics*, No. 61 (Summer 1963): 103.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Course Evaluation, "Weaving," Spring 1963. Instructor: Glen Kaufman. Mary Walker Phillips Excerpts and Miscellaneous File, Cranbrook Archives.

³⁷ Phillips, "Experimental Fabrics" (masters thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1963).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Photos referenced are from the American Craft Council Library College of Fellows Artist File Collection.

International with Mary Walker Phillips's wall hanging, entitled *Circles*, 1964, and a Nottingham loomed lace casement exhibited in Fabrics International with a detail of Phillips's monumental, architecturally-scaled wall hanging, entitled *Shells*, 1967.

With Jack Larsen's help, Phillips's breakthrough year was in 1964 – not in industrial or commercial textile design, but in the emerging arena of studio craft.⁴⁰ Phillips exhibited pieces in two important venues in 1964, including The American Craftsman show at the Museum of Contemporary Craft and the 13th Milan Triennale, a prestigious international design show, where fabrics were included for the first time after a pictorial hanging in bobbin lace by a Czechoslovakian artist, Luba Krejci, had won the silver medal in 1960.⁴¹ Fabric magnate Jack Lenor Larsen, who coordinated the American delegation to the 13th Milan Triennale with Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr. and Mildred Constantine of New York's Museum of Modern Art, naturally emphasized fabric and fiber in the American Section.⁴²

The works selected for the 13th Milan Triennale reflected an idea in circulation at that time that modern architecture demanded to be enriched with hand crafted objects in a marriage that completed them both by contrast.⁴³ An important aspect of this juxtaposition was that good design was inherently democratic, whether made by hand or machine. In effect, the message of the American Section at the 13th Milan Triennale, which integrated beautiful, hand crafted art objects with well-designed, mass-produced objects and materials, was that craft and industrial design offered parallel, and even interdependent, visions of democracy. This perception of unity between American craft and American modernism persisted well into the late 1970s, and reflects the training many artists in craft media received at progressive schools like Cranbrook Academy of Art and Black Mountain College. In the foreground of an iconic photo of the American Section at the 13th Milan Triennale, a monumental, dark natural, rusticated linen casement by Mary Walker Phillips is suspended in a sensuously arced tent of white knit fabric.⁴⁴ Designed by architect Charles Forberg, and probably based on a prototype by Miriam Leefe shown in the Fabrics International exhibition, the minimalist and even slightly surreal-looking tent backdrop undulated through the American Section, touching the floor at intervals on tiny pointed feet.⁴⁵ Phillips's 4' x 9' casement, called *Near East*, had an artsy, evocative name, and featured a clean, modernized tree of life motif made using a traditional bell pattern Phillips found and adapted from *Mary Thomas's Book of Knitting Patterns*.⁴⁶ Weaver Alice Adams complimented this work as "transparent, but at the same time, rich in surface."⁴⁷ In *Near East* Phillips was beginning to merge her modern interior design training with a personal vision of the knitted art textile.

Phillips also collaborated on a child-sized prototype tubular metal chair, a modern icon, for the 13th Milan Triennale.⁴⁸ Eva Zeisel made the frame at the request of Edgar J. Kaufmann Jr. and Jack Larsen asked Phillips to create the custom upholstery, which she knitted from "blue and turquoise nub wool" in

⁴⁰ See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 141-46.

⁴¹ See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 146-52. See also, Sergio Dello Strologo, "The Triennale," *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XX, No. 5 (September –October 1960): 14.

⁴² Jack Lenor Larsen, "The 13th Triennale: A Report by Jack Lenor Larsen," *Interiors*, (September 1964): 92-107; Rose Slivka, ed., "Milan: The Triennale," *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXIV, No. 5 (September –October 1964): 24-30, 40-41.

⁴³ Alda Louise Huxtable, "Art in Architecture 1959," *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (January – February 1959): 10-15.

⁴⁴ Mary Walker Phillips, *Creative Knitting: A New Art Form* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), 67, Illus. 48.

⁴⁵ Cora Carlyle, ed., "U.S. Stretch at the Triennale," *American Fabrics*, No. 65 (Fall 1964): 85.

⁴⁶ Mary Walker Phillips, *Creative Knitting*, 66.

⁴⁷ Alice Adams, "Mary Walker Phillips," *Craft Horizons*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (January – February 1965): 24-27.

⁴⁸ See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, pp. 150-51.

a fully-fashioned style with no seams so it could be slipped off the frame to be cleaned or changed.⁴⁹ The idea for “a sweater-like knit chair” was Larsen’s – at this time he still anticipated that knits would be competitive in the home furnishings industry as well as in fashion, where they were continuing to gain market share.⁵⁰

After 1964, Phillips career was launched – *Near East* was so favorably received that Phillips naturally chose to make more one-of-a-kind wall hangings, ranging in size from monumental to miniature. Phillips made a few wall hangings like *The Creature*, in 1964, with irregular and undulating borders, but she never pursued this direction further into making 3D or sculptural forms.⁵¹ Perhaps, from her perspective, the 9-foot tall wall hanging was to hand knitting what a hand-woven 3D sculpture was to weaving – a sufficient level of technical innovation was already required to resolve the many problems inherent in constructing a knitted fabric that would hold its shape when displayed as a wall hanging or used as a room divider.⁵²

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Phillips continued to exhibit her work regularly in major craft venues – a prototype wall covering in paper twine for *Made with Paper* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in 1967, *Near East* in the Museum of Modern Art’s show, *Wall Hangings*, in 1969, and *Near East 2* in *Objects USA* in 1972, to name just a few. And she began to teach workshops, first at Cranbrook, and then all over the country, including at Penland School of Crafts and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, as well as for local and national fiber guilds and well-known fiber merchants.

Phillips knit with non-traditional materials like metal, and combined fibers not normally merged in knitted fabrics at that time for their interesting visual, tactile and architectural properties. Her work in knitting extended from the unstudied abstraction of a Merit Award winning hanging she entered in *Craftsmen USA* in 1966 (an ornate, and almost pictorial linen work called *The Kings*, 1966, which is now in the permanent collection of the Cranbrook Art Museum, CAM 1992.19), to the quiet and elegant restraint of an *Entrelac* hanging entitled *Royal Interlace*, 1978, in which she combined wool, silk, and silver and gold metal thread.⁵³ And like many weavers of her generation, Phillips appropriated objects from the natural or manufactured world – mica disks, seedpods, temple bells – capturing them in sensually transparent double knit pockets or attenuated lacy openings that became hallmarks of her work in knitting and brought a totally new look to knitted fabrics.

By 1969, the Knit Revolution was an established fact – and mass-manufactured knitted textiles for the home were not a big part of it. Instead, knit fashion fabrics were the big news and in hot pursuit of the market share traditionally held by woven fashion fabrics. After her years weaving fabric for fashion, Phillips seemed no longer much interested in fashion as a design challenge. But in focusing on hand knitting and on making one-of-a-kind works of art, Phillips had bet right. The Knit Revolution of the 1960s secured a substantial market for machine knit fabrics and simultaneously renewed a popular interest in the craft of hand knitting that would resonate for nearly two more decades. By the summer of

⁴⁹ Telephone interview by Jennifer Lindsay of Jack Lenor Larsen, June 23, 2009. See also, Phillips, *Creative Knitting*, 115, Illus. 81.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Phillips, *Creative Knitting*, 60, Illus. 43.

⁵² See generally, Lindsay, M.A. Thesis, Appendix I.

⁵³ Photo available from the American Craft Council Library College of Fellows Artist File Collection.

1969 the demand for hand knitting yarns was already reported to be three times what craft yarn producers could supply.⁵⁴

Like so many artists of her day, Mary Walker Phillips established a reputation in the medium of knitting, and later macramé, through museum exhibitions and gallery shows that won her numerous book contracts and speaking engagements starting in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1980s. Phillips and her cohort of artists trained in craft media actually recovered and reintroduced the art and craft of making to a new generation of crafters in fiber, jewelry, ceramics, glass, wood, basketry, metal and paper. In a wonderful, direct, unpretentious and informal style Mary Walker Phillips taught twentieth-century knitters how to make knitted fabrics with or without patterns, as they preferred. For Phillips, trained as an artist, knitting was a thoroughly modern medium with unlimited and untapped potential that she could use to make art forms unlike anyone before her had ever attempted. It was equally well suited to anyone who simply loved the art of making practical items for everyday use.

Reference

Jennifer Lindsay, “Mary Walker Phillips: *Creative Knitting* and the Cranbrook Experience” (master’s thesis, Smithsonian Associates and Corcoran College of Art + Design, 2010), Smithsonian Institution Libraries Digital Repository, <http://si-pddr.si.edu/jspui/handle/10088/18629>.

A thesis abstract is available from CANVAS, the Corcoran Archival Network for the Visual Arts, <http://canvas.corcoran.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15735coll1/id/104/rec/8>

⁵⁴ Cora Carlyle, ed., “Hand Knitting is Big Business,” *American Fabrics*, No. 87 (Summer 1970): Marketing Presentations.