

Interview of Lloyd Herman: July 2015

This interview is presented by long-time NWDC member Lynn Di Nino and was conducted in Lloyd and Dick's art-filled home during the summer of 2015:

LD: You've been an NWDC member since 1988. Tell us who brought you into the group and about your early involvement.

LH: I associate my earliest knowledge of NWDC with co-jurying and co-curating the Northwest Craft exhibitions for the Henry Art Gallery when Lamar Harrington was director there in 1974. Ron Ho had a party - I'm sure with a lot of NWDC members- the day after jurying. I got acquainted with a few people then. I really didn't know Ramona Solberg, or some of the other mainstays of NWDC until later, but I think '74 was the time that I first began becoming acquainted, and then when I moved out here to Bellingham in '88 -when I took the job in Canada - I felt immediately at home. I already knew a lot of craftspeople that I'd known through the Renwick whose work we exhibited- that have become friends. I felt much more comfortable here than I did seven years in Bellingham, where I had little contact with the arts community despite being chairman of the Municipal Arts Commission the year that I moved down to Seattle. That was 1994. It was crazy.

LD: In the awareness of NWDC members you were already famous for being a director at The Renwick, which was established as a branch of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1972. It was known for its collections, exhibition program and publications highlighting the best craft objects and decorative arts of the 19th century to the present. Tell us about your time there including how you got the job.

LH: [laughs] How I got the job was really kind of goofy. My first job at the Smithsonian was an administrative one, and I was the administrative officer to the director of the National Museum -as the top museum guy was known. I had to keep up with all of his correspondence and whatever he was working on. He was on a committee called the Renwick Committee trying to figure out what to do with the old federal Court of Claims building that had been designed by James Renwick as the first specifically built building for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1859. And I got really interested in the whole thing about what to do with this building. The secretary of the Smithsonian, Dillon Ripley, wanted it to be a center for the study of craft, decorative art, and folk art, and I thought, well, that's really interesting, that's a field that interests me, and my job was, well, under this man. I was helping to oversee the renovation of the oldest Smithsonian Museum building, known as the Arts and Industries Building, into what would be a changing exhibition center that we were calling the Smithsonian Exposition Hall. Gallery after gallery was emptied out for getting ready for the new Air and Space Museum to open. We would then kind of renovate those galleries into changing exhibition spaces. I was overseeing these changing exhibition areas while still very interested in the decorative arts. I think I was an aspiring interior designer as a child, and I had scrapbooks of pictures of interiors that interested me. We'd rent these traveling exhibitions from places like the American Federation of Arts. During that time I met Paul Smith who was director of what was then The Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York, and we took several of those exhibitions that Paul had originated. One particularly I'm proud of called "Plastic as Plastic". And of course the museum was

in a little townhouse space in Manhattan, and I had this vast hall. We had enough space so I was able to borrow the first all-plastic airplane, and hang it over the exhibit [laugh], a plastic automobile body, it was a full automobile but it had a plastic body, and another plastic modular vacation home, as well as a spray-foamed environment. So it was fun. I was kind of getting into a sort of curating, but it was curating after the fact - adding to what somebody else had already imagined. I would probably be kind of incensed if anybody did that [laugh] thinking about it now. So I got this idea, just as we were going to turn the Arts and Industries Building into the Smithsonian Exposition Hall, that why couldn't the Renwick Building, as it was called, be used the same way as the center for changing exhibitions in craft, decorative arts, and design and folk art. So, my boss was away on an, oh, I think it was a four week trip to India in about 1967. I started developing this proposal, which turned out to be a six page single-spaced proposal for what I called the Renwick Design Center. I was enamored of the British Design Center in London, and used to go to London almost every year. And I thought, well we don't have a design center in the United States, and this could be that -plus my interest in the handmade could all be combined in one as a changing exhibition program, specifically what Secretary Ripley wanted, in the Renwick Building. So when my boss came back -my six page proposal, which even included what foods we would serve in the elegant tea room I'd envisioned in the grand salon on the upper level -was waiting on his desk. He never said a word. . . never acknowledged that he'd even seen it. I was too timid to ask.

Two years went by and it was maybe about '68 that he came into my office, and said he'd just had lunch with the assistant director of what was then called the National Collection of Fine Arts, (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). This director was responsible for developing a program for the Renwick and he gave him my proposal and suggested I meet with him and share my thoughts. I did. He had entirely different ideas. He wanted a little exhibit case of teapots here, and maybe a model room, you know, not at all what I envisioned. I really kind of lost interest in the Renwick Building and was busy anyway working on the Centennial trying to locate objects for 40 freight cars. A new director of the art museum came in - he'd only been there a couple months when this man whose proposal I didn't like had a heart attack. And in an effort to find out what this guy had been working on he found, in a stack of papers on this man's desk, my then two year old proposal, and [laughs] - he called me over for an interview, and hired me to implement it. So my first title, this was in February of 1971, was Administrator, Renwick Gallery. I wasn't to be called "curator." I had no academic credentials whatsoever, and so I was basically administering an exhibition program. The man who hired me then, Joshua Taylor, sort of a renowned professor of American art history from the University of Chicago, liked what I had proposed, and it made sense to him, and I was hired immediately, and had a little office in this half reconstructed building over near The White House. We had an architect who was working on the renovation of the building - the exterior had already been preserved, so I worked with the architect to figure out space planning for exhibits, where the museum shop would be, and the offices, and all of that. And it was really exhilarating. I spent really long days and weekends, but we had all the resources of the Smithsonian. Secretary Ripley came in one Saturday when I was working there with one of the assistant secretaries, and asked how things were going, and I said, well, we're having trouble getting that chandelier that you bought on a trip to India over here - reassembled and installed. We don't even know whether it's been electrified, and I can't get anybody to look at it. Secretary Ripley turned to the assistant secretary, and said 'get on that'. Stand in front of that procurement desk until it's done. I was 35. That kind of led to the Renwick as it started, not with a collection but as a center for changing exhibitions in the decorative arts, craft, and design. And when we opened the museum one year later in '72, we had temporary exhibitions in every room that kind of exemplified the variety of exhibitions we envisioned. There was one of architectural photographs. There was another one, a kind of signature exhibition called "Design Is", and there were cylindrical exhibit cases -each one of them had an individual object. Maybe one of them was an example of industrial design.

We had a quilt by Katherine Westfall, from California. We had several handmade things. We had American Indian objects because that kind of embraced the idea too. So it was a wide variety helping people get an idea of what the Renwick Gallery was about.

LD: Upon leaving in 1986 and having directed more than 100 exhibitions during your 15-year tenure, were you confident about creating a career for yourself in unexplored territory?

LH: I thought, you know, I'm turning 50. If the director abolished my job, and the title 'Director' - which looked like the direction things were going - I could retire early at 50. I had sufficient federal time in the military and at the Smithsonian, and could start another career as an independent museum consultant. So I hit the ground running with about three exhibition proposals that I was unable to do at the Renwick. One of them was called "Threadworks", and it was for US Information Agency which turned out to be one of my biggest clients for exhibitions that travelled abroad, and I got to travel with them [laughs] often. Then I was doing about two shows a year, totaling I think about 17. Some of my clients were the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service, the American Federation of Arts, The Museum Association of New York States, the Traveling Exhibition Service and Art Services International. The US Information Agency also provided me some wonderful travel opportunities. So, actually, I was decorated by the Queen of Denmark, and the King of Belgium for exhibitions that I had organized from their countries [laughs].

I found out that the Cartwright Gallery in Vancouver, B.C. was going to upscale to become the Canadian Craft Museum so I applied for and got that job planning their new museum with the proviso that I would work with a four day week so that I could pursue curating other exhibitions for other traveling exhibitions services and museums while having that job. And I started organizing exhibitions for the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, but also traveled.

Additionally I'm currently on the Craft in America board, the PBS series, and I'm helping develop one of the forthcoming episode's, I've been on the boards of Penland School of Crafts, and Arrowmont, and The Craft Emergency Relief Fund which is one of the best ones I was ever on. I've enjoyed that and learned from that experience too, and meeting other people.

LD: NWDC benefited by your membership on the Living Treasures committee. Tell us about other impacts you've had and commitments you've made to the craft community including within other organizations in this part of the country.

LH: Besides the Municipal Arts Commission in Bellingham, I was a founding member of the Ballard Arts Council when I lived in Ballard when I first moved here, and when I first moved to Normandy Park, I was Normandy Park Arts Commission. Now I'm on the Highline Historical Society which embraces Normandy Park, Burien, White Center, and SeaTac. The Living Treasures project helped with my understanding of the importance of history through recorded oral history interviews that I have since conducted for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian. Those are of Alice Rooney, Heikki Seppa, John

Marshall, Paul Smith -my old pal from the Museum of Contemporary Craft and the American Craft Museum, and two of the previous directors of Arrowmont before I joined the board - Ray Perrotti and Sandra Blain. During that time of development of the Living Treasures project idea I was also advocating for archival collection for the Archives for American Art.

LD: Tell us a little about where you grew up and your history, including something about your family of origin and early art influences, or early art making projects.

LH: [laughs] I have a dopey little ceramic dog with sort of abstract spots on it that I made in high school [laughs] but I was not much of a maker. I've always told people who asked me if I practiced a craft, I've said, no, I was a failed 4-H woodworker. I couldn't square the piece of wood to thumbtack my 4-H sign onto [laughs]. So I became an appreciator of people with skills. The things I made in high school shop class were absolutely forgettable.

But you know, I, I grew up largely in the country. My dad was a bookkeeper, and my mother had been a secretary -she'd gone to secretarial school in Winnipeg -a Canadian immigrant from a Scottish family. We didn't have really any art in the home. We had some reproductions, and I often thought, you know, we had this big painting over the sofa in the living room, it wasn't really a painting, it was sort of a reproduction on textured cardboard that came with the furniture. So, it's not as though [laughs] I had any knowledge of original art until perhaps I was in high school where I did take art classes, and then after my sophomore year at Oregon State University I went into the navy. I was able to go to museums in different cities where I was stationed and became a little more knowledgeable about contemporary art, which was my particular interest, and then I learned about historical art as well.

I was born in 1936, and I was consequently a child of The Depression. I have a sister who's five years older, and when I was five we moved from Corvallis where my dad was a bookkeeper, into the country across the Willamette River in Lind County, Oregon, only about three miles out but to a kid it seemed 100 miles. So when I was ready to go to school at age six, I followed my sister to this little one-roomed country Orleans school, and I attended all eight grades. I was the only kid in my classroom the third through the eighth grade so that we had to join up with another little one-roomed country school to have an eighth grade graduation because they had two graduates. I marvel today at how the teachers were able to deal with all eight grades. But at home we all had chores -I had chickens to take care of. I had 4-H sheep. We raised a couple of pigs, and I used to be embarrassed, it sounded so dog-patchy to tell this story: a neighboring farmer had one piglet more than the sow could feed so we took in this little piglet, and had a little box by one of the floor registers in the kitchen. We would feed it on a bottle, and then it got big enough it would skitter around the linoleum floor, and finally had to be put outside. That pig had a great memory, though. Even after it no longer lived in the house it would sit at the back door like a dog waiting to be let in [laughs]. I thought, oh, god, we've got to pen that pig up. What will the neighbors think, a pig waiting to get in the house? But, you know, I churned butter, we did all that stuff. We saved rubber bands, and aluminum foil for the war effort, and the thrifty nature of what we did at that time has never left me. **I remain aggressively frugal I guess you could say, and consequently have always been interested in recycled materials in art and design.**

LD: Okay. Paul Smith, Director Emeritus of the Museum of Arts & Design, interviewed you in 2010 for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. It's primarily interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators. They also hold your correspondence and papers. Is your interview audio or video available to the general public?

LH: Like all Smithsonian bureaus, it's something that is for the public. You can read more at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lloyd-e-herman-16029>. The Smithsonian is for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among *men*. Uh, no slight intended ladies, but it is certainly something that is in the course of education.

LD: You and your life partner Dick Wilson –and now spouse - are art collectors and have traveled the world for the 41 years you've been together. You've led groups of artist travelers. What has been gratifying in your life?

LH: I got great travel opportunities when I was at the Renwick Gallery, often being invited by foreign governments to go to their countries to help choose objects for an exhibition. And even though I didn't necessarily know the history of design, or ceramics, or whatever in that country, I always worked as a co-curator bringing an American taste and sensibility to the selection of objects for an exhibition that would tour the United States. When I retired I thought, oh, god, I'm going to have to pay for my own travel now. An early trip to China with Michael Scott of the Crafts Report got me interested in more kinds of off-beat locations, and I found out from him about trips that Ramona Solberg had led. Dick and I had made our first trip to India 31 years ago with Ken Shores from Portland. It was another art group. And more trips to India. Then I started thinking, you know now I know enough about the crafts of India. I think I can put together a group of people who would enjoy knowing them too. I ended up leading trips to Iran, Vietnam, Morocco, Bhutan, Jordan and let's see. . . . others [laughs]. I get a lot out of it, I enjoy being with people, and the camaraderie that's shared with a small group of people traveling together. I never expected that.

LD: What makes a handmade crafts object interesting? Can you explain how some creations have that "it", that presence, and energy?

LH: I can't really explain that. It used to be that I learned by jurying craft competitions which I have done a lot of for organizations local, and statewide, and national over the years. I've learned a lot from other jurors, and what they look at that's then given me more of the confidence to voice my own opinion. . . other than, 'oh, I like it!'. Workmanship alone does not make an object come to life. And I came to realize that workmanship has to be equal to the kind of idea behind it, whether it's intended to be a refined object or whether it's to be - a current term now is 'sloppy craft'. I don't like that idea but if you understand some things can be a little more robust, and kind of casual looking, then they don't need the refinement of surface. that doesn't really quite answer your question but, uh, there, there's a quality, I guess, that I've come to recognize largely through looking at a lot of work. the fancy word connoisseurship but I like to think of it as sort of visual memory and assessment. Evaluating what I see, and comparing that with maybe other similar objects that I've seen, or what other work in that medium brings about. It's interesting that I'm going to be a juror this coming year for the, uh, Bellevue Arts Museum Biennial, which will focus on metal this year, so I'm really looking forward to that, and flattered to be doing it.

LD: When you look back over a lifetime of looking at crafts, do you especially remember favorite objects? Or particular people whose work really impacted you at a particular time? Said another way, who or what were your personal "game changers" in looking at crafts?

LH: Gosh, I, you know that's a hard one to answer. I don't - I can't think of a single object. . . well I do think of a single object: it's a chair in my living room, a sculptural chair by Richard Herz, H-e-r-z, who was, I think, an Oregon furniture maker, and that chair was from the 1974 Northwest Craft Show that I juried at the Henry Art Gallery. When we finished the jurying, I said to Lamar Harrington –'I really like that chair, and I think I can afford to buy it but how much would it cost to ship it'? She said I think we have money in our budget so we could ship it to you [laughs] which was a wonderful treat, and it still is one of my favorite objects. He's someone who has kind of disappeared from sight. But, you know, I guess probably the answer is I have a number of handmade things that I have bought that represent someone's work who I've liked enough to own it.

LD: Over the years, another constant question has been what is craft? What is art? Can you define this once and for all?

LH: [laughs] Not for once and for all. That keeps being addressed every year or so and it has been defined in different ways. It used to be this idea, well, it's about the medium. So if it's made of clay, or wood, or metal, or textiles –then it's craft. Well, you could take issue with that too, because bronze sculpture - is that craft? And then it got down to the idea that, well, is it functional? If it's functional -it is craft. That began to be eroded by people who were making purely expressive objects that had no functional aspect perceived, at all. That thinking doesn't really make it either. In that essay I wrote for the "Transformations" catalogue talking about Duchamp and his idea of the ready-made by putting a sink on a pedestal and putting it in an art museum - it makes people stop and think. . . .

Now I think it's considered to be in **the intention of the maker and the perception of the beholder** as to whether it's considered art, regardless of the materials, or whether it's functional or not. There were and have always been functional objects in museums that have been perceived as art. So, you know, it's still evolving [laughs].