

ELSE REGENSTEINER

Born and educated in Germany, Else Regensteiner has studied and taught weaving in the United States since 1942. She studied weaving under Marli Ehrman at the Institute of Design in Chicago and with Josef and Anni Albers at Black Mountain College.

In the early 40's she began teaching at the Institute, at Hull House and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her philosophy of textile education is summed up in her first book, *The Art of Weaving*: "As with all crafts, fundamentals and theory must be learned before the full range of creative possibilities can be embraced. But invention can start together with learning, and technical perfection does not have to be dull."

In 1945 she partnered with Julia McVicker to start the studio, reg-wick, custom designing and weaving for architects and designers.

In 1957 she started as head of the weaving department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Under her guidance, weaving became a major program and a Master's degree became available. Retiring in 1971 as Professor Emeritus, Else then became a consultant for the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, Greece, for five years.

Else was on the Board of Directors of the Handweavers Guild of America, Inc. from 1969 to 1976, and was one of the initiators of the Certificate of Excellence program. In 1977 she was made a fellow and recipient of an Honorary Award from the American Craft Council. In 1980, the Midwest Weavers Association established the Regensteiner Award, honoring those individuals who by their work and influence have made major contributions to the international community of weavers.

Her weavings have been featured in more than 75 one-woman shows and group exhibitions and appears in several permanent collections including that of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York.

Her writings include articles in *Handweaver and Craftsman and Shuttle, Spindle & Dyepot* (SS&D, Vol 1. No. 2; and SS&D, Vol. 12, No. 1, her keynote lecture for the Midwest Conference in 1980 entitled *Chicago Weaving: Development and Impact*). Her books on basic weaving techniques are standards, including *The Art of Weaving*, *Weavers Study Course: Ideas and Techniques*, and *Geometric Design in Weaving*.

Among many other honors, Else is listed in *Who's Who in American Art* and *Who's Who in America*.

by Phillis Alvic

In the early sixties I was an art education major at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My very first weaving was done in freshman orientation, a course that introduced many art areas in several weeks' stints two afternoons a week. In my junior year I chose weaving as the craft component of my education major and began my studies with Else Regensteiner. Within a very short time, weaving became my main visual area.

Else's gift as a teacher was that she knew the exact moment a student was ready to receive information. As students, we actively engaged in our own education through experimentation. The course was constructed as a series of problems. We

all sought our unique answers with judicious suggestions from the teacher. Craftsmanship and art were not separated but interrelated. Drafting was taught concurrently with basic introduction to the loom.

Within the basic course in weaving, there was a mixture of designing both for utility and for decorative ends. After a grounding in many different types of weaving, we were allowed to explore interests in specific areas of our own choosing.

We were encouraged to seek inspiration for our work from many sources. There

was a library of weaving books in the weaving studio. Although the texts available at that time were not nu-

merous — or even in color — we used them extensively. The Art Institute of Chicago provided historic and contemporary textile exhibitions in the decorative arts galleries and a textile study room. The museum, of course, displayed many of the world's greatest paintings which we studied for design and color. We developed the sensibilities of artists while we worked in the craft of weaving. We became aware of the rich heritage of weaving, studied the visual elements in other forms of art that were applicable to weaving and had our eyes opened to seek stimulation from varied sources.

On reflection, I have thought that my undergraduate education was too good. Because I did not feel the need for graduate school, I have since missed the credentials when I have applied for jobs. But, my education did more than adequately prepare me for the path I have chosen. I was well equipped both technically and visually to continue my own studies, which is the life of an artist.

Else Regensteiner developed her method of teaching on the Bauhaus model with her personal reflections of the strengths and weaknesses of that system. Founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 and later moved to Dessau, the Bauhaus pioneered in visual education until it was closed by Hitler. The Bauhaus, through its faculty and students, became the foundation for modern art and for contemporary industrial design in Europe and in the United States. In 1939, Else became the assistant to the weaving teacher Marli Ehrman at the School of Design in Chicago. Laszlo Maholy-Nagy had established the school on the Bauhaus principles and employed many of its faculty. Ehrman had graduated from the Bauhaus. In the School of Design students explored materials and structure and applied this experimentation in both areas of individual expression and in design for commercial production. Else was also exposed to Bauhaus faculty during a summer at Black Mountain College. Joseph Albers was there teaching design and color theory while his wife, Anni, taught weaving.

Else's approach to teaching expanded on the Bauhaus experimentation to include more structured guidance. As students, we were expected to do a lot of thinking and looking before we began the actual work on the loom. At the loom, we tried many yarn textures and colors, and weaving patterns before we decided on the direction for the work. A lot of the teaching was done through constructive criticism of the product during the developmental stages. This method built our confidence and encouraged self-criticism. The mark of

an excellent teacher is that her students are able to carry on without her and are not dependent, but can function autonomously. Standards are not imposed, but are developed internally within the students.

In the early 40's Else taught weaving from her own studio, at Hull House (a social settlement founded by Jane Addams) and in the evenings at the School of Design. One of her evening school students recommended Else to the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. She began teaching there in 1945 and retired as Professor Emeritus in 1971.

Else Regensteiner has done much more than teach me to weave. She has served as a model of how one can piece together a creative life of many separate elements tied together by interrelated strands. Her work has appeared in over 75 exhibitions. Her weavings have challenged the boundaries of the craft with subtle elegance. In 1977 Else was made a fellow of the American Crafts Council for her contributions to her craft. Her Gilmore loom has hardly ever been without a warp.

Besides the decorative wall pieces, she has channelled her creativity into designing utilitarian fabrics. After a School of Design student who worked in interior design complained about the lack of availability of specialty fabrics, Else and another of her students formed a custom weaving business. Under the banner of *reg/wick handwoven originals*, she and Julia McVicker produced fabric for interiors for many years.

Else did not just remain within the art school environment, but generously shared her expertise with weaver's guilds and on the programs of regional and national conferences and as juror for exhibitions. For 20 years Else has headed a study group that meets once a month.

While attending the ACC Conference in 1977 in Winston-Salem, I was very surprised to find Else nervous about her lecture. I had assumed that experience meant you did the same thing over and over again. But Else always approached things fresh, seeking new ways to express ideas with clarity. She was concerned that the prepared talk on creativity in contemporary weaving did not make her point forcefully enough for an audience that contained many nonweavers.

With Marcella Baumgaertner, Else conducted tours to many parts of the world. These travels were much more than sightseeing ventures; they examined textiles and visited studios.

In the mid-70's, Else served as consultant to the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, Greece. In this school, founded by an American missionary in 1904, the boys





Dazzling Journey. 42 by 28 inches.

concentrated on acquiring farm skills. The girls studied the household arts including sewing, weaving and embroidery. Else encouraged the girls to use designs from the strong Greek tradition for items that were utilized for the girl's dowry and for sale.

Most weavers know Else Regensteiner best through her writings. She has written dozens of magazine articles, primarily for *Handweaver and Craftsman* and *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot*. While leafing through her first book, *The Art of Weaving*, I actually shed a tear. Else's personality and her perspective on weaving come through so clearly that I became homesick for those exciting school years. With her books, she has continued to combine solid technical information with strong design and sensitivity to color. These books have become staples on most weavers' bookshelves.

In the very early years of the Handweavers Guild of America, Else shared her experience and her vision for the national organization. She served as a Board member and chaired the Certificate of Excellence committee. The Certificate requirements reflect her belief that the best weavers should have wide knowledge of the field, exhibit a high skills level and always be mindful of aesthetics. In the major study portion of the Certificate of Excellence, personal creativity and the ability to define and follow-through on one topic are required. This mirrors Else's thinking on the importance of individual direction and initiative.

Else Regensteiner also served me as a model of a woman with a career who also had a personal life. She was born in Munich, Germany, educated at the



Red Feather Weaving. 36 by 72 inches.

Frauenschule and continued her studies at the University of Munich. She married and had a daughter before moving with her family to the United States in 1936. Her husband, Bertold, of 62 years was a gracious, cultured man who took obvious enjoyment in his wife's accomplishments. He worked as an industrial engineer, but his interests were wide and varied. Books and weaving were prominent in their home.

A few years ago I visited Jon Eric Riis, another student of Else's. While reminiscing about our Art Institute days we fell into an argument. We both claimed Else as our primary influence and felt that she couldn't have been as important to the other. She was able to guide a student in the direction that best drew on individual creativity and talents. That is why there is no common visual stamp that identifies a student of Else Regensteiner. We are unique because she helped us obtain the skills and she nurtured our confidence. She made us all realize that hard work and high self-standards would be the only way to realize our potential as artists. ♣

An avid researcher, Phillis received two major Humanities Council grants, and is concluding on-site research for a project entitled Weavers of the Southern Highlands: Early Years in Gatlinburg. An avid writer, she will be writing a series of articles on craft schools for The Craft Report. She is editor of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen. An avid weaver, she is working on a Rabun Gap series, experimenting with different formats besides the verticle rectangle. Several of the pieces were shown at the Art and Craft Foundation gallery in Louisville.