

Weaving of Community

Let us be merry, let us rejoice in the streets, let us take up our forlorn half-knitted sweaters and dusty Saxony wheels and make way to the Astoria Fiber Arts Academy to join in the circle of community being woven, as we speak, by a handful of dedicated artisans and elders of the loom.

As a fiber fanatic with more than one half-made sweater and not a few unfinished sock pairs (not to mention that quilt, and those pillow covers), I was amazed last fall to discover that Astoria—little old Astoria—would be home to a craft facility dedicated to textile arts. Months on from those first rumors of such a community boon, we've got ourselves a bona fide fiber arts center. Complete with classes, co-operative work area, and a retail space exploding with luscious yarns, hats, blankets, socks—and quilted coffee mugs topped with removable pincushion “lids” and a sewing kit inside (tape, scissors, thread, the works)! At the risk of being exposed as a complete fiber geek, this was one of the most exciting finds in the shop. Or imagine socks made on an antique knitting machine with fibers spun from crab and shrimp shells! Or recycled wetsuit rugs? People, do I have your attention yet?

Of course the Academy isn't just about retail sales, though this is a large piece of the pie that enables artists to sell their work and helps the Academy finances. The complete vision is to foster and continue the strong history of textile craft guilds in Astoria and “establish a resource center for maintaining and growing the community of fiber artists” [in the region]. “My biggest thrill is to give this town back its own heritage,” Academy visionary Margaret Thierry says with a passionate gleam in her eye. In the 1950s, six families moved to Astoria from Finland and formed a craft co-operative, which later evolved into the Clatsop Weavers & Spinners Guild. The Guild is still in existence, and with the Academy helps to fill the learning gap left by the dissolution of the CCC fiber arts program.

Textiles form the heart of hearth and community, and one only needs to spend a little time making craft in public to see that this is true. Whether spinning at a county fair, knitting at a café, or weaving at the Academy with the door open on a warm afternoon, fiber artists find children, men, and women flocking to their work. “It's comforting,” says one male onlooker of a spinning demonstration, “it's rhythmic, cozy—just makes you feel good.” The practice of fiber arts, centuries old—and by the way, related in most mythologies to the supernatural and divine—has always allowed the blending of self-expression with that of usefulness; fostered community and the transmission of technique, pattern, and story.

This passing down of craft is central to the function of the Academy, and was part of the original vision of weaver and colorist Margaret Thierry and fiber artist Shannon Meeker. Their shared idea of “wouldn't it be cool if” percolated in Thierry's mind for four years, until she mentioned the idea to just the right person. “It was September

5th in the Blue Scorcher. I was chatting with Larry Taylor and I told him about my vision. Larry blew life into the idea . . . he took it from just something that I wanted to do and helped make it real.” Though it took time, like any great weaving, the Academy came into physical form in January of 2010 with looms donated from private individuals and salvaged from the discontinued weaving program at CCC. As a project of the Astoria Visual Arts, the Fiber Academy is under the non-profit umbrella of the AVA, but has its own board, budget, and mission.

Fiber arts are for *everyone*, and in fact, historically, the industrial textile trades or master craft guilds were often dominated by men. The Academy is pleased to offer classes tailored to all: beginners and more advanced artists, and hopes to encourage a budding group of middle school-aged weavers (and other kids) with programs in the late afternoon during the school year. The largest area of the building is given over to weaving; the place is bursting with looms. In fact the most recent arrival is an enormous working production loom, which made its way from local weaver Leslie Morehead to the Academy via Timberline Lodge. Though classes make jumping into weaving painless—they include instruction, materials and the loom—there are other entry points into fiberland. Dyeing, spinning, felting, and knitting classes are offered regularly (see sidebar). And for those wanting to really go for it, Virginia Hall offers a wool preparation class that takes the participants from fleece (skirting, washing) to fiber (flicking, spinning). In addition to classes, community members can join a circle—at present there is an open knitting and spinning circle on Thursdays, from 3-5pm—or utilize the co-operative weaving space by either renting time on a loom or renting space for their own loom.

Clearly, the ways of getting involved with Fiber Arts Academy are as varied as fibers themselves can be. Join via membership—the best way to support the project, says Thierry—and get discounts on classes and the tax deduction, plus the satisfaction of keeping the arts vibrant in our community. Take classes, shop in the store, volunteer to teach classes or work in the shop. Pulling together such a venture takes huge effort and commitment, and needs a steady transfusion of fresh interest and ideas to remain vibrant. “I used to wake up in a sweat for the first six months—how was it going to work? But it did,” Thierry grins. “Larry [Taylor, AVA president] was great. He kept us all going.” Cheryl Silverblatt and Helen Repp, both master weavers and teachers are part of the original team and Board.

Teacher Spotlight

The Academy has a host of talented teachers. Margaret Thierry teaches beginning weaving and dyeing techniques, Helen Repp instructs kids—“I love teaching young people. It’s so much fun and they are so creative.”—and also advanced weaving. Cheryl Silverblatt teaches tapestry weaving, Virginia Hall hosts wool prep classes and spinning. Bonnie Lively busts out knitting and special topics (i.e. socks!) and Marika & Melody Cowan plan to offer instruction on their antique sock knitting machines.

The Academy also hosts regional teachers. On September 11 Eugene artist Barbara Pickett will be teaching a one-day workshop on Colorhue liquid, non-toxic, fiber-reactive dyes. Pickett is Associate Professor at the U of O and principal instructor in the Fiber Arts program there, plus an exhibiting artist (www.beetgallery.com), and co-owner, with her son, of textile business Mihara Shibori. The class runs from 10am to 4pm and will include supplies and instruction for several different techniques. Interested (and why wouldn't you be?) folks check out the website: www.astoriafiberarts.com.

Fall is a great time to get into a new activity or pick up those half-knitted projects and begin to cozy in for the shorter days. The Fiber Arts Academy is a place to make connections, create, and learn. Our participation is important—on whatever level—to keep the project alive. When I asked Thierry her long-term vision, she said: “that younger people will get involved and oust me. That will mean it's off and running.” Sounds like an invitation: friendly *coup*, anyone? Long live the fiber arts!

Astoria Fiber Arts Academy is located at 1296 Duane St., Astoria. Web: www.astoriafiberarts.com; phone 503-325-5598

Class Schedule (register online)

- September 8 – 27 Beginning Weaving
- September 7 & 14 Safe Dyeing Techniques (for wool)
- September 11 Colorhue Instant Dyeing on Silk
- September 7 -
November 9 Beginning Sewing
- October 7 -
November 16 Beginning Weaving

Classes are updated all the time, so keep tabs on the website for the newest offerings. Don't see what you want? Request a class!