

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

IN TWO PARTS

Part II of Interview with Emily Wolfson and Fred Shepherd

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Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

KCHEA – Part 2 - EMILY WOLFSON

WOLFSON: It's just that I, when I look back on it, and you know, when you read that twenty-fifth anniversary thing again, it's just amazing, in a way, that the Guild ever took off. (laughter – Wolfson) And I'm, I'm aware because I was here, how much some of these Art Department heads had to do with it. Clara Eagle just really was, went all out for it. She really believed in the idea. She, she pushed and she pulled and she did a tremendous job on her end of the line in west Kentucky, because west Kentucky is a long way from Berea and Lexington and Louisville. And, I think something ought to be said about just what a good job she did for western Kentucky and the Kentucky Guild. And we haven't had many people lately, but we've had a few people who came into the Kentucky Guild from, now the Murray Art Guild, and we've had several in the last eight or ten years who've been exhibiting and contributing to the Kentucky Guild.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's great. Yeah, I think the, I watched the, the New Hampshire Art League I think they call it.

WOLFSON: Uh-huh.

WILLIHNGANZ: They did a one hour documentary. They did this, I believe, about a year ago or so. Marie loaned me their, their, DVD.

WOLFSON: Oh, good.

WILLIHNGANZ: And it's terrific. It's just very, very well done - some wonderful photography, a whole lot of staff. They must have had a terrific budget to do this.

WOLFSON: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: Because they interviewed a lot of people, and it's interesting to me, one of the things that I found most fascinating was the inner relationship in their careers and with opportunities and whatnot. Have you been aware of a lot of that happening within the Guild?

WOLFSON: I'm, I think I'm kind of unaware (laughter – Wolfson) in that area. I suspect though a lot more happened particularly in central Kentucky than I was aware of, but you know, it's encouraging to people, just like it was encouraging to – Naoma. She had set up this little weaving cooperative and this, but to be able to come down and exhibit in the fair and to bring other people down, that must have been very helpful to her. And I think the students who have joined the Kentucky Guild maybe have profited a lot from it. I think I've gotten past the point where I really can judge (laughter – Wolfson) too much what's going on. I'm just not, I can't be as active and so I don't, I really can't judge as well. But I'm still proud of it, and I'm still, still a supporter, and I still think it's important in Kentucky. Kentucky never had as big a staff or as all that, because Kentucky has not been a rich state, and some of the efforts to do the Guild

was actually to help the state - particularly eastern and western Kentucky. And so I think, I think it still needs to be in place. It's not over yet.

WILLIHNGANZ: It seems to me that there's been a real movement just within the last ten years getting people aware of craftwork and focusing on, I've seen, at least my thinking, a lot more craft fairs and a lot more activity.

WOLFSON: Yes, that's right.

WILLIHNGANZ: And I just wonder what the cultural influences are that drew that out or what caused that. I mean, what has brought our awareness up?

WOLFSON: I guess, it's just exciting to do it, and there's a wide range of, what has been called crafts, too, and there, I don't understand the difference between a craftsman and a crafter, to tell you the truth. (laughter – Wolfson)

WILLIHNGANZ: Is there a difference?

WOLFSON: Pardon?

WILLIHNGANZ: Is there a difference?

WOLFSON: I don't know. I don't know. I have a feeling that sometimes if you just made anything with your hands. If you sewed a up a bonnet, you were a crafter. I'm not sure, but that's, that's, that's something that maybe just shows the extension of it. Back in the fifties, Scandinavian countries were rediscovering their crafts, and for instance, discovering the beauties of those old carriage blankets that they wove, and that they used the ends of warp yarn cut up and knotted into it to make, and they rediscovered, redesigned rhea rugs, and redesigned silver, and redesigned furniture, and, and maybe some of that is still getting spread out all over, not just Scandinavia, but every place.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah, perhaps so. It, it does seem to have a real resurgence going on right now, and I don't know, I think maybe it's just the influence, it's a backlash from the homogenization of a lot of the products that come frankly, out of China.

WOLFSON: It may well be. It may well be, and effort to not just be a part of the mash. (laughter – Wolfson)

WILLIHNGANZ: That's right. Yeah, you can only buy from Target so much and then it gets to be all the same. It all looks the same.

WOLFSON: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: You have no individuality there.

WOLFSON: Right, and I think the Kentucky Guild does encourage that individuality at whatever level you want to do it. And jurying it does help people understand what they mean by quality. It, it, it, nothing's perfect. It doesn't always work perfectly, but it does make people more aware of the fact that you can't just twist your arm and produce a really fine piece.

WILLIHNGANZ: One of the interesting quandaries that Lester brought up when I did Lester Pross. He was talking about a village that I believe was in Uganda, I believe it was, where they made very elaborate sandals.

WOLFSON: Uh-huh.

WILLIHNGANZ: And they wove them with this golden thread, and they made all these various designs and whatnot, and sold them locally and then one day a fellow came in, and he said, "I really like these sandals. I'd really like to buy them." And they said, "How many would you like?" He said, "About a hundred thousand pair." And of course, this was just a little village that made these sandals, and you know, what does that do to the artwork and the craft when you start producing in those kinds of quantities. It changes the whole thing, to some extent.

WOLFSON: That indicates that people need more education in looking at crafts, not as something that you can get cheaply, but as something that you might pay more for, because it's better. Because it is special, and I think that when you order whatever it is – five hundred pairs, a thousand pairs – you're not looking at that. You're looking at some way of having them produce it cheaper and sell more.

WILLIHNGANZ: Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: And that's not really in their best interest.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah, you compromise, and there are different levels of it really. I mean, there are certainly plenty of china makers that make an exact duplicate of every piece of china, and some of them are very high quality. Noritake is very fine stuff, but it all looks exactly the same.

WOLFSON: Yeah, but it's very fine.

WILLIHNGANZ: It's very, very fine. Then you look at, for instance, Louisville stoneware does essentially what a potter does,...

WOLFSON: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: ...but they sort of do it on a semi-mass production basis.

WOLFSON: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: And they make thousands of a particular item, then they discontinue that line, and they don't make it again.

WOLFSON: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: And if you happen to have one, it can be a collector's item, (laughter – Willihnganz and Wolfson) cause they don't make it again.

WOLFSON: That's right.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, I don't know, I guess maybe there's a place ...

WOLFSON: Somewhere

WILLIHNGANZ: ...in our society for all sorts of different levels.

WOLFSON: Well, yeah, and it's a little like, it's a little like the other arts, like dance or plays. Some of them are just routine. Some of them have something special, and, of writing, too, that can be. Sometimes people can write an article for the paper, and it's so dull you just can bear to read it no matter what you would be interested in. And yet, there are other people who can write so well, that they can make a board of education meeting sound fascinating. (laughter – Willihnganz) You know?

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh, I do know. Yes, indeed. (laughter – Wolfson) That's absolutely true.

WOLFSON: And that's a, that's a real gift, and it does, it does make a difference in what people read, what they like to read.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. It changes our quality of life. That's for sure.

WOLFSON: Yes. Well,...

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. So, are we done?

WOLFSON: I probably...

WILLIHNGANZ: If you think of more things...

WOLFSON: I probably told you all I know. (laughter – Wolfson and Willihnganz)

KCHEA - Part 2 - EMILY WOLFSON and FRED SHEPHERD

(TAPE BEGINS IN THE MIDDLE OF WOLFSON TALKING)

WOLFSON: A black figure on a white ground and you turn it over and it's a white figure on a black ground or dark. And what I had a lot of fun doing was learning to double weave and putting multiple colors in the warp and multiple colors in the weft so that you make a more complex weaving. And I don't have any of those right here, right now, any of the ones that I really like. Some of them have been sold, and some of them are in other places. (laughter – Wolfson)

WILLIHNGANZ: Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: But that was, that was what I enjoyed weaving, and then while I was doing that, I got interested in making the weaving three-dimensional. But I'll have to show, I'll have to show you one that I did that I think is more interesting than the black one, but it's somewhere else, too.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Okay. Maybe we can do that at some point. Okay, Fred.

SHEPHERD: Swans chasing each other around the room. We don't have swans here, but I like birds.

WOLFSON: Yeah.

SHEPHERD: Linda's a big bird feeder.

WOLFSON: She is?

SHEPHERD: Oh, God.

WOLFSON: I haven't seen Linda...

SHEPHERD: Spend eighty dollars a month, eighty dollars a month on bird feed.

WOLFSON: I haven't seen Linda in, I don't know, years.

SHEPHERD: Oh, she's, she's, she's full of it.

WOLFSON: Yeah. Is she still going to...?

SHEPHERD: Well, she and Kate are in the craft business, and have been for years – fifteen years.

WOLFSON: And what do they do – jewelry, mostly?

SHEPHERD: Clothes mostly, but now Kate is interested in becoming a silversmith, and so she's had two shows in Frankfort, Franklin, Tennessee, and sold them out, all of them. So she's...

WOLFSON: Good for her.

SHEPHERD: Yeah, she's, I think, very slowly coming around to the artistic side of the family. She loves to draw and paint, and she works like a fiend.

WOLFSON: (laughter – Wolfson) She's her Papa's daughter. Yeah.

SHEPHERD: Yeah. She loves work, like all of us do.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me about this piece.

SHEPHERD: Huh? Oh, it's very simple. There is a whole group of things made in sequences. This is two different pieces of clay attached together, and then the rims are altered, cut (unintelligible), and then the birds are added, and then they're chasing each other around the room. I made a whole series of those, about a dozen of those pieces, and I still have that one and one other one in the shop. The rest of them are all gone. Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's terrific.

SHEPHERD: Fun to make.

WOLFSON: And you made some smaller ones, too.

SHEPHERD: Yep, made smaller ones and bigger ones.

WOLFSON: Cause I got one or two.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm. A few bird pieces.

WOLFSON: Mm-hmm.

SHEPHERD: Yep! This is gonna go in the mail. (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd) It's got to go in the mail, now.

WOLFSON: Is it going in the mail, or is he going to take it?

SHEPHERD: Too many witnesses, now.

WOLFSON: Or is he going to take it?

SHEPHERD: Hmm?

WOLFSON: Or is he going to take it? You got to have a good packer.

SHEPHERD: Well, it's a box within a box.

WOLFSON: A box within a box.

SHEPHERD: Box in a box. Yeah, they wanted that piece, so they're finally going to get it.

WOLFSON: I think it's lovely.

SHEPHERD: Yeah, it's a pretty piece. That was the most difficult piece to make – that little tiny thing on there. Looks like a little girl did it. (laughter – Shepherd)

WOLFSON: I should say.

SHEPHERD: Yeah, it's fun. Kind of mixing real tiny precise things with...

WOLFSON: With the smooth.

SHEPHERD: ...with stuff, little ruffled feathers on the bottom. There's always something to look at.

WOLFSON: A very fussy top with a very smooth, you know,...

SHEPHERD: Yeah, right. Exactly - one part of the piece challenging another part of the piece. It makes your eye move around it, around the work. That's something that's hard to do.

WOLFSON: Yes, it is.

SHEPHERD: Yeah, it's hard to do, but I'm not really tired of the piece, but he said, "When you get tired, send it up."

WOLFSON: Well, you're willing. You're willing to give it up.

SHEPHERD: Oh, yeah. They deserve it. I love them both. They're great people.

WOLFSON: Yeah.

SHEPHERD: And I already have another piece.

WOLFSON: Like this?

SHEPHERD: No, a piece in her collection that is a teapot that is in that Potters' Book of Kentucky.

WOLFSON: Yeah. Hmm-hmm.

SHEPHERD: Yeah, it's in that book. When I went to the house, and I saw it sitting on the table, then, "Oh, my God!" She said, "Oh, yeah, Fred. It's the one that's in the book." (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd)

WOLFSON: That's good.

SHEPHERD: Yeah.

WOLFSON: That's great.

SHEPHERD: So that was double, double for hers. She was smart enough to get the piece and now she has a picture of it in Joe Molinaro's book.

WOLFSON: Now she has both. Good. Oh, my.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Anything else you can tell me about the guild?

SHEPHERD: Well, I, you know, I wish I was a millionaire.

WOLFSON: You have to spark it don't you?

SHEPHERD: Yeah, I wish I was a millionaire. Of all the causes that I, you could leave money to, that and scholarships for kids, for students.

WILLIHNGANZ: Mm-hmm.

SHEPHERD: So important. So important. keep that, keep those kids in shape while they're there. Get rid of their first ten years out of school paying back these horrible loans.

WOLFSON: Yes.

SHEPHERD: We just cannot do enough for young people.

WOLFSON: Mm-hmm. I was very fortunate. I came along when they had the student help, under Franklin Roosevelt.

SHEPHERD: Did you?

WOLFSON: Mm-hmm. (laughter – Wolfson) Long time ago.

SHEPHERD: Well, you, you, you graduated in Paris.

WOLFSON: No, I graduated in...

SHEPHERD: You went to the (unintelligible)?

WOLFSON: What?

SHEPHERD: Didn't you go to the (unintelligible)?

WOLFSON: No. I went to, I studied with Leger.

SHEPHERD: Oh, Okay.

WOLFSON: But I, I had a scholarship after I graduated from the Arts School at Newcomb College. (laughter – Wolfson) Of all places.

SHEPHERD: Oh. Wow!

WOLFSON: And, my French professor, I took French for four years, because I just liked it. And he heard, read of this scholarship that was offered in Paris, and I applied and it said, it was a very small one, but it was very nice. And they said, "But you have to pay your way over, so you have to get, you have to promise that you can." So I asked my dad, and he didn't think I'd get it, so he said, "Of course." (laughter Wolfson and Shepherd)

SHEPHERD: So, you've done all the rest.

WOLFSON: So, I did all the rest.

SHEPHERD: Yeah. (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd) You got the money.

WOLFSON: And I had a, the, Rockefeller had, helped Paris to get together a place for students, because it was so hard to find lodging for students. This was in the thirties, and he set up a university city, university city. They had houses, each nation had built a dormitory or residence for students from their country.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: And they had a central, like a student center, great big beautiful place, and the scholarship was to the American house (unintelligible).

SHEPHERD: Ohhh.

WOLFSON: And so, I had a studio up on the fifth floor...(laughter – Wolfson)

SHEPHERD: Great.

WOLFSON: ...and I'm not going to tell you the money. (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd) It was so small, it was so small you wouldn't believe it. But I had a stipend that was paid for early, and I could go where I wanted to. I think they expected me to go to the, (unintelligible) whatever.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: But, a sculptor in New Orleans had said, "You know, if you want to go to Paris, don't go, just go to the regular places, find a, one of the contemporary painters who's doing something, and study there." And I, what I had gotten good at was painting landscapes and things, fairly traditionally, but I wasn't very good at composition, organization. So, he said, "Find somebody." So, Leger was the one. (laughter – Wolfson)

SHEPHERD: Not too bad. Not too bad, Emily.

WOLFSON: So, it was a good, it was a good year. And probably the best year I ever had. (laughter – Wolfson)

SHEPHERD: Not one you'll forget. Yeah. When did you get into watercolors?

WOLFSON: I actually did some at Newcomb. I, one of, my first art teacher that impressed me was a watercolor, did watercolors, and taught a watercolor class.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: But we did oil painting a lot of times, and I did, I took a portrait class with him and all my other stuff, but, and then, you know, it's just so much easier to take your stuff in watercolor, to go someplace else and paint.

SHEPHERD: For you.

WOLFSON: For me, than it is oil.

SHEPHERD: Well, I remember the piece that you did for the Guild. It's a big scene that they used for a cover piece for Sunday.

WOLFSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

SHEPHERD: Yes, with balloons and the people...

WOLFSON: Oh, the poster.

SHEPHERD: Yeah! Oh, it was great! Just great!

WOLFSON: Well,...

SHEPHERD: I thought, "Mm-hmmm, she does some things other, besides weave. I didn't know that."

WOLFSON: Yeah, but I was a painter before I was a weaver.

SHEPHERD: That was it.

WOLFSON: And when I taught at Indiana I was teaching just design and crafts for teachers.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: I got interested in weaving, but I didn't get to do much of it until I retired. I taught it here, though, but I didn't get to do as much.

SHEPHERD: Well, you turned out to be a jack of all trades, eh?

WOLFSON: Yes. Well, I was, I was a representative member of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen. (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd)

SHEPHERD: You hit both sides of the field, not just one but both. (laughter – Wolfson)

WOLFSON: And I was a representative member, so....(laughter – Wolfson)

SHEPHERD: That's right. Very few of those.

WOLFSON: Yeah. So...

SHEPHERD: Be satisfied to get a little bit of that.

WOLFSON: And so, the, yeah the, so I had to learn to weave a lot of useful things, and I appreciate those. I don't think you have to do art, but then I was interested in painting, so, uh, I kind of went into more interesting things like tapestry and double weaving, and stuff like that just because I liked it.

SHEPHERD: Yeah. It isn't like those things when people look at weaving and it, in some, in some instances, it doesn't look that difficult.

WOLFSON: No.

SHEPHERD: But...try it sometime. (laughter – Shepherd)

WOLFSON: Yeah. Well, (laughter – Wolfson and Shepherd) you can get lost.

SHEPHERD: Easy, easy. It always used to fascinate me about, patterns and color and having the foresight to recognize how all those things are going to fit. Of course, it would take painting skills to do that as well.

WOLFSON: Yeah, and to fit, have multiple, multiple colors in the weft.

SHEPHERD: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

WOLFSON: You can get lost. (laughter – Wolfson) and I have.

WILLIHNGANZ: I would like to ask both of you to sign a release.

WOLFSON: Okay, and I'm supposed to do that, and I've got to get a pen.

WILLIHNGANZ: I've got a pen right here.

WOLFSON: Oh, good.

(End of recording.)