



THE WOVEN PATH:
ELSA BRIGDEN ELLIOTT

by Line Dufour

In a Waterloo bungalow, a weaving studio presides over the basement. Mellow jazz music plays through the speakers. Each wall is filled with fibre inventory of one kind or another, creating a nest-like environment. Horizontal windows line three sides of the studio above eye level. A 45-inch Leclerc counterbalance loom for throws and two 27-inch Leclerc counterbalance looms preside over the space. Shelves are filled with her

accumulated inventory of woven runners, place mats, scatter mats, and throws in a wide assortment of colours and textures. The walls are lined with cones of yarns and fabrics, and here and there, bags of yarn and strips of fabric for rag weaving sit on the floor. A sewing machine is set up for finishing, along with the usual paraphernalia we expect to find in a weaving studio: a warping mill, bobbin winder, a swift, bobbins and assorted types of shuttles.



Anyone who is acquainted with Elsa Brigden Elliott is aware of her reputation as a dynamic and vital member of her community, as well as a prolific weaver. It is hard to believe that she has been weaving for over fifty years. She has had an amazing weaving journey, one that is bound to inspire you, if not fill you with awe of her weaving adventures.

Born to two artistic, creative and free-spirited parents in Hamilton, travel and people are the warp upon which Elsa's life has been woven. Her father was a printmaker and painter and taught Commercial Art at Westdale Secondary School in Hamilton. Her mother trained as a dancer in Toronto and England, and danced in New York in the late 1920s. She taught dancing upon her return to Toronto and had a passion for textiles which she applied to the costumes she made for her dance students. Her father took early retirement from teaching and the family went to live in Mexico for a year and a half in the early 1960s. Elsa, fourteen, was introduced to weaving, pottery and photography at the Instituto Allende associated with the University of Guanajuato, while she completed grades 9 and 10 via correspondence. Over the years, the family continued to travel to Mexico, during which time she took more courses in weaving at the Bellas Artes in San Miguel de Allende. It also offered courses in guitar, traditional Mexican crafts, and dance.

In 1971 she completed her Bachelor of Arts in anthropology at the University of Toronto. She continued to travel throughout Mexico with her husband Kim. Their first trip was with a student group from Humber College where Kim was studying film and photography. Throughout Mexico, weaving was, of course, ubiquitous. Upon her return, she managed a commercial photography studio in Weston and she continued her weaving, taking classes with the inspirational Robert Cawood, who had a shop in Toronto called The Village Weaver. Robert permitted the students to come in on

Top: Silo Weavers at the One of a Kind Show

Bottom: Example 1 of Elsa Brigden Elliot's weaving

Far Right: Example 2 of Elsa Brigden Elliot's weaving

weekends and set up the looms with projects of their choosing. She purchased her first loom from him, which she still uses.

In 1975 she moved to Kitchener to open and manage the Cara Shop, which sold Canadian handcrafts in the Fairview Mall. Elsa was still weaving as a hobby and continued to take art classes, but the store helped hone her business and merchandising skills. She left Cara to go to Europe for four months in 1977. Upon her return, she wove for Tamara Jawaraska, the famous Polish tapestry weaver, for two years. "Tamara was as creative with lunch as she was with her tapestries." She started to sell her weaving at the Kitchener Farmers' Market, and Fair November at the University of Guelph. She also taught weaving for six years in her own home.

From early on, Elsa did not have any qualms about selling her work. She saw weaving as a viable business and it was her sole source of income. She did not have any bank loans or business plan and wonders if weavers could do that in the current marketplace. The business grew organically. She did not pick up any other job after she started selling her weaving and it has provided her with an adequate income, while giving her autonomy and a lifestyle she wanted.

Silo Weavers provided Bridgen Elliott with the opportunity to sell her weaving alongside other craftspeople. This opportunity was made possible with Milo Shantz, a local businessman with philanthropic leanings, who offered retail space for very little rent at the start (about 10 per cent of sales), which enabled businesses to grow. She and two other partners started Silo Weavers in early 1980. One partner quickly left but the partnership with Irene Neff lasted for almost 18 years until 1997. Bridgen Elliott continued to manage and grow Silo Weavers for the following twenty years.

She also started selling at the One of Kind Show in Toronto in 1986. They approved her application under the condition that she not sell woven clothing. This restriction helped her focus on creating and developing her handwoven home accessories and proved to be a good business strategy since few weavers specialised in domestic handwoven products. Participating in the One of a Kind Show, as well as running Silo Weavers, required increased and accelerated

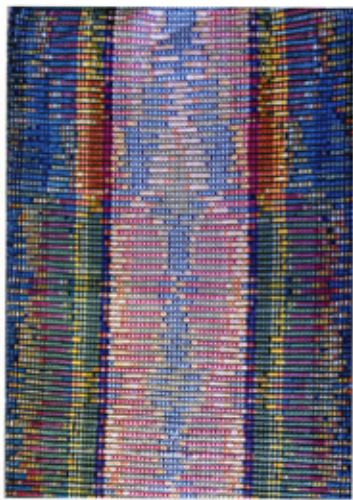
production. "I am definitely a production weaver," she says, and at the peak of her production, she would put on 55 metre (60 yards) warps. She also hired a couple of part-time salespeople for the shop, with one employed for 28 years. Part-time staff were taught to make warps and help with finishing work as well as work with customers. In addition, she paid people to do additional production weaving for her while she focussed on creating one of a kind pieces. Her husband, who had left the University of Waterloo in 1996, helped her with setting up and dismantling the booth at the One of a Kind spring and Christmas shows, an intense physical effort.

Throughout all these undertakings, Elsa maintained close involvement in the Kitchener-Waterloo Weaving and Spinning Guild, as an executive member, and then later, volunteering to help set up sales events, and giving audio visual presentations on the textiles she found in her travels.

In June 2017, after 38 years of being in business, Elsa closed Silo Weavers. She misses not only the clients, but the contact she had with all the artisans who came to the shop to sell their work. It had taken years to build a volume of sales through the accumulation of loyal clients. She states, "It was built from the heart and I didn't realise how much of a reputation we had built up until recently."

She is still doing the One of a Kind Show and will continue to do so as long as she wants to keep weaving. With ageing, she notes, "I can't weave for hours at a time anymore...." Nonetheless, Bridgen Elliott continues her production weaving, as well as the one of a kind pieces. Warps have been shortened from 55 metres, to 14 to 18 metres. She has more time to put thought into creating variety and design. Though people are still enthusiastic about purchasing her woven products, she is reluctant to open her house and studio to clients. Instead, she agrees to meet them at a café in St. Jacobs, with a selection of products based on their expressed preferences.

With fewer retail commitments, Elsa now dreams of undertaking other activities that interest her. "I'd like to play on my tapestry loom; get out to textile shows; return to photography; make more guild presentations such as on the Tapestry Studio in Pangnirtung



and other textiles travels I've done." She would also like to volunteer at the Idea Exchange (formerly known as the Cambridge Library and Art Galleries).

Bridgen Elliott's keen business acumen and her fearlessness in seizing opportunities to sell her weaving, enabled her to be a very successful weaver. Success would not have been attainable without having confidence in her abilities and skills; sustained esteem and passion for her weaving; relentless determination and patience; consistent production; a capacity to tolerate repetition; and last, but not least, an ability to enjoy working on her own but also with others. She is proud of establishing Silo Weavers, as well as her involvement with the Quilt and Fibre Festival, where she co-ordinates the Contemporary Fibre Art exhibition for the St. Jacobs Quilt Show Committee.

Elsa Bridgen Elliott's weaving path reveals to us that all our experiences enhance our weaving practice and success. The weaving journey is a door through which we can experience new adventures, learn new things, travel, meet new people and be involved in one's community. It permitted her to live an authentic life, one that gave her autonomy, honoured her free-spirit, and accommodated her curiosity about the world and people. Her advice to new weavers, "Follow your interests. Don't make yourself do things you are not interested in."

Go to www.siloweavers.ca to learn more about Elsa Bridgen Elliott's activities.