

## A living at the loom

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Genie Stewart — widely known by her "nom de loom," Genie the Weaver — has been weaving in the Oregon countryside for the past 35 years.

These days, she is most often found in her studio in Hopewell, taking in the beauty of the surrounding Willamette Valley vineyards and farmland, and creating new, intriguing, award-winning clothing and decorative items.

Her distinctive colors, webbing and hand-detailing have become instantly recognizable to her customers and colleagues. Recent showings have been in galleries, shows and festivals in Oregon, Washington, Iowa, Missouri, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Utah, Florida, and as far away as Korea.



**Genie Stewart uses the larger of her looms, which she has nicknamed Thor after the god of thunder.**

Marcus Larson/News-Register

What is the focus of your art?

As a fiber, or textile, artist, I am a clothing and fabric designer, weaver, seamstress and marketer. Clothing has been my main focus. Although fabric is primarily woven in a plane, my visions of it are dimensional within the parameters of the human form. I've explored many techniques, color combinations and garment designs, later to revisit them in a new light. Primarily, the fabrics are cotton, silk and rayon working together.

How did you get started?

In 1969, as a housewife with a baby daughter, I looked for a hobby. I tried pottery, glass-cutting and being a gallery guide, among other things, before a friend suggested I try weaving. Borrowing my friend's spare loom, I taught myself to set up and operate it and began dabbling in various weaving techniques.

Within six months, I'd purchased a loom of my own. In 1972, I gave birth to a son. In 1973, I began selling my handwoven garments at the fledgling Portland Saturday Market. My weaving let me spend plenty of time with the children while continuing my art.

Today, my son, a journalist, occasionally helps with my looms, and my daughter, a writer, pinch-hits when I need extra help at a show. In 1979, I began supporting myself exclusively as a weaver, still with my original small loom.

As I attended more art fairs and began showing my work in galleries, I realized I needed additional, larger looms to accommodate my increasing volume of production and allow me to switch among multiple projects. Today, I show my work in least eight major art fairs a year and am featured in numerous galleries throughout the country.

Where do you find inspiration?

Everywhere. One of the exhilarating aspects of being an artist is perpetually having opportunities to respond tangibly to experiences through the creation of something that reflects both those moments and oneself.

As artists will, I become intrigued and lured by a shape, a texture, a concept or a color and I go after it to see where it takes me, where I can take it and what it can become! At any point on the path, I may derail to another perspective or sequence of tangents.

I've also drawn inspiration from my travels in Indonesia, India, Morocco, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France, Italy, Turkey, Senegal, Peru, Panama, Costa Rica and Mexico. Over the years, I have learned that what captures me most in our and other cultures will move through my senses, my mind and my hands and emerge in the weaving.

What is your favorite place to work?

My weaving studio, nestled in the wine-grape country of the Willamette Valley. It has three large windows, three variously sized looms and one woman passionate about color and fabric. This has been my home, life and livelihood since 1980.

Where in Oregon do you show your work?

In Oregon, I show at The Real Mother Goose and Changes in Portland, Fire's Eye Gallery in Bellevue and the River Gallery in Independence. I was the first textile artist to show at The Real Mother Goose and had a small display in one room then; they have carried my work through three expansions, into Changes, the shop with handmade clothing.

The River Gallery in Independence is an artist co-op of 17 core members with 70 or so consigning artists. The works include textile arts, pottery, jewelry, metal work, fused glass, sculpture and a multitude of techniques for two-dimensional art. The artists take turns tending the gallery, now seven years old.

One of our noteworthy annual events is the Fish Run, started in 2000. To raise money for a scholarship fund, we make and sell foam-core fish which people purchase for \$25 and decorate. In September, concurrent with the annual Hops Festival, the fish are displayed outdoors and can be purchased, increasing the money for scholarships.

In creating your clothing, with whom have you worked?

Local people (whom I miss due to their retirements) are Anna Eason, my seamstress for 10 years — the very best — and Russell Groff, owner of Robin and Russ Handweavers, as well as his employee Donna Munson.

The shop stocked standard weaving yarns from all over the United States and Canada, but more enticing were the "sometime finds" there from Mr. Groff's world travels, where he found end-runs from companies doing custom orders themselves. These lured the avid weaver, promising a surprise that could so easily inspire a new fabric.

What advice would you give to someone who is just starting out, hoping to make a living by being an artist?

Art is my job: it's what I do. I can't not be an artist. But accept that you cannot make it on art alone — you must choose to be a business person as well. It is simply what you have to do for the privilege of doing art

for a living.

Who are your heroes?

My heroes are people with a sense of fairness and integrity, parents who are parents, teachers, those working to protect our natural resources, those working to protect people. Many are public servants.

If you could have dinner with any artist, living or dead, who would it be and why?

Writer and pilot Antoine de Saint Exupéry, to watch and listen to someone who so captivatingly described the ethereal essence of flying light planes.

Would you reveal your unusual birthday tradition?

I am somewhat known for signing my letters and e-mails with "Sunshine and Cartwheels." The latter refers to my annual birthday tradition of doing as many cartwheels as I am years old.

— *Barbara Jelinek gathers information for this series.*