



Photo courtesy of Sara Ashford

Sara Ashford established a "dye garden" adjacent to her TwispWorks studio.

Woven, sewn, dyed

METHOW CREATORS BRING FIBERS AND TEXTILES TO LIFE

BY SANDRA STRIEBY

The Methow Valley is home to a thriving community of textile artists practicing any array of methods. Here's a sampler of local textile makers and their

many offerings.

SARA ASHFORD, CULLER STUDIO

In a studio where work surfaces and supplies rub elbows with projects in progress and finished textile pieces, Sara Ashford combines art and science in an ongoing series of

experiments that make her work space a living montage of color and texture.

Natural dyes and natural fabrics are the foundation of Ashford's work. She learned to weave when she moved to the Methow Valley 42 years ago. That led to a love of textiles. Working with natural dyes came next "and then they all

married together," said Ashford. She continues to study and learn, trying a variety of techniques.

Saying she "probably would get bored" if she weren't exploring multiple avenues, Ashford says she's "always studying, experimenting. I've learned a lot by trial and error." She's also learned through more focused study. Currently, she's honing



Sara Ashford use dyes from plants she grows to create "wearable art."



Photos courtesy of Sara Ashford



Ashford insists on using high-quality natural textiles.

her grasp of chemistry, developing a deeper knowledge of the constituents of different plants so she can understand how to use each one to create colorfast dyes.

Eleven years ago, Ashford established a dye garden adjacent to her TwispWorks studio. She uses dyes from the plants she grows there on re-purposed clothing, dye-ready silk scarves, and fabric that she'll craft into wearable art. She also uses leaves and flowers to transfer color directly to cloth, using techniques such as pounding plant materials until they release their pigments or steaming rolled fabric on which she's arranged the pieces of vegetation that she's using as color sources.

One favorite dye plant is Japanese indigo, which Ashford uses in many ways: over-dyeing second-hand clothing — which she may also decorate with washable, color-fast

ink — using the rich color to dye folded or tied cloth, and painting it onto fabric.

Making the pigment involves fermenting an aqueous extract from fresh leaves, then precipitating the suspended color, which can be dried or refrigerated for later use. A pigment vat in the Culler Studio storage and processing room has been working since last summer; Ashford feeds and stirs the brew to keep it alive, much as one would tend sourdough starter.

Ashford feels strongly about using high-quality natural textiles, buying carefully-sourced cloth from "a couple places I can trust," she said. Those sources provide hand-woven fair-trade silks produced by tribal communities in India using traditional techniques.

"A lot of these are wild silks," she said, created using methods



Photo courtesy of Elise Knight

Elise Knight's hand-crafted children's clothing is popular at Methow Valley Goods.



Photo courtesy of Elise Knight

Knight uses both vintage and new fabrics to make her clothing,

work, she finds machine sewing infuses her days with the same calm, focused quality.

"I started making children's clothing 30 years ago," said Knight, who sold her wares at the Christmas Bazaar in Twisp. It's only in the last year that her work has been available at Methow Valley Goods. "Her business has skyrocketed" since then, according to TwispWorks Retail Operations and Events Manager Lindsey Bryson.

Both vintage and new fabrics have homes in Knight's stash. A long-time devotee of second-hand shops, she won't hesitate to cut up an old dress and create something new if she likes the fabric. Her fabric choices are inspired in part by images of women in Africa and India who dress in fabrics that bring beauty to the stark landscapes in which they live.

"The women take care with themselves and their clothing," she says, expressing the "human spirit of taking care" of what's in their control.

Children enjoy Knight's brightly-printed dresses and reversible overalls, she said. A part-time teacher at Little Star in Twisp, Knight has observed that children pay close attention to what they and their peers are wearing.

"It's amazing at what an early age kids are into what's on their clothes," she says. "They love it when you remark on their clothing."

Parents appreciate the hand-made garments, too. In spite of the ready availability of beautiful and practical knitted clothes for young children, mothers have told her they want to get back to woven fabrics like the ones she uses, said Knight.

Knight's hand-made clothes are long-lived. "I like to make them with the idea that they're going to last through many generations," she said. She's found clothes she made 25 years ago at the senior center's thrift store, ready for new wearers.

In addition to children's clothing, Knight's current repertoire includes aprons and potholders. She continues to explore other ideas — in part to keep up with demand from local fans who are eager for more of her work, in part as an expression of her own creative curiosity.

"I feel very lucky in life that I have something that excites me so much ... honored that I have this drive," said Knight. Each beautifully

developed over more than 2,000 years. "Tribal people need that economy," she said, and the production process is "very sustainable."

Ashford's dedication to natural materials grounds her diverse endeavors, allowing her to create work that's good for people and the earth while giving rein to her active imagination.

You can find Ashford's work at The Confluence: Art In Twisp and at Methow Valley Goods on the TwispWorks campus. She also welcomes visitors to her studio and dye garden at TwispWorks.

ELISE KNIGHT, SEWN BY ELISE

Elise Knight learned to sew in a seventh-grade home economics class and has been practicing the craft ever since. She feels fortunate to have grown up before technology had such a strong grip on daily life.

"I did a lot of hand stitching," she said. "It's what I would sit and do — a very meditative thing to do."

Although she no longer does hand



Photo courtesy of Susan Snover

Susan Snover uses mostly recycled materials to make functional art.

crafted piece carries that excitement into the world.

Knight's work is available at Methow Valley Goods on the Twisp-Works campus, and Aspen Grove in Winthrop carries her potholders. She also participates in twice-yearly art walks, and the annual Christmas Bazaar in Twisp.

SUSAN SNOVER CUSTOM HANDWEAVING

Susan Snover uses mostly recycled materials to weave functional textiles — rag rugs, dish towels, baby blankets. As a professional weaver in Seattle, she made 300 rugs a year. Now retired and living in the Methow Valley, she's producing fewer pieces, but she still loves fabric — “the color and the texture of it and the fact of re-using something that would be thrown away,” she says.

Soon after Snover moved to

Seattle in the 1970s, a friend lent her a loom. She took a six-week weaving course and began a career — one that allowed her to work from home while raising her children, and to engage her love of color.

“I don't believe in waste,” said Snover, who figures she's kept more than 15 tons of fabric out of landfills by using discarded clothing and bed linens and scrap fabric. She estimates that one of her largest pieces, a rug measuring 10 by 16 feet, used 160 pairs of jeans.

In the Methow Valley, Snover has found the senior center's thrift store to be a rich source of materials. When we spoke, she was preparing to weave a 60 inch by 80 inch rug for a customer's beach house, and had found all the materials she needed — sheets in pale shades of green, blue, sand and white — in the rummage room on a single day.

For Snover, working from home



Photo courtesy of Susan Snover

Snover spent many years as a professional weaver in Seattle.

has not meant working in solitude. She's been active in the regional and national weaving communities for decades. In mid-June, she was in Bend, Oregon, attending the bi-annual conference of the Association of Northwest Weavers' Guilds and learning new techniques like cedar basket making and needle felting. She's a member of the Methow Valley Spinners & Weavers guild, and encourages anyone who's interested to attend a meeting and “be part of the textile community.”

Snover now owns three looms — down from seven during her days as a professional weaver. “Generally, I have all three looms warped and in operation at the same time,” she said, which lets her decide what to work on each day based on customer orders or her own inclination.

She does less custom work than she did in her heyday, partly because her access to materials is more limited than it was when she lived in Seattle. “I tell people ‘I will do a custom rug for you if I can easily find the stuff,’” she said.

So far this year, Snover has woven 33 rugs and estimates she's kept 107 pounds of fabric out of landfills. That's a lot of functional beauty created by someone who “retired” some 20 years ago.

You can find Snover's work at

The Confluence: Art In Twisp, the Winthrop Gallery, and The Mazama Store, and at Methow Valley Goods on the TwispWorks campus.

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