Room dividers

Els Christensen

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ROOM DIVIDERS

by

Els Christensen

Date:

08 June 1992
APPROVALS

Adviser: Donald G. Bujnowski
Date: June 12, 1992

Associate Advisor: William Keyser
Date: June 16, 1992

Associate Advisor: Dr. Barbara Hodik
Date: 6.17.92

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs: Bernard Bornarth
Date: 6/19/92

Acting Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts: Dr. Peter Giopulos
Date: 6.4.92

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Date: June 10 - 1992

I can be reached at the following address:

Els Christensen
119 Faircrest Road
Rochester, New York 14623
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FOREWORD

The initial concept of the "room dividers" began in 1986, after reading an interview with Jack Lenor Larson. Larson talked about a brand-new idea of room planning, using floor-to-ceiling high screens, hinged and double-paneled. Larson explained, "By partitioning, the angled screens at mid-wall or corners, at least four different floor-plan contours could readily be devised, and as many mood and multiplications affected by reversing the visible side (Interior Design, 1969, 118). I really liked his way of thinking. Since my minor involved working with wood, I wanted to find out if I could incorporate the two mediums (wood and fiber) into one cohesive statement. In the Spring of 1986, my knowledge of woodworking was still rather limited; more courses in this area were needed to develop a stronger base upon which the development of a screen could be laid. In the Summer of 1983, the first samples for the Western-style screen was started.
ARTIST’S STATEMENT

"In harmony there is no duality."

My main intention was to create two different screens that would enhance and harmonize with the surroundings they were placed in.

These two screens can be viewed from both sides. In the case of the three-paneled or Western-style screen, the woven cloth panels are supportive to the wood. In the Eastern-style screen, the wood is supportive to the woven drape.

In the Western-style screen, I incorporated the materials, colors, and design that are in accord with the wood. In the Oriental-style screen, the colors represent feelings, as it did for the Impressionistic painters, also. As for the design, the butterfly symbolizes the most metaphysical insect, being transformed from a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. This seemingly miraculous change in the appearance of the butterfly unifies the duality of the two insects into one.

The World

Is after all as the butterfly,

However it may be (Blyth, 1967, Sein)

The Butterfly

Even when pursued,

Never appear in a hurry (Blyth, 1967, Garaky)
I
HISTORY OF PARTITION DEVICES

The decorative folding screen was invented by the Chinese in the late Chou Dynasty (about 206 BC – 220 AD). In the eighth century, the screen was introduced to Japan, (Komanecky, 1984, 15) and strangely enough the Japanese made the screen so popular that it became more associated with Japan than with China, where it originated.

The Chinese screen had been poorly constructed, often made of separate panels, hinged together with leather or cloth straps. They were heavy, mainly used to provide privacy and to control the flow of air, space, and light within the room (Komanecky, 1984, 15).

The traditional Japanese house screen was a single vertical panel on a base called “Tsuitate” (Figures 1, 2, 3). It was used to conceal and to visually enhance and was either for indoor or outdoor use (Koizumi, 1986, 93). The panels could be made of paper, cloth, reed, wood, bamboo, or wire mesh. By its image, such a screen showed the visitors to the house something of the wealth and status of the owner, whether a ceremony was going on, or what season was being celebrated.

The folding screen “Byōbu” (Figure 4) was designed for flexibility and mobility, and was lighter, stronger, and slightly smaller in size.

The folding screen came in three different sizes, small medium, and large. They could have two to ten panels. The six-panel screen was most commonly used. They came often in pairs. Their panels could be made of paper, cloth, bamboo, or reed. Between 1573-1868, a six-panel screen of painting or calligraphy on paper was very popular. During the Edo period
(1600-1868 AD) beside the Aristocratic and Sumarai householder, more people of a lower status were able to afford the screens. The single-, two- (Figure 5), or four-paneled screens were used mostly. They were displayed at various ceremonies, for example, a birth. This particular kind of screen would have designs of cranes and turtles painted on them with monochrome ink.

The Buddhists used calligraphy on their screens. In case of a death, they would turn their screens upside down. In this sense, screens proved most convenient for symbolic coloring interiors in an instant, evoking whatever mood the situation required (Koizumi, 1986, 92).

In 1614, the "Clove," the first English ship to return from Japan, carried home a rich load of Japanese ware including a "Byōbu" folding screen (Komanecky, 1984, 18). From England, the idea traveled to other European countries, the Netherlands, Italy, and France. Each of these countries preferred to decorate their screens their own way, or they sometimes would imitate each other. During the eighteenth century, France started to use well-known artists such as Watteau, Boucher, Huet, and Lancet to paint designs on the screens; and in England, a needlework screen with country and hunting scenes became very popular.

The development of folding screens in America was governed by a different set of traditions from those of Europe. The new nation obviously could not draw on a native tradition of screenmaking, at least not until the very end of the nineteenth century; and even then, this tradition was strongly influenced by European examples. The country's taste for such objects was informed almost entirely by its familiarity with Oriental screens, first from the
use of screens, to keep off draughts of cold air, which seem to be of Chinese or Japanese origin, if we may judge them from the paintings with which they used to be decorated. They are now used little, since the finishing of our houses has been so much improved. Still, there are some cases where screens are found to add comfort as a decorative object.

Although today screens are still used in our houses, mostly as decoration, they are not as lavishly decorated as they were before the nineteenth century. A spin-off is the screen in front of the fireplace, or to hide a dirty corner or an area in a room, for dressing behind, or for additional storage.

I was influenced by two completely different designers. One was a Spanish architect, Antonio Gaudi y Cornet, 1852-1926. He occasionally did design furniture, but did not actually construct the furniture he designed (Komanecky, 1984, 181).

Between 1906-1910, he designed a pair of five-panel screens of oak and rare colored glass. The wood was so beautifully shaped, it seemed as if the screens were involved in a dance of their own (Figures 6 and 7).

The other person was an American furniture designer from Syracuse, Gustav Stickley, 1858-1942. His three-panel screen of oak frames with linen panels showed such simplicity of design and quality of craftsmanship. The wood and panels were in harmony with each other, something I had been looking for all along (Figure 8).
TECHNIQUE AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS/
THE WESTERN-STYLE SCREEN

The first problem presented itself early. Normally for any wood-sculpture or furniture, the woven material is usually expendable and it is placed in permanently when the wood is glued together. I had to find out if I could fabricate a screen, finish it completely, then add two woven panels as an insert afterwards. I didn’t understand how I could attach the woven panel into the wood and also have it easily removed for dry-cleaning.

The first section of the first three-paneled screen became the sampler for the next two panels. It was very difficult to duplicate the panel, more so than I had anticipated, although I had taken all the measurements and cartoons from this first panel while it was in the process of development. The second two panels came out slightly different in appearance; the difference was hardly noticeable however the original panel became the central focus while the two others panels became the outside units.

After the first panel was finished and I had an idea how to attach the woven piece to the frame, I was able to start with the first samplers of the woven inserts. My initial concept was to do the weaving on the drawloom (Figures 9, 10, 11, 12), but I was unable to graph a suitable design at that point, a design that complemented the wooden screen that I had just completed. So, I abandoned that idea completely. I started to work on a multiharness, horizontal loom instead. I chose silk as a warp and wool as a weft and a weaving pattern that had a warp-faced background and a weft-
faced imagery. The backside would be the opposite, so it could be viewed from both sides.

After sampling a few different kinds of wools, the decision was made to use a two-ply rug wool for the weft and Tussah silk for the warp (60 EPI) using four threads as one, woven on a twelve-harness loom. The design chosen was a five-harness, two-block, repeat satin weave, Satin-weave curls at the edges. To create a straight selvage on both sides, extra warp threads were threaded through harnesses 11 and 12. I was unable to hook them up on the threadleses together with the other harnesses because of the uneven count of the blocks. Harnesses 11 and 12 needed to be lifted up individually at the beginning of each row.

The color of the fibers had to complement the wood and not be overpowering. Wood has a strong visual grain and pattern of its own. This had to be considered when choosing the pattern and materials for this fabric. Also, the measurements had to be very exact. The wool weft alone did not bring out any visual statement. It not only toned down the glow of the silk warp but it made the finished fabric look dull. Since the wooden screen had a golden shine to it, a golden thread was spun together with the woolen weft. After this sampler came off the loom, it was washed in Synthropol; the fabric did shrink about 8%. This had to be taken into account when measurements for the next warp were taken. Also, the design had to be watched closely. This oval form was projected exactly in the middle of the cloth (Figure 13). Next, I cut a warp long enough for just one panel. This one was washed in Synthrapol. The measurements came out perfectly. I was now ready to weave the side panels. Because the first panel was woven by itself, the warp
was shorter and the tension tighter. The next two panels came out longer. The curves were still in the middle, but they had become elongated. Although we washed them several times, they never shrank to the size of the original middle panel (Figure 14).

The following is how the woven panels were attached to the frames.

The wooden frames have two bars on the top – #1 and #2 (Figures 15, 16, 17, 18) – and three bars at the bottom – #3, 4, and 5 (Figures 19 and 20). Bar #2 has a groove underneath it, and bar #3 has a groove on the top of it. A heavy cord was rolled in the bottom and top of the woven panel. Their rolled up edges were pressed securely into the open grooves of the bars, stretching the fabric firmly in place.

I had aimed for the idea of not having a front and back of the screens. The woven panels looked almost identical on both sides. The way the hinges were attached to the wood gave the screen a front and back side. Since the side panels of each frame are rounded off, thicker in the middle and thinner at the edges, it makes it impossible to close or open the screen completely. Taking up more space than I had anticipated (Figures 21-22).

The wooden panels of the screen, measuring 64" x 67", are made of cherry and finished with several coats of Gloss Lacquer.
III

TECHNIQUE AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS/
THE EASTERN-STYLE SCREEN

The idea for this second screen evolved after talking with several of my Korean and Japanese classmates. What I was looking for was something special, completely different from the Western-Style screen I had just finished. Particularly helpful was the book, *Traditional Japanese Furniture*, by Kazuko Koizumi. It pictured a drawing of a Japanese Kimono rack. (Figure 23) I thought such a stand could just as well function as a wooden stand. A piece of woven fabric could be shaped over it and an Oriental-style room divider be created.

The essentially floor-level lifestyle of the Japanese meant that there was no need to develop raised furniture for reading and reclining. Hence, one does not find legs or stands on Japanese furniture – not even on chests and cabinets. Everything stays low, within reach from a sitting position on the floor.

People seated on the floor see things from a fixed perspective, which places proportionately greater emphasis on the frontal aspects. Hence, singularly frontal designs are the rule. Little or no consideration is given to the backs or sides of pieces. This “from the floor up” approach to furnishings was traditionally called “Shitsurai.” (Koizumi, 1986, 11)

I increased the height of the stand to accommodate people sitting on a chair. The drape covering the stand had no front and back. Both sides were
equal in importance and design verse; front and back flowed over into each other at the middle of the piece (Figure 54).
Since I was interested in symbolism, I was looking for ways to incorporate symbolic designs and colors into this woven drape by using the inlay technique developed by the late Theo Moorman of England. (Figures 24-1 and 24-2)

As I have learned from reviewing the history of partitions, it was not the first time that screens were made and used symbolically. Virginia F. Butera wrote a whole chapter about the screen as a metaphor. She begins by saying:

The fascination felt by Western artists over the last century for the folding screen as an aesthetic device has developed because of its very special structure and its long history of symbolic associations. A vehicle for extending an artist's range of expression, the screen is aligned with the human condition, existing in a space shared by the viewer rather than separated and isolated on a wall or pedestal. For these artists, the folding screen functions on four levels. The first is purely utilitarian. On the second level, it is simultaneously decorative and functional. Within the third and fourth levels, the metaphoric possibilities inherent in the screen as an art form predominates, although the functional aspects still may be present (Komanecky, 1984, 195).

I quoted some of the comments made by Butera because I was excited by her review of the folding screen, the redevelopment and their usefulness, embracing function and decoration, free to become sculpture and metaphor (Komanecky 1984, 212). As Antonio Gaudi y Cornet and Gustav Stickley had influenced me for the Western-style screen, so did several others for the Eastern style. An example is Ellen Layon, with her screen called Transformation II. (Figure 25) Her imagery took me back again to a countryman of mine, Maurits Escher. He worked mainly in lithography and
woodcuts; very seldom did he work on textiles. Between 1937-1945, he had his Metamorphosis Period; his prints were transformed from two-dimensional to the three-dimensional. (Figure 26) Because drawing is deception— that is, suggestion instead of reality, we may well go a step further and produce a three-dimensional world out of a two-dimensional one.

In the lithograph, *Reptiles* (Figure 27), we see Escher’s sketchbook in which he has been putting together some ideas for periodic drawings. At the lower left-hand edge, the little, flat, sketchy figures begin to develop a fantastic three-dimensionality and thereby the ability to creep right out of the sketch. As this reptile reaches the dodecahedron by way of the book on zoology and the set square, he gives a snort of triumph and blows smoke from his nostrils. But, the game is up; so down he jumps from the brass mortar onto the sketchbook. He shrivels back again into a figure and there he remains, stuck fast in the network of regular triangles (Ernst, 1985, 28)

Escher talked about a telephone conversation he once had about this print. “A woman once rang me up and said, ‘Mr. Escher, I am absolutely crazy about your work. In your print, *Reptiles*, you have given such a striking illustration of reincarnation.’” Escher replied, “Madam, if that’s the way you see it, so be it.” (Ernst, 1985, 14)

By making his metamorphosis, as we can observe in (Figures 26, 27, and 28), we find vague, abstract shapes changing into sharply defined, concrete forms and then changing back again (Ernst 1985, 37).

In *Verbum* (Figure 28), he has taken the metamorphosis to its fullest possible extreme. It contains two distinct kinds of development. From the center outward, vague amorphous shapes gradually evolve into recognizable
creatures which escape into their natural element. In a circular sweep around the hexagonal ring, creatures, metamorphose - bird into fish, into frog, into bird - tracing the ecological cycle of air, water, and land. This subtle system of development, consisting of rays emanating from a single center and concentric circles about that center is familiar to mathematicians in the polar coordinate (Schattschneider, 1977, 41).

I was very impressed by the works of Escher and the way his metamorphic images developed from nothing into something recognizable. It seemed similar to the periods I went through, the preparations, and finally weaving and finishing the drape.

I was looking for the right image that symbolically could express my feelings and thoughts and at the same time be aesthetically pleasing. It became the butterfly.

Butterflies are examples of endoterygotes, insects which characteristically undergo a complete change or metamorphosis during the course of their development. Their life cycle includes both a larval and pupal stage before the adult insect or image emerges. The larva is completely different from the adult both in appearance and habits. The pupa is an inactive, nonfeeding stage, which gives rise to an adult (Smart, 1989, 28) (Figure 29), again similar to Escher’s metamorphic work.

The symbol of the butterfly is different or sometimes the same for some cultures. In Greek, the symbol stands for psyche, the female soul (Walker 1983, 14). Christianity gives it the meaning of the stages of the development of life, death, and resurrection. For the Mycenae, who lived about 1500 BC, it represents the Great Mother. Like the Christians, the butterfly contains within
itself all its previous incarnations and the promise of future generations. In Japan, it is the symbol of vain woman, a geisha, a fickle lover. Will my room divider be accepted in a Japanese household? But luckily, it became better, a pair of butterflies is also conjugal happiness, marital bliss (Cooper, 1978, 26-28).

In Japan, but also in Ireland, Mexico, and Liberia, the spirit of the dead takes the form of a white butterfly. And in China, a jade butterfly is considered the essential emblem of love, suggesting a wedding of souls. The most appropriate gift for a bridegroom to give his bride is a jade butterfly (Walker, 1983, 415). And for me, she/he means beauty and free spirit. As the saying goes, “Butterflies are free.” I wanted to show this free spirit by letting the butterflies dance on the drape in all directions, showing off their beauty and their transparency, living in harmony with nature.

This time the developmental process began in earnest. The Theo Moorman technique was quite new to me. I had to weave many samplers before I had any idea what I was going to do for my final project.

The first samplers were woven with a white cotton warp and different colors of yarns, and yarn sizes were used for the weft and the inlay. (Figures 30 and 31)

The next warp and weft were black with an inlay of several silk threads put together, thick enough to cover the background behind the inlay completely. One butterfly was woven with a horizontal inlay (Figure 32), the other with a sideways inlay (Figure 33). My plan was to paint each of them after they came off the loom. The previous samplers with an inlay of thin yarns had not given me the hoped-for effect; perhaps painting them would do
the trick. Before I embarked on the painting experiment, I painted several butterflies on a fine silk fabric using French dyes (Figure 34). After about ten different trials, one of the butterflies came out really well. (Figure 25) This color scheme was transferred over to the inlays. It looked nice, but it did not create the playfulness I was aiming for. It was still too much of a two-dimensional design – a butterfly stuck on a black background (Figure 14).

What next? Paintings of Impressionists went through my mind. They had a special way of applying their colors to the canvas. It did not need to be the true color. As René Huyghe explained in the preface of the book *Impressionist*, those artists tried to give colors an independent appearance, free of cultural or intellectual ties. This new vision was stripped of illusion of form and outline, the usual references which enables the spectator to define an object. (*Realités* 1971,6) *The Lily Pond* by Claude Monet (Figure 36) was a good example of that.

This time a sampler was woven with a white warp and weft and also a white silk inlay, making it almost canvaslike – ready to be painted afterwards. This never happened. During the weaving of this last one, I got a much better idea. Paint the warp *before* you start to weave it. Again, a white cotton warp was used and several sections were painted with Procaine dyes using the colors blue, green, red, and yellow. The dyes were not absorbed well, but after it was woven with an off-white cotton, the effect was almost IKAT-like. (Figure 37)

On the next section, some soap was added to the dye. The absorption was better; but the colors did not flow over into each other, and I was not able to get a good shed. The soap kept the threads sticking together. This had
not been a good idea to work with. Instead, all I had to do was make the yarn wet before I started to paint. The dye will travel well and absorb better also. This third section was woven with an off-white weft and the inlay was done in different colors, using very thin silk threads, DMC embroidery floss, and metallic yarns. What I was planning to do was to make the butterfly almost one with the background, using some of these background colors in the color-scheme of the butterfly to create this impression of transparency. When this sampler came off the loom, I knew I had found the answer.

The pattern for the drape needed to be very accurate. I started with a long piece of brown paper and draped it over the spoolrack, which was approximately the same height and width as the wooden stand I was making in the woodshop. (Figure 38)

The length of the brown paper was cut to the exact measurements. Different shapes and sizes of butterflies were cut out of white paper and attached to the brown paper to see how they looked. (Figure 39)

After that, the butterflies were drawn onto the brown paper. (Figure 40) The white butterflies were kept as cartoons to be used during weaving to find the right placement and outlines of the butterflies (Figures 41 and 42) since it was not easy to draw the outlines on the warp. That is done often when weaving a tapestry.

The brown paper was divided into 1-inch strips so I could keep track of the drape and its inlay, 1 inch at a time.

The total length of the drape was 142.5 inches long and 36 inches in width, with five butterflies on each side. 3/2 off-white cotton is used for the ground warp and ground weft. A very thin, fine silk thread is used as a tie
down warp and DMC embroidery floss, silk yarns, and metallic threads in different color combinations are used as an inlay weft. After the warp was wound and the loom dressed (Figures 43 and 44), the warp was pulled out again and attached to the front of another loom to keep the whole warp as tight as possible. The total length of the warp was painted with different colors of Procion dyes, darker at the ends and becoming lighter in shade toward the middle (Figure 45). After the warp was totally dry, it was wound back again onto the first loom and I was ready to start weaving.

To make it more lively, a background with and inlay of grasses and cattails was added to the inlay of the butterflies (Figures 46, 47, 48, 49).

The first part of the drape was easier to weave. All the inlays of the butterflies and the background were seen going up. The other side was going up also, but by weaving it in one piece, I had to picture everything upside down while weaving it and laying in the designs. One side of the drape is slightly darker due to the choice of color combinations of yarns used for the inlay of the butterflies and the surrounding background. This side symbolizes Fall (Figure 50). The other, lighter side is Summer (Figure 51).

After the weaving was completed and taken off the loom, the drape was washed in Synthrapol. To my amazement, the water turned dark brown! I was afraid to take the piece out of the water. Had everything turned dark brown? No, it hadn’t. It even worked out for the best. The undyed parts of the piece had absorbed some color, tying all the colors together nicely. There was no separation of color or undyed warp and weft anymore. The accident became a blessing caused by a poorly absorbed dye on the warp, which had not been set prior to the weaving and washing of this drape.
In the meantime, the wooden stand for the screen was also finished. It was made of poplar. The finish was done with several coats of jet-black Solortax that gave it a very rich black color, a color that had been so popular in Japan for furniture and other household items. Measurements are: 43” x 54” (Figures 52 and 53).
V
CONCLUSIONS

Een weg van Duizend mijlen begint met een eerste schrede. (Dutch translation)

Or,

A road of a thousand miles starts with the first step.

That is how it all started, one day at a time; and I had finally reached the end of the road. The room dividers were finished.

I am very happy with the result. They worked very well in my thesis-show (Figure 54). It took a lot of hours and at times it was very frustrating, but it was worth it. I learned so much from this endeavor. It was a very fruitful year, with a happy ending.

I look forward to start my own production of screens with various techniques, which I have experienced and studied. I also have had a number of failures which has helped me in developing some new fiber structure and dying processes. These new directions will be part of my future endeavors.
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Figure 2  Reversible – Single Panel Screen “Tsuitate”.

Figure 3  Reversible – Single Panel Screen “Tsuitate”.
Figure 4  Pair of six-panel folding screen “Byōbu.”

Figure 5  Screened Clothes Rack “IKO-Byobu.”
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Pair of five-panel screen.
Figure 7  Antonio Gaudi y Cornet, Pair of five-panel screen.
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