



An innovative course, *Commissions: The Artist-Client Process*, offers a unique “reality” experience for students in the School of Art at the University of Washington, Seattle. With an original handwoven rug as the goal, Professor Layne Goldsmith leads students through the process of working with clients from concept development to design approval. The final stage is sending the designs to weavers in Nepal who use Tibetan techniques and were selected by Goldsmith after she visited rug manufacturers there. Just before the most recent session of the course was beginning in January 2008, Goldsmith responded to questions by e-mail.

Students • Clients • Weavers

A Global Collaboration

An interview with Layne Goldsmith

How often is the Commissions course offered?

This class is offered once each year in the winter quarter. We are preparing to begin our fifth year. The project was designed as a means to raise money to purchase the TC-1 Jacquard loom for the UW weaving studio. To date, this project has taken in over \$215,000, but we have been unable to purchase the loom for a variety of reasons.

How long is a quarter?

The quarter is a ten-week session. However, our first class meeting is a catered reception that takes place several weeks before the quarter begins. At this time, the students meet their sponsors, and the Artist/Client dialogue begins. Many of the students meet with their clients during the winter break before class starts in January.

Is the course open only to fiber students?

This class is open to all students in the School of Art. I have had second-quarter freshmen and second-year graduate students working together in the same class! It is a very enriching experience for the whole group to address such diversity among the students.

How many students can enroll?

I accept one student for each of the paying sponsors. The largest class had 21 students. Fifteen is ideal.

Eli Steurich and Satoko Berg working on a full-scale drawing for a dining room rug design.

ABOVE: Janet Carlson working on design during class (2004).



How are they selected?

Students are selected based upon portfolio review. I ask each interested student to submit three sketchbooks and a portfolio. I am interested in seeing the documentation of the student's creative thinking. It is more important to me to assess the level of visual literacy than to view finished projects from studio-based classes. My experience is that this is clearly visible in the sketchbooks and portfolios.

How do you find the clients who sponsor the project?

I have lived in this area for almost 25 years. The first year, I worked from my personal and professional contacts. I also worked with people in the UW Development office, who suggested individuals that might be interested. After the first year, the UW College of Arts and Sciences newsletter ran an article on this class. Their circulation was over 100,000. I had people calling me to enroll in the class. Previous sponsors have referred friends and have also hosted recruitment events. I also "pound the pavement" looking for potential sponsors. We have worked with sponsors in Florida, Illinois, and California, so residence in Seattle is not necessary. If you have anyone you would like to recommend, please let me know! I am happy to contact them and follow up.

Are there restrictions on what the client can request?

Good question. We specify that the sponsorship price covers a given size rug. Beyond that size, clients may order as large a rug as they like. An additional fee is charged on a square-foot basis for each additional foot beyond the base sponsorship. Clients may specify 100 percent wool, or a blend of wool and silk. For silk there is an additional charge.

As for other options, we have woven rugs with five different pile heights, rugs with eccentric shapes, and rugs up to 14 x 20 feet in size. I work with a producer who is able to assist us in weaving many non-standard options.

Are there technical aspects of the weaving that the student designers have to consider?

I have a "structural vocabulary" handout that delineates the Tibetan weaving structure and the elements involved plus how each of these can be used to artistic advantage. I also have a loom warped in class, and each student is required to weave a row of the Tibetan knots to help them understand the physical structure.

But mostly this is a design class, with a very physical outcome.



ABOVE: Tibetan woman handspinning yarn.

BELOW: Green Damask rug designed by Marisa Rosa Williams being woven in Gangtok, Sikkim for Dr. Sydney and Rosa Williams, 2007.





TOP: Yukari Wayda (right) discussing her design with Lobsang Tensing, owner of Oriental Trading Company in Kathmandu, Nepal. Clients were Christopher and Alida Latham.
TOP RIGHT: Red Damask rug designed by Marisa Rosa Williams for Dr. Sydney and Rosa Williams. Hand-knotted Tibetan wool and silk, 9' x 6', 2007.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Rug designed by Michael Cepses for Travis Penn and John Wilcher. Hand-knotted Tibetan wool, 10' x 7', 2005.
ABOVE: Rug designed by Anna Lambert for Harvey Heller. Hand-knotted Tibetan wool, 14' x 14', 2006.

What kinds of thread/yarns are used?

The warp is 100 percent cotton. The knotted pile is 100 percent Tibetan wool. Upon occasion, we will use New Zealand wool, which is also available in Nepal and India at a lower price than the Tibetan wool. The NZ wool is whiter and is better for designs that use very light pastel colors. However, we prefer Tibetan wool and specify it.

Do students work from color samples provided by the weavers or do they determine the colors themselves?

I have a set of colors that I have compiled with the help of the companies that I work with. The students and clients work with these colors in their designs. They are in the form of yarn "poms" with assigned color numbers.

Do the weavers send samples for approval?

Depending upon the design, we will weave a strikeoff to determine the effect of certain design details. Usually this is not necessary, but each year we do order several strikeoffs to make sure a specific effect is possible and how it will look.

Are the students ever in contact with the weavers?

The first year I taught this class I received a grant to take three students with me to Nepal to work with the producers on the first group of rugs. Since then, Nepal has been on the US State Department list of dangerous countries, and the university will not permit me to take students. The last time I was in Nepal, the Maoists were busy deposing the king. There were riots in the streets every day and we were holed up in our hotel under order of National Curfew.

Is there a time lapse between the end of the course and the completion of the rugs?

Yes. The designs are sent at the end of the quarter (March 14, 2008, for the next class). The weaving takes up to four months, depending upon the size of the rugs. I schedule a public exhibition for the end of this period.

What weaving techniques are used?

These rugs are woven using a Tibetan knotted pile weave. Much of the yarn is hand spun. It is all hand-dyed.

What are your criteria for selecting Nepalese weavers?

During my first trip to Nepal in 2003, before the first course began, I visited four dozen weaving centers. I was interested in a number of considerations: issues of child labor were at the forefront, but also environmental impact of the dyeing process, working conditions of the weavers, labor practices of the companies, and their ability to meet the timelines and demands these custom orders would place on their facility and weavers. Could they do this work, communicate via e-mail with me in English, and meet the deadlines reliably? Were they Rugmark-affiliated?* Did they use safe dye practices?

Do the weavers work in private studios, small production companies, or large factories?

There are over 400 Tibetan rug weaving businesses in Nepal currently weaving rugs for export. In India there are even more. The weavers work in centers that range in size from three looms to hundreds of looms. The largest producers in Nepal, Samling Carpets and Paramount Carpets, employ up to 6,000 weavers each. They maintain many weaving centers, most of them outside of Kathmandu.

Has the intention of giving students a head start on their careers been realized?

The first year, three students out of a class of fourteen were hired to work for a rug company based in Seattle and Kathmandu. Two other students from that same class obtained commissions from clients outside of their class-assigned sponsors, due to their own recognisance. One student went on to form her own rug company with a Tibetan partner. Others comment that the class prepared them for the real world in ways they could not have imagined.

Are there any other benefits for the students?

Many of the sponsors develop a strong personal relationship with their students. One previous client hired her artist as a personal assistant, and then web designer and business manager for her jewelry company.

*See sidebar on Rugmark, page 12.