

Conference Report: MAFA Workshop Weekend 2009

A quick disclaimer: While I'm one of the volunteers who helps with communications and therefore occasionally post on behalf of MAFA, the MidAtlantic Fiber Association, this article is purely my own opinion, and should not be construed as representing the official views of MAFA or its Board.

The MAFA Workshop Weekend was held from Thursday, July 30 through Sunday, August 2, 2009 at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. According to the conference directory, there were 16



The vendor hall offered many temptations—and boy, did we succumb!

instructors from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, teaching 15 three-day classes, 151 students, and 10 on-site vendors. (An eleventh vendor, The Mannings, was only 20 minutes away from the site, and opted to put flyers with directions and a map in the conference “goodie bags,” and stayed open late and on Sunday for the conference-goers.)

This was the second MAFA conference held in the Workshop Weekend format, and everyone seemed to be having a blast—even those courageous and selfless volunteers who organized the conference and saw to its running even as they tried to enjoy their well-deserved classes. Gettysburg College was a new venue, selected after the expected venue (which had housed the conference in 2007) informed MAFA organizers a mere eight months before the conference that—whoops!—it could only

guarantee 100 beds, and that MAFA was not going to have access to the classrooms with water (which would put a kibosh on the dye classes).

CLASSES

At the MAFA Workshop Weekend each student takes a single three-day class. This is different from conferences such as Convergence—and, for that matter, the MAFA conference before 2007—at which multi-day classes may be offered on the weekdays prior to the weekend conference, and participants can select from among many 1.5 – 3 hour seminars during the main weekend days of the conference.

The switch in format came about for many reasons, not the least of which is that most of those who wanted to see the conference continue and were willing to work to make it happen would rather immerse themselves in one intensive, hands-on class than attend 4-5 short lectures. In addition, with some notable exceptions, the guilds in MAFA's region are small; even with several banding together, it's extremely difficult to agree upon, coordinate, and finance a multi-day workshop.

The education coordinators came up with a fabulous menu of classes this year. When I showed the preliminary list to friends, the response was inevitably “Wow!” Personally, I couldn't decide (even though I had insider information and knew what the proposed classes were six months before they were officially announced); I sent my registration form in with a list of my top-seven choices and a note to put me in whichever class made things easiest for the registrar.

Here's a list of the classes that were held, with the name and state/country of the instructor:

- 1) “More for Your Money: Loom-controlled Double Weave and Color-and-Weave Effects,” Sharon Alderman (UT)

- 2) "Color Interaction for Handweavers," Su Butler (IL)
- 3) "3-End Block Weave," Jason Collingwood (U.K.)
- 4) "Brocades and Other Inlay Techniques," Inge Dam (Canada)
- 5) "Straight Eight, A Versatile Threading," Tom Knisely (PA)
- 6) "Painting with Fabric Strips," Nadine Sanders (WA)
- 7) "Surprisingly Simple Summer and Winter," Sarah Saulson (NY)
- 8) "Spinning for Knitting," Amy Tyler (MI)
- 9) "Painted Warps and Woven Patterns: A Love Affair between Color and Structure," Betty Vera (NY)
- 10) "Advancing Twill — Sampler to Scarf," Virginia West (MD)
- 11) "Classic Crackle and More," Susan Wilson (CO)
- 12) "Shimmering Silk, An Inspiring Fibre," Heather Winslow (IL)
- 13) "A Spectrum of Color from Natural Dyes," Carol Wood & Debbie McCrea (NY)

As always, there were also novice classes in spinning and weaving; it's part of MAFA's mission to offer these classes at every conference, and they *will* run, even if only one student signs up.

- 14) "Learn to Weave, Then Take the Next Step," Barbara Diefenderfer (MD)
- 15) "Novice Spinning," Sally Jenkins (MD)

An instructor's sudden illness forced the last-minute cancellation of one class. Just to prove that there is no favoritism at MAFA...MAFA's own Vice-President was left with almost no choices, and ended up in the novice weaving class. (The VP is a teacher by profession, so she was absolutely fine with having the chance to observe a master teacher and talk with her about the development of a weaving curriculum. But still....!)

By the way, if there are classes you'd like to see for the 2011 Workshop Weekend, or if you'd otherwise like to volunteer to help with the planning, please email correspondingsecretary2007@mafafiber.org (substitute @ for "at" and . for "dot, and close up spaces to create a standard email address). If suggesting a class, *please* give the instructor's name and some sort of information that will help MAFA locate him or her (website URLs are ideal; even a state/country will help. It's amazing how hard it can be to sift through the hits on Google).

OPEN STUDIO

Friday evening was the open-studio evening, during which we students visited the other classrooms to see what everyone else was doing. While I was very happy with my class and wouldn't have traded it for another, I have to admit I felt a twinge of envy when I saw what the other classes were working on! In particular, the iridescent tencel scarves in Virginia West's class were absolutely gorgeous (and infinitely more wearable than my doubleweave sampler and color-and-weave gamps).





FASHION SHOW



On Saturday night, Alisa Brown (Weavers of the Mid-Hudson) once again hosted the MAFA fashion show. This is not a glitzy, professional show with anorexic models and loud music. Instead, it is a warm, friendly, show-and-tell. Members of the audience take their turn in the spotlight (and at the short, low catwalk) to display their work. There were elegant jackets, snappy vests, and exquisite shawls, representing a variety of techniques, including handweaving, knitting, and felting. Having recently acquired an ayatakadai, I was particularly taken with David Moran's meditation hangings, which he had braided on his takadai.

The natural-dye class modeled their skeins; the dyeing instructors also showed their own creations. Carol Wood brought a manikin on stage to show the breath-taking lace wedding gown she had knit for a friend. Debbie MacCrea modeled a painstakingly accurate re-enactment costume, created with cloth that was not only dyed using period dyes, but also dyes that were appropriate to her non-wealthy persona.



THE VENUE *(in excruciating detail)*

Although there were some minor glitches, Gettysburg College was pretty good overall, and I hope that the MAFA conference can find a home there. The location is reasonably central for the region (and with a region that extends from the eastern Great Lakes to the Outer Banks, with forays into West Virginia and Ohio, no location will be ever convenient for the majority of the members), with decent highway access. Airport access is not ideal (75 minutes to Baltimore BWI; Harrisburg is closer, but it's not as large an airport, so flights are less frequent and more expensive), but it seems likely that as one gets closer to Baltimore and Washington, the venues will become more expensive and/or not as nice.

The campus is quite pretty and basically flat, with wide, well-maintained walkways between buildings. The buildings were close together, and it was possible to navigate among the classroom buildings with minimal time outside. Unfortunately, the cafeteria and student union building were just far enough away from the classrooms that quite a few people got drenched by a torrential downpour that occurred right after lunch on Saturday.



Since Gettysburg College does not have a summer session, parking was in low demand, and a few people (I'm not naming names) opted to park in places other than the designated lot. These daredevils were spared the shock at the end of the weekend of finding that construction in the area had removed the entrance by which many of us had entered the designated lot.

DORMS

Initially, I was NOT happy about the dorm, the Apple Complex. It was about 95 degrees and 95 percent humidity when I arrived; with all the doors to the dorm propped open, the air conditioning in the maze-like halls was fighting a losing battle. And I had failed to make the inference from the conference brochure that "There are elevators in the classroom building" meant there were no elevators in the dorm...and my room was on the third floor!

However, after some chance for reflection (plus a party in my friends' suite), I've decided I really like the way the dorm is set up (other than the lack of elevators). There is some variation, but the rooms are basically arranged in suites, each with two bedrooms (double occupancy), a bath, and a large common area with a kitchen (stovetop, full-sized refrigerator). Definitely great for socializing; I could see groups sponsoring small spin-ins, knit-ins, Weavolution/ Ravelry/ WeaveTech/ Spindlers/etc. get-togethers, and/or progressive parties based in the suites.

In the past, there has been discussion about how we're not getting any younger, so maybe dorms don't work anymore. I disagree, despite the horror stories I've heard about Townsend University and other past venues. My very first MAFA conference was in 2005, which was held at a conference center. It wasn't as expensive as Convergence, but it still wasn't cheap! It also was not as well-attended as expected, probably because of the price.

Honestly, I can easily tolerate staying in a dorm and having a roommate I've not met before if it means I save a hundred-plus dollars (which I can then spend at the vendors!). (Plus my roommates have been really wonderful women, and I'm glad to have had the chance to meet them.)

CLASSROOMS

It was scary when I dropped off my loom in my classroom. The room's tables and chairs had been stacked in precarious piles along the perimeter of the room, reducing its usable dimensions by a good few feet on all sides, and the room was packed so tightly with Baby Wolves, Harrisville Model As, Schachts and Dorothys on stands, and even an AVL WDL (not to mention more standard table looms) that it was nearly impossible to maneuver. I identified my friend Lori's new Louet Jane loom near the front of the room, wended through the maze of looms, feeling rather like the little red car in the game "Traffic Jam," and shoved Lori's loom over to make room for mine. I also left a note to apologize.



My classroom. This is the "after" photograph!

I was sure the classroom was not going to work.

Fortunately, Lori's husband had helped her bring her equipment into the classroom, and knew what a mess it was. He got there early on Friday, hauled all the excess furniture into the hallway, and helped rearrange the looms so that we could actually fit in the classroom (yes, with all floor looms unfolded!). And...y'know, if we could fit 17 people in Sharon Alderman's class, about half of whom had floor looms or largish table looms on

stands...the classrooms are big enough.

Some of the classrooms were a little oddly configured for the classes. For example, the crackle-weave class was in a small lecture hall with curved tables set on risers. I think there was only one floor loom in that class; I don't think another would have fit, though there was plenty of room for table looms.

The dyeing and warp-painting classes were held in science labs. There was some concern whether everyone would get to paint their warps because there wasn't enough counter space for everyone to spread out at once. (In my opinion, given that it was a full class, they needed both the lab AND a gym or cafeteria with 15 or 16 long banquet tables, something that any venue might be hard-pressed to provide.) In the end though, all warps were painted and put on looms.

CAFETERIA

The food was varied and acceptable. Not haute cuisine, but decent—and certainly a LOT better than when I was in college. I noticed that the cafeteria ran out of some selections, but I've also heard complaints about the cafeteria running out of food, period. I'm not positive, but I think this was a result of the cafeteria basically shutting down about 10 minutes before the meal hour ended, as opposed to the 300 teenage boys attending soccer camp devouring everything before the weavers got a chance.

The cafeteria's policy is to enforce portion control, which means that one is allowed to get only one small entrée at a time. However, seconds are allowed (if they haven't run out, though I personally thought the crispy French fries were much more worthwhile than the entrees, so this wasn't a problem). The cafeteria has two soft-serve ice cream machines with several flavors apiece. I think the espresso

chocolate chip and cookie dough were the favorite flavors for the Workshop Weekend participants; I personally favored the vanilla with Snickers pieces.

Despite my injudicious consumption of ice cream and French fries, I lost five pounds over the weekend, so there might be something to this portion-control idea....

SUGGESTIONS

I write this section with some trepidation, knowing full well that to whine is to volunteer, and the conference organizers and MAFA Board know who I am, where I live, and what my phone number and email are.

- Ask for more detailed loom information (weaving width, stand) on the registration form. A 24" table loom on a stand is bigger than some floor looms, and has to be planned for accordingly.
- Correct the non-members surcharge. Non-MAFA individuals got away cheap this time: the non-member surcharge should be equal to the individual-member dues...which, since MAFA is on a two-years dues schedule, should be \$20, not \$10. (This might also encourage people to get their guilds to join or re-join MAFA.)
- Repeat critical information from the brochure in the registration packet/letter. (Namely: materials fee if applicable; no elevators in dorm).
 - For me, the brochure is a constant companion from the time it's issued until the time I register...and then it's gone and forgotten. "It was in the brochure" is an understandable answer, but it's not a particularly friendly or useful one.
 - Almost everyone took materials fees in stride and felt silly because they had forgotten, but...it's a long time from a January registration to a July conference, and it wouldn't take that much room on the letter to remind people of the materials fee.
 - Also: sometimes you *think* you stated something explicitly, but may not have (e.g., no elevators in dorm). It's a good idea to reiterate, just to cover yourself.
- Provide the roommate's email/phone number in the registration packet/letter. It'd be nice to "meet" before the conference and perhaps coordinate what to bring.
- Give street numbers or approximations thereof for buildings. Mailing addresses (i.e., college P.O. box) are not real useful when using a GPS or getting directions off the Internet.
- Provide maps of the inside of buildings showing where rooms are located. This may be hard to obtain, given what I saw of the emergency-exit maps in the dorm (which had no room numbers or you-are-here dots), and may have to be created.
 - This is particularly critical when not all rooms have physical numbers or the floor plan is confusing/not the same on different floors, as for the dorm MAFA had for the Workshop Weekend.
- Set up a bulletin board (or two) for for-sale notices and other communications among participants.
- Provide a printout of last-minute notes and reminders if this information is available at the time of registration, e.g.
 - Which door to the dorm the key unlocks (sometimes a back door looks more like the front door than the front door)
 - Checkout procedures; where keys should be dropped off
- Persuade the college to remove all un-needed furniture from the classrooms, rather than stacking it up in a corner. It may not be as out of the way as one might hope.
- Offer more intermediate-advanced spinning classes or spinning + weaving combination classes. I've heard that this Weekend's non-novice spinning class was phenomenal...but it was only one class.

Spinners deserve a chance to suffer from indecision when selecting a Workshop Weekend class, too. 😊 It's also possible that there was such a wealth of great weaving classes that they cannibalized one another. Two weaving classes had to be cancelled for lack of enrollment, after all, and at least one ran with a borderline number of students.