

Mary Burns: The Dream Weaver

By Kay Krans

Mary Burns is an award-winning weaver and fiber artist. In addition, she is a visual artist, naturalist, writer, teacher and more. Her family's history had a strong influence on her art.

Her grandfather, John Nutter, came to the Manitowish area for the first time in 1897 when he was 14 and worked for Buck's Resort on Spider Lake (in what is Manitowish Waters today) and Winchester. By 1923, John and his wife Ann Nora Gleason Nutter moved into a house in Manitowish.

Today, Mary and her husband, John Bates, live in her grandparents' house, which was the setting for many of her childhood adventures in the Northwoods and an inspiration for her book for young teens, *Heartwood* (2003). From that base, they share their love of the flora and fauna of the Northwoods with all who are interested through weavings, artwork, poetry, writing, presentations, and tours through hiking, kayaking and cross-country skiing.

Mary grew up in Wausau, discovered her love of art, and learned to weave on a tapestry loom in high school, which was the birth of her lifelong work. In college, her next loom was a floor loom with multiple harnesses. Today, she weaves on a beautiful, very complicated loom named "Brigid" after her great grandmother. Before she can weave, Mary spends hours making drawings, creating designs, using computer programs, and threading the looms.

Forty years ago, Mary and John moved to Manitowish and added the studio to her grandparents' home. The house was a wreck and had been vacant for 13 years. They brought it back to life and made it a haven for living and creating their work. Many of her earlier weavings and fiber art depicted subjects and themes from nature in various styles. It might be a weaving of a Northwoods dragonfly or the majestic white pine that brought so many to this area.

Mary likes to work with themes from historical images that are recreated in her weaving. "My four-year project, *Ancestral Women Exhibit*, features woven portraits of an elder from each of Wisconsin's 12 Native tribes along with 12 complementary weavings," Mary shared. She had to reach out and learn from the women and their tribes in order to create the weavings. These women elders kept or keep their native traditions and teachings alive.

Her latest exhibit, *Women and Water: Woven Portraits from Around the World*, is a powerful look at women who work with and for water across the globe. She began this work in 2016 and completed the last portrait in 2023. These women are water protectors from various backgrounds such as limnology, water walkers, oceanography, poetry and art.

"The exhibit is composed of 29 woven portraits of 39 women from over 20 countries, plus the Arctic and Antarctic," Mary explained. "Some of the women featured are from as close as Lac du Flambeau and Trout Lake." Mary shared that she hopes "these women and their stories encourage you to strengthen your own ties with water and inspire you to take action to protect

our waters.” Because of this work, some may consider Mary a water protector. The stories of these women accompany the exhibit in a beautiful book, including the woven portraits and the stories.

Mary weaves custom-designed jacquard weavings and wall pieces in addition to felting, natural dyeing and eco-printing. She has participated in numerous science and art collaborations, as well as artist residencies, and she teaches various fiber arts workshops.

Through her work, she seeks to inspire a love of nature and understanding of social justice. Her work also can move one to think and guides the viewer to look at her themes in a spiritual manner as well. “My weaving career began in a high school,” Mary recalls. “It was one of those *‘the light went on’* moments. I loved everything about it and have never stopped loving it. The spark that inspired me as a teenager continues to light my path. I want my work to engage people. I want to interact with them and inspire them. Jacquard weaving has become an essential element in my art.”

WUWM 89.7 Milwaukee’s NPR May 4, 2023, Susan Benz

Mary Burns Bio

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