

Leclerc Looms: Over 125 Years of Weaving Tradition

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with input from Francois Brassard

The ups and downs in the popularity of handloom weaving in North America has made it a challenging business for those companies that produce equipment for this market. It is for this reason that the history of most of today's handloom manufacturers stretch back only a few decades while many companies active in the first half of the twentieth century like Union Loom Works, Deen Loom Company, Newcomb Loom Works, and Reed Loom Company are now just a historical note. An exception to this is Leclerc Looms which has been a leading producer of handlooms and weaving accessories for well over a century.

The history of the Leclerc Loom company can be traced to 1874 and the founder, Alfred Leclerc. Less than a decade after the end of the US Civil War, in the Canadian province of Quebec, Alfred bought a flour mill in the town of St. Cyrille powered by a water wheel that had machinery for carding wool on the premises.

Over the next two years Alfred operated the flour mill and carder during the summer months and when the water froze over set about installing woodworking machinery in the building. In the spring of 1876 he built a forge adjacent to the mill and started to produce wood products in parallel with the flour and wool production. Alfred continued to grow the business and in 1891, his son Nilus built a windmill to sustain the power required through the winter months. The Leclerc Company was now producing heavy looms, carded wool and furniture. In 1893 a steam engine was completed to handle the increased year round power demands, and the product line expanded to include shoe soles and shoe racks for the footwear trade. In 1898 a large order for church furniture was obtained and the company launched into a product area it would later become famous for. At the turn of the century the company was formally organized under the name Alfred Leclerc and Sons. His two sons, Nilus and Alphonse became directors. The company continued to grow.

The first big breakthrough into the home loom business took place in 1924 when a small versatile home handloom was designed and developed and two years later exhibited at the Quebec Exposition. The loom was demonstrated by Emilie Chamard, a prominent local handweaver assisted by Nilus' son Robert who was 9 years old at that time. The loom was an overnight success. In 1936 Robert started working full time at the factory as a loom assembler and salesman. Handlooms were to become Roberts fascination and life. In 1940 the company abandoned all other product lines in favor of handloom production. Alfred Leclerc, the founder passed away at 90 years of age.

During the second World War the company started producing special designed exercise looms for returning soldiers. These looms became part of the recovery therapy in hospitals in Great Britain and North America.

In 1944 the company was formally reorganized and incorporated under the name of Nilus Leclerc Inc. with Nilus as President, Robert as Secretary and Lucien and Louis (family members) as Directors. The company's production increased dramatically with the success of their mainstay products, the "Series M Rigid Loom" and the "Series F Folding Loom" which over time became better known as the Mira and Fanny Counterbalance floor looms. A brochure produced about this time spoke of how "Forty-five skilled carpenters, cabinet-makers

and draughtsmen team to manufacture products of the finest quality" in a plant covering "more than 40,000 sq. feet" and consuming "200,000 kWh. per year".

Following the war, the company expanded their product line to meet the growing demand of the handweaving community, adding a series of popular Jack loom designs like the Nilus, Nilart, Colonial and what is believed to be the first folding transportable workshop loom, the Minerva. The company grew dramatically and in addition to building looms, the production of church furniture was resumed.

Unlike many vendors who produced only one or two looms designs, Leclerc has constantly innovated. As the North American population became more mobile and handweaving increased in popularity, the company recognized the need for smaller sized, transportable looms and introduced a series of smaller table looms including the highly successful Meco and Dorothy designs. The growing popularity of tapestry weaving led to the design of a range of Tapestry looms including versions of the large looms used at the Gobelins School in Paris. In an attempt to make handweaving more accessible to those with limited budgets, the company tried producing a lower cost "Finish it Yourself" loom design called the Inca. To expand the weaving range of traditional loom designs, the company developed the Shed Regulator to improve Counterbalance performance on unbalanced weaves and invented back-hinge treadles to improve the shed and reduce the work required to operate a conventional multi-harness Jack loom.

Over 30 distinct loom designs have been produced by the company over its century and a quarter of operation, not including the many special custom looms that were designed for some of their business customers. For those Leclerc loom owners trying to identify their loom, a full list of designs can be found at:

http://www.leclerclooms.com/draw_inst/Draw_inst.htm

While many of their major loom designs appear to have remained unchanged for decades, a closer examination shows that over time there have been a series of continual improvements in the components to improve the performance and make a better product. So much so, that it is often possible to determine the relative age of a Leclerc loom by looking for subtle changes in the design.

In 1954 the first of a series of bulletins and books by Stanley Zielinski in cooperation with Robert Leclerc were produced. These are still produced by the company as their "Master Weaver" series. Following the death of Nilus in 1961, the company was reorganized with Robert Leclerc as President. The handloom business continued to grow and Robert returned the company exclusively to loom production.

In 1968, the International Labour Office in Geneva asked Robert Leclerc to do six months research in the Middle East investigating methods of improving the local handweaving industry, at that time geared to carpet making. This was followed by requests to perform similar visits to Mali, Mexico, Peru, Columbia and the Philippines.

The last orders for Church Furniture produced were of a special grained Birds Eye maple made for the woodwork and furniture of St-Mathieu de Montmagny, and for special carved

pews in solid oak for the Basilique de Ste-Anne de Beaupre a famous shrine north of Quebec City.

Robert directed the company through 1986 when his wife's illness forced him to retire. The company was managed by outside interests until Francois Brassard purchased the complete handloom business in 1995.

In keeping with the Leclerc tradition of innovation, Francois introducing the "Single Lam" Countermarche design, added a range of computer assisted dobby looms to the product line and launched the highly successful "Voyageur" model workshop loom which was developed following a nation wide field testing program. This development coincided with an upgrade of the company's production facilities and physical plant as well as a program to rewrite the company's technical documentation including the production of video-taped loom assembly instructions.

The company's location in a part of Canada best known for its maple syrup production has given the Leclerc company access to a plentiful supply of the Maple hardwood used in all their looms. The strength and durability of this hard wood coupled with the century of design evolution in their products and dedication to the handweaving industry have built the Leclerc reputation. The company's current product line consists of 14 individual loom designs which can be ordered in over 75 variations along with a broad range of tools and accessories. This includes a complete range of designs including Inkle, Rigid Heddle, Tapestry, Table, Floor and Computer-Dobby Looms using Jack, Counterbalance and Countermarche mechanisms to weave material in widths from 6 inches to 14 feet. The Leclerc dealer network stretches across North America and around the world and as handweaving continues to grow in popularity the future looks bright for the company!

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