

# The Giving Tree: *Oatland's Mighty Oak Project*

by Suzanne Work Hokanson



Fiber art installation in the lobby of the Oatland Island Wildlife Center. Photo by Jeri Nunley Nokes.

Fiber Guild of the Savannahs member Muriel Henry adding fern fabric to a section of the tree's trunk.



The Fiber Guild of the Savannahs is a guild in many ways, but our latest project, a fiber art installation for the lobby of the Welcome Center at Oatland Island Wildlife Center where we meet, has brought us together as a guild in a powerful way.

In early 2013 the staff at Oatland approached our guild to inquire if we could create something for the lobby with its soaring thirty-foot ceiling. The challenge was to design something in fiber to deaden the sound a group of school children can make when waiting in this space. Each year thousands of school children visit on field trips to walk the trails and learn about the indigenous wildlife, starting their tour in the Welcome Center. We were excited to have the opportunity of showing the unique qualities that fiber art can bring to a space and to work together on this magnificent project.

The logo of our guild is the mighty oak and this majestic tree is seen throughout the wildlife center, dripping with lacey Spanish moss, lined with Resurrection Fern, crowned by thousands of leaves, and home to many critters. The perfect solution after much discussion was to design and create our own mighty oak tree using all of the fiber techniques that our guild represents.

As our fearless leader fiber artist Urban Jupena likes to say, “Our sheep grew the wool. Our spinners spun it. Our dyers dyed it. Our weavers wove it. Our sculptors made the fabric into branches. Our felters, knitters, crocheters, and quilters made leaves, and we all worked on assembling the twigs – wrapping, sewing and winding each leaf. The sewers sewed the branches together. The brave ones went up on the scaffolding to do the final assembly, and together the whole guild stood back and was encouraged.”

We were fortunate that the multi-talented Urban Jupena relocated to Savannah to live here during the winter months. He immediately joined our guild and took over leadership of the project. Urban is professor emeritus from the Department of Art and Art History at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He received his BFA from Philadelphia University of the Arts and MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, and he is well known in the fiber art field for creating large-scale installations as well as lovely tapestries.

To get us started, Urban built a scale model of the space we would fill. We tried out different ideas for how to make a tree fill the space. At one point we thought of a two-dimensional design of overlapping branches, but then the concept evolved to a more literal three-dimensional representation of an oak tree.

Urban met with the fire marshal to discuss getting permission to have something this large installed in the lobby. It was decided that the tree needed to be created with wool fibers as they are self extinguishing. Then Urban cajoled the Wildlife Center carpenter into building us a support of 2x4s and wide wire grid from which our tree would be suspended. We ordered mill end yarns when we had exhausted all the donated yarns. One of younger guild members, an Oatland staff member, created a KickStarter campaign so that we could have the funds to purchase the chicken wire, yarn, dyes, floral wire, pins, needles, interfacing, etc., that were necessary in making our oak.



**The bark & fern on the loom, woven by Muriel Henry.**

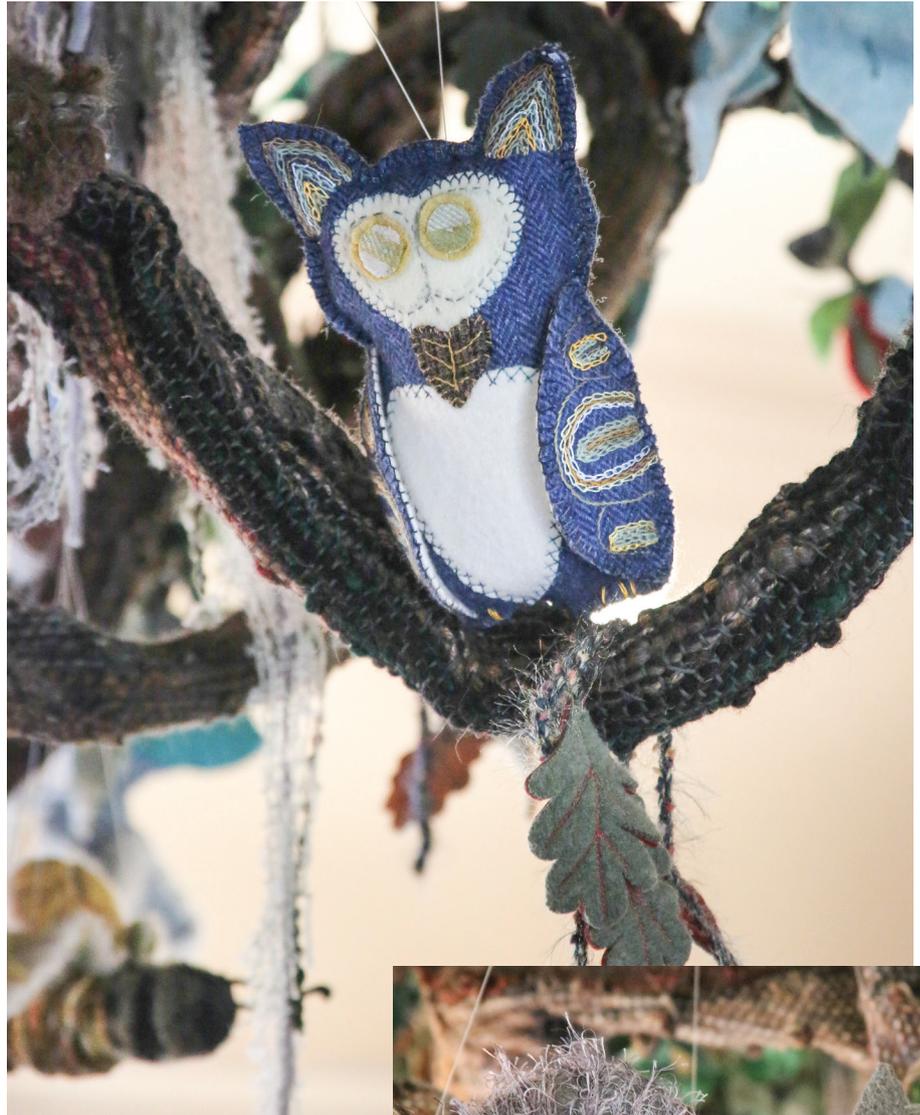
*“One of the goals of the project was to feature the wide variety of fiber art techniques utilized by the members of the Fiber Guild of the Savannahs.”*

## Steps to creating a large scale fiber art installation

- Choose a leader – someone with experience and the ability to motivate.
- Get written permission from the site. Discuss time frames, ownership, and responsibility for removal.
- Contact the local fire marshal for requirements. Clean by occasional vacuuming. Consider moth protection.
- Create a scale model to understand the physical nature of the site.
- You will quickly run out of donated materials. Look into crowd sourcing funding websites such as KickStarter.com. (We raised \$3,560.) Create an award system, i.e. “Every ten dollars donated automatically puts you into a drawing.”
- Promote your project through social media, i.e. Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest.
- Form committees who will accomplish different tasks, i.e. knitters, weavers, dyers, quilters, etc., and publicity, photographers, and installers.
- Document your fiber art installation with photographs showing the process. Keep records of who worked on the project and when each phase was started and completed.
- Meet weekly throughout the year to work on the project.
- Include members who work full-time in some way so that they can contribute to the installation from home.
- Get professional photographs of your finished fiber art installation.
- Celebrate. Organize a dedication ceremony and formal presentation. Invite the press, send postcards to friends and place notices in appropriate venues. Mail thank-you notes to those who helped.
- Create a book explaining the process with extensive photographs.
- Stand back and enjoy... and then decide what you are going to create next!

Everyone in our guild participated in some way to make Oatland’s Mighty Oak, lovingly called “OMO.”

According to Urban, “In our day and age artists are about one’s own work. Seldom do we as artists work together. The OMO project is a wonderful example of fiber artists really working together. No one person can claim that they did any part by themselves. We all had to work on every part.”



Detail from Oatland Might Oak fiber art installation.



Our membership is made up of a range of individuals, from young people in their early teens to older members in their eighties. Because several of our members are not available during the day as they work, we created packets with yarn, wire, stuffing and leaves so that they could create branches at home. Some of our members made critters to hang out in the tree: a white egret crocheted from handspun alpaca, a snowy owl, a pair of folk-art squirrels, a needle-felted turkey vulture and flying squirrel, butterflies and bees. There is even a crocheted kite, gnomes hanging out in the tree, and much, much more! What fun it is for the visitors of all ages to look and find these birds and animals hiding amongst the Spanish moss and leafy branches.

After finding the original glass lantern tucked away in a storage room, Urban had it rewired and persuaded Oatland’s electrician to install it. The lantern is the perfect touch to light the space as it mimics the lanterns that light the squares in historic downtown Savannah.

Doris Grieder beautifully expresses why many of us have been captured by the spirit of our beloved OMO:

“I am basically not a joiner. I prefer to be creative in my own little world. Therefore, I never thought I could be so dedicated to and enthusiastic about a large project, one which could not be done by a single person. But there is a very special pride in looking at the finished tree knowing hundreds of people will enter the Oatland building and see it. Kids are enchanted by the kite that got stuck up there, the squirrels, the snake, the owls and birds, and discovering the turkey vulture and bobcat. Grown-ups smile at the mistletoe bundles, at the Spanish moss, maybe appreciating all the weaving and leaf cutting that went into it...”



Detail from Oatland Might Oak fiber art installation

The making of this wonderful mighty oak tree using all sorts of fiber techniques, has taught us all the true nature of a guild. Working together towards a common goal has filled us all with joy that we hope will bring a sense of wonder to all who see it!

*Suzanne Work Hokanson is an art teacher and weaver. Her previously published work includes the book Woven: A Bauhaus Memoir. Photography by Suzanne Work Hokanson unless otherwise noted.*

*If you have a story about a guild and community collaboration that you would like to share, please contact us [HGA@WeaveSpinDye.org](mailto:HGA@WeaveSpinDye.org)*

