

# an american original

*Few know that iconic children's-book author Virginia Lee Burton also created a design collective. By Jean Nathan.*

**F**or more than 70 years, the classic children's books of **Virginia Lee Burton**—among them *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* and *The Little House*—have captivated generations of readers young and old. But Burton was also the creative force behind a highly successful textile collective called the Folly Cove Designers. Named for the area near Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Burton lived and worked, the group set a new direction in fabric design during the resurgence of American folk art in the thirties. Like Burton's bright, warmhearted books, Folly Cove prints have a timeless and universal appeal. At the same time, these colorful, handcrafted designs, bursting with natural motifs, could have been taken off the spring runways. As Harold Koda, the head curator of the



Met's Costume Institute, says, "There is a kind of sweetness and utopian quality to their project. They satisfy our nostalgia for free-spirited, free-thinking imagining."

Burton's richly productive life is an inspiring tale of fashioning new worlds. Jinee, as she was known, was born in 1909 to Alfred Burton, an engineer and dean at M.I.T., and the much younger Lena Yates, a British artist and writer. Claiming the New England winters were ruining her health, her mother uprooted Jinee and her brother and sister to California in 1917, then left the family altogether in 1925, when she fell in love with a former student of her husband's. The three children were separated, with Jinee being sent to a foster home.

With resilience and determination, Burton set her sights on becoming a dancer, taking ballet lessons—and also winning a state scholarship to the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. "Overcoming obstacles was very much how Jinee saw the world," says Christine Lundberg, who conceived and produced *Virginia Lee Burton: A Sense of Place*. Directed by Rawn Fulton, this enlightening new documentary film, which explores her life and art, will be shown this month at the National Museum *lives* >158



**CRAFTING A LEGACY**  
TOP: "APRIL" FROM BURTON'S 1965 HORN BOOK CALENDAR.  
LEFT: A C. 1948 PHOTOGRAPH OF THE AUTHOR IN THE FOLLY COVE WORKSHOP.

# PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT

## LIVES

of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. "She was working in a man's world," Lundberg continues. "In that sense, she was a pioneer."

In 1928, the now strikingly beautiful nineteen-year-old with a megawatt smile and a lithe dancer's body was back East in Boston with her aging father, when she was invited to join a dance group in New York City. But then her father broke his leg. Burton changed course to stay home and care for him, channeling her aptitude for drawing into a job as a "sketcher" on the *Boston Transcript*. It was in a drawing class at the Boston Museum School in the fall of 1930 that she met and fell in love with the sculptor George Demetrios, her handsome Greek teacher. They married that spring.

After the birth of their son Aristides, in 1932, the family moved to the Folly Cove area of Gloucester, Massachusetts, a picturesque seaside community on Cape Ann. By 1935, when their second son, Michael, was born, the Depression had taken its toll on their finances, and Burton decided to try her hand at children's books as a way to generate income.

"My first book, *Jonnifer Lint*, was about a piece of dust," Burton wrote after winning the 1943 Caldecott Medal, the Pulitzer Prize of illustrated children's literature, for *The Little House: Her Story*. "My friends and I thought it was very clever, but thirteen publishers disagreed with us, and when I finally got the manuscript back and read it to Aris, age three-and-a-half, he went to sleep before I could even finish it." Characteristically, Burton persevered. "From then on I

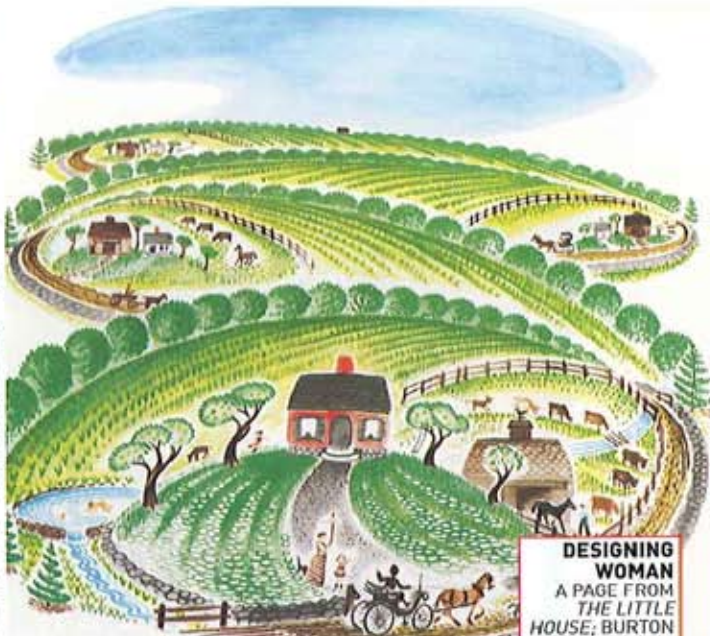
worked with and for my audience, my own children."

The runaway success of her second attempt, *Choo Choo: The Story of a Little Engine Who Ran Away*, published in 1937, launched her career and enabled the family to buy a small 1830s carriage house and barn on seven acres in Folly Cove that the author and illustrator would immortalize in *The Little House*. Burton went on to produce six more books, all but one of which had an anthropomorphized female protagonist in a masculine world, whether a steam shovel named Mary Anne or a tractor-cum-snowplow named Katy, a subliminal but potent feminist message. Says Aris, now 76, "From her books I learned that no matter what is thrown at you, you deal with it and keep going. That theme is all through her work."

Her work as the mastermind of the Folly Cove Designers began in 1938, when a local woman who taught violin asked Burton to give her drawing lessons in exchange for music lessons for Aris. Burton soon became a pied piper to Folly Cove's grown-up set.

With Burton's advice to "draw what you know, draw what you see," her students began integrating the elements of their daily life and landscape into highly patterned, vibrant designs carved onto linoleum-covered woodblocks that could be printed onto cotton and silk. Reminiscent of Liberty and William Morris prints, these whimsical designs, which soon decorated everything from wallpaper to summer dresses, also follow the Morris credo to combine the useful with the beautiful.

The early forties were a period of extraordinary productivity for Burton as she created her best-known books and Folly Cove Designers—by then 25 strong—began retailing its work. In 1944, Lord & Taylor



**DESIGNING WOMAN**  
A PAGE FROM *THE LITTLE HOUSE*; BURTON (AT RIGHT) WITH TWO FOLLY COVE MEMBERS IN SKIRTS OF THEIR OWN DESIGN.

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bought nonexclusive rights to five designs, which they promoted in their store windows and in ads that brought media attention, including articles in *Life* magazine and *The New York Times*, and manufacturing deals with textile firms, F. Schumacher among them. Despite an uncanny ability to tap into what her audiences wanted, Burton had little entrepreneurial ambition. When a New York department-store buyer told her that she could increase profits of the design collective by turning to commercial manufacturing methods, and so be able to drive a Rolls-Royce, Burton replied, "I like my Ford."

After Burton's death in 1968, the Folly Cove Designers decided to disband, donating their sample books and other artifacts to the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester, where the work is on permanent exhibition. The designs are also in textile collections, including that of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Pieces occasionally turn up in estate sales and auctions, where they are highly sought after by private collectors. As Andrew

Spindler, an antiques dealer in nearby Essex, says, "They always get snapped up."

Burton's written works, in contrast, remain widely available. "We cannot imagine ever letting them go out of print," says Betsy Groban, the current "steward of her legacy" at Houghton Mifflin, Burton's publisher, which has sold nearly 7 million copies of her books.

Says Groban, "She was a rara avis in the world of children's books and in the larger creative world—a brilliant artist, a magnificent poet, an idealist, and a feminist, although she may not have used that word, who poured so much of herself into creating enduring works of art, first for her own children and now for ours." □ *pata >160*