

JUDITH LEIBER HANDBAGS

LEIBER MUSEUM



JUDITH LEIBER'S ARTFUL HANDBAGS

By Jeffrey Sussman

There are many highly accomplished artists in a wide variety of fields: painting, sculpture, music, literature, photography, film, architecture, etc.

In the creation of artful handbags, however, there is only Judith Leiber; she is entirely *sui generis*.

Prior to the creation of beautiful handbags that are works of art, handbags had been, at best, stylish and fashionable.

The handbags of Judith Leiber go beyond fashion, indeed, even beyond style. The bags are regarded by highly respected museum curators the world over as works of art. It is why the bags are in the permanent collections of such museums as the Smithsonian, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Corcoran Gallery, and The Victoria and Albert Museum, among various others.

Dennis Kois, the former exhibition designer at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and now Executive Director of the deCordova Museum in Massachusetts, wrote: "Mrs. Leiber's work was shown at the [Corcoran] because she is among the few fashion designers in the world whose work transcends craft and enters the realm of art."

And Dr. Valerie Steel, Director and Chief Curator of the Museum at FIT, wrote: "Judith Leiber is one of the world's most important handbag designers. Her name is synonymous with a certain kind of evening bag known as a minaudiere, which is made of metal or other hard materials and usually highly decorated or bejeweled.

These handbags are often fanciful or whimsical in design, and can take the form of plants, animals, or trompe l'oeil objects. Each bag is hand-crafted and requires several days to complete. A model is sculpted in wax and then cast in metal. The bag is then gold-plated, painted, and covered with thousands of hand-set crystals."

Judith Leiber's handbags have even been compared to Fabergé eggs. In fact, when the great opera diva, Beverly Sills, was asked if one of Judith's bags was a Fabergé egg, she replied, "It's a Leiber egg! And it's just as valuable as a Fabergé egg."

Beverly Sills was one of the most prominent collectors of Judith Leiber handbags; her collection numbered nearly 100

bags, each one a work of art, each created in the studio of Judith Leiber, and each meticulously manufactured with loving attention paid to the smallest detail. Among the Beverly Sills collection are jeweled eggs, butterflies, lotus flowers, bags that were inspired by great 20th Century artists, and several bags that look like leather bound books, all of which Ms. Sills has left to the Leiber Museum.



Fabergé-Inspired Multicolored
Rhinestone Egg with Pearls

1988 • JL0366

Judith and Beverly had been great friends, having met at the Hotel Continentale in Milan. Judith was there on business, Beverly Sills was in Milan to sing. Judith spotted Ms. Sills in the hotel lobby, walked over and introduced herself, for she was a great fan of Beverly Sills' singing. Thereafter, whenever the Leibers were invited to one of Beverly Sills' performances (which was quite often), they presented her with a handbag instead of the conventional bouquet of flowers. Of course, Ms. Sills so loved Judith Leiber handbags that she also purchased many bags on her own, and her husband, Peter Greenough, bought even more bags as gifts for his adored wife.



*Bunch of Grapes-Shaped
Minaudiere with Crystal
Rhinestone & Garnet Lock*
1986 • JL0597 (C.099)

Though Judith created handbags for every First Lady, beginning with Mamie Eisenhower, she developed a particular friendship with Barbara Bush. "She is a lovely human being: kind hearted, warm, friendly, and down to earth," said Mrs. Leiber. Not only did Judith create exquisite handbags for her, but she also invited Mrs. Bush to visit the Judith Leiber showroom to pick out patterns for bags that she would like. "Barbara came to our showroom. She met everyone on our staff, and had her photograph taken with each of our employees. For Christmas, she sent each of those employees an autographed photo of herself with them. She did not have to go through the trouble of doing so, but it demonstrated a kindness and appreciation for people that is often absent in the behavior of prominent and powerful individuals. Barbara is more than thoughtful; she is generous. There is no pretense to her at all." The Bushes subsequently invited the Leibers to dinners and parties at The White House, and after President Bush retired, both Leibers were invited to visit the Bushes in Texas. All of the handbags that Judith had made for Barbara Bush are now in the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library.

The late Pat Buckley, wife of William F. Buckley Jr. and celebrated grande dame of high fashion, was also a collector of Judith Leiber handbags and she, too, regarded



*Anteater Silver Rhinestone
Minaudiere, Decorated
with Onyx*
1991 • JL0335



each bag as a work of art. When Pat Buckley, who had been born in Canada, became an American citizen, Judith made her a special gift: a glittering American flag handbag! It was one of Mrs. Buckley's prized possessions and prominently displayed in her Manhattan home.

Left:

Flower Pattern Fabric Bag with Rhinestone Re-Embroidery with Jet Bead Clasp

1990 • JL0405

Below:

Multicolor Rhinestone Encrusted Gold Minaudiere with Onyx

1994 • JL0422

Not all famous women received patriotic images of flags. When she was First Lady, Hillary Clinton received a special Judith Leiber handbag that had been modeled on Socks, the family cat. It has a deep black body, bright crystal eyes, white chalkstone paws, and all are set off with a cute rhinestone bow.

First Lady Hillary Clinton wrote to Judith Leiber that at an event where journalists poke fun at elected officials, Socks the cat was seated on a table in front of Mrs. Clinton, who could not stop smiling at the cat. Everyone thought that Mrs. Clinton was smiling at the jokes; however, she was smiling not at the jokes (which may have been caustic and satirical), but at the adorable cat in front of her. Such are the mesmerizing qualities of Judith Leiber's artfully created representations of beloved animals.

Among other famous collectors of Judith Leiber handbags have been Mrs. Frank Sinatra, Mrs. Don Rickles (whose witty husband quipped that there was always a Judith Leiber truck full of handbags parked in front of their Beverly Hills home), Mrs. Stanley Marcus, Mary Tyler Moore, Joan Rivers, Kathie Lee Gifford, Lynda Carter, Carol Petrie, Joan Sutherland, Diana Ross, Claudette Colbert, Greta Garbo, and even Queen Elizabeth.

Is it any wonder that fashion designer, Geoffrey Beene referred to Judith Leiber bags as "objects of desire!"

Where did Judith Leiber come from? How did she manage to become the dominant and most admired designer in the world of elegant evening handbags? She did not suddenly burst upon the world of fashion. She went through a long and arduous period of training in Budapest, Hungary, where she was born and raised. Originally, the young Judith Peto was going to study chemistry in London so that she might enter a family cosmetic company. However, having returned to Budapest from London during a summer vacation in 1939, Judith became a victim of history: the Nazis had invaded Poland and so began World War II. Ms. Peto could not leave her country, could not continue her studies. A new path was sought for the ambitious young woman. Her mother had always loved beautifully crafted handbags,



and her father, on his many business trips to France and Italy, often brought his wife the best handbags from the most illustrious fashion houses in Milan and Paris. Judith decided that she would learn to make handbags like those that her father brought home from his trips. She asked her parents to help her get a position as an apprentice



Right:

Ebony Box Carved in India with Italian Hardware, Cornelian Stone Lock & Detail

1981 • JL0355

Below:

Gold Florentined Box with Inlaid Black Satin, Gold Lock & Shaped Handle

1968 • JL0623 (C.149)

in a handbag factory. The name of the factory was Pessl, and it was owned by a Jewish manufacturer. There, Judith learned every aspect of handbag manufacturing, though she first started out by sweeping floors and mixing pots of boiling glue. She was ambitious and hardworking and rapidly advanced from apprentice to journeyman to master to full-fledged expert maker of handbags. She had become a master craftswoman by learning all stages of handbag manufacturing from cutting to skiving to sewing to framing to adding handtacks and polishing. As a result, she was the only woman in all of Hungary who joined the Handbag Guild.

However, life became increasingly difficult under the Nazi occupation. Pessl was eventually closed; its owner sent to a concentration camp. Judith and her father Emil, mother Helene, and sister Eva were confined to their apartment building, most of whose residents were Jewish.

Not long afterward, Judith's father was arrested by the police and taken to a labor camp in Kispest where he was forced to dig anti-tank traps to stop the advance of



the Soviet army into Hungary. Being resourceful and determined, Judith called upon a close friend, Magda Hahn, whose uncle worked for the Swiss Consulate in Budapest. Magda and Judith prevailed upon him to issue a diplomatic pass so that Emil Peto could be set free. Not satisfied with saving her father alone, Judith urged her friend, Tom Baroth, to find the same kind of typewriter that had been used to type the Pass. He was able to locate another Olympia typewriter, and after Emil's name, he typed "and family," thus conferring tenuous diplomatic immunity on the entire family. Knowing how dangerous it might be for a Jew to travel roads patrolled by Nazi soldiers and Gestapo, Judith arranged for a non-Jewish messenger

to take the Swiss pass to the Commandant of the labor camp where Mr. Peto was imprisoned. When the Commandant read that Mr. Peto was under the protection of the Swiss Consulate, he cursed and spit on the floor; but he had no choice but to release his prisoner. Another Swiss pass, a fake one used by Judith, is now on exhibit in the U. S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

By 1945, the Russian army had defeated the Nazis. Their occupation of Budapest was anything but pleasant. Having spent months hiding in the basement of their apartment building with about 30 others during the Battle of Budapest, Judy and her friend Agnes decided to venture out and examine what was left of their neighborhood in an attempt to get one or two tenants for Agnes' family so that they could get some money. They were, at the time, desperately poor and anxious about their future.

There on a street, a few blocks from her apartment, Judith met Gerson Leiber, an American soldier who was stationed in Budapest. He was a member of the American contingent of the Allied Control Commission.

"I was immediately attracted to him, but I was brought up not to talk to strangers. I was with a friend, so she spoke for both of us," said Judith.

Gerson has his own vivid memory of that fateful encounter: "I saw the girl of my dreams! It was love at first sight!"

They had a whirlwind courtship, regularly attended the opera and visited museums and dozens of art galleries. In 1946, the loving couple married. Shortly thereafter, determined to make a new life for themselves, they sailed to America on a Bride Ship (i.e., one that was populated by American soldiers and their European wives). Eleven days later, the couple arrived in New York. Judith was relieved to place her feet on terra firma, for she had endured recurrent bouts of seasickness during the eleven day voyage.

Gerson went on to study at the Art Students League and with some of the most prominent artists of the era. By the 1950s, he was developing a reputation as one of the finest young modernist painters in New York. Since then, his work has been



Above:

*Re-Embroidered Rhinestone
Flower Pattern Fabric Envelope
Scroll & Stones on Flap*

1989 • JL0466

Left:

*Multicolor Karung Envelope
Inspired by Piet Mondrian Painting*

1990 • JL0589 (C.077)





Above:

*Horse-Shaped Multicolored
Rhinestone Minaudiere*

1979 • JL0421

Right:

*Grouse-Shaped Multicolored
Rhinestone Minaudiere*

1980 • JL0423

Below:

*Peacock-Shaped Multicolor
Rhinestone Minaudiere*

2004 • JL0370



exhibited around the country and is in the collections of more than 70 galleries and museums. Several years ago, Guild Hall staged a critically acclaimed one-man exhibition of the works of Gerson Leiber.

While Gerson was developing his skills as an artist, Judith found employment with a highly regarded fashion house, Nettie Rosenstein, where she rose in prominence to the position of top designer and pattern maker. She was the only person on staff who could make all parts of a handbag, whereas all other employees worked on an assembly line, making one part of the handbag and then passing it along to another employee who made another part. Judith's old world training had positioned her as

unique in the highly competitive world of handbag manufacturing.

By 1963, having worked at several handbag companies, Judith was finally encouraged by Gerson to go out on her own. "You've spent enough time working for schnooks," he said. "Now your name and only your name will be on the handbags that you design."



They rented a small loft on the seventh floor of a building at 33rd Street and Madison Avenue. The building's small elevator could accommodate only three people, including the operator. On weekends, when the elevator was not in service, Judith and Gerson trudged up seven flights of rickety stairs to their loft; not a day went by when they didn't

work. Gerson painted every morning, and in the afternoon, he helped Judith. If that meant carrying bundles and boxes of handbags on a bus or subway to Saks, to Bergdorf's, to Bonwit's, so be it. It had to be done, and the Leibers worked seven days a week, fourteen to eighteen hours a day. At the end of their first year in

business, they had sold \$75,000 worth of exquisite Judith Leiber handbags. It was a remarkable beginning, the preface to a long and unique story of success. Hard work was their ethic, and they never rested on yesterday's accomplishments. They were climbing an amazing ladder, and each day, each week, each month, they ascended ever higher, rung by successful rung.

And how did the Judith Leiber metal handbag come into being? She had ordered a metal bag from Italy. Its surface was tarnished and unattractive. How would she turn that poor metal bag into a work of art? Judith decided to decorate the bag with crystals.

The bag was an immediate hit with buyers, and even when metal plating eventually improved, Judith still chose to make her bags unique and beautiful by using a wide variety of rhinestones and other decorative material, including semiprecious stones and even sea shells.

Judith Leiber's assortment of materials was as varied as the colors on a painter's palette. She made bags of silk and of leather, including alligator, lizard, snakeskin, ostrich, and calf. The stones that were used in clasps and frames were all semiprecious: amethyst, lapis, tiger's eye, jade, garnet, agate, malachite, onyx and virtually any other semiprecious stone that one can name. Such were the components for the five collections that Judith created each year, comprising more than one hundred exquisite designs.

The entire process of making the bags took considerable skill, patience, attention to detail, imagination, and unbounded creativity. For example, fabric and leather bags began with Judy cutting a pattern on paper then cutting out the pattern of the bag on the material of which it would be made. The material was then folded, shirred, and quilted. Leather was skived, folded and sewn. Interlinings were attached with a latex machine, and such interlinings could be a multiplicity of fabrics such as horsehair, muslin, paper, flannel, canvas and foam rubber. Most of the work was done by hand, to achieve the highest degree of perfection. Machines were used for those tasks that could not be performed by hand.

A finisher would examine every part of a completed bag, which may have had as many as 130 components, and then polish and buff the surface.

When making animal bags, a wax model was first created. Certain parts were then copied by machines, but others such as ears, feet, and noses would be hand cast and then soldered onto the larger piece. The additions of locks, charms, and hinges were all done by hand. Throughout the entire process, the quality of the handbags was ensured by Judith's supervision and high standards for excellence.

No one produced handbags like Judith Leiber. No one else had the old-world training and skill that made her dreams of handbags into beautiful sought-after realities. The bags are an extraordinary oeuvre, unique in world fashion, a tribute to one woman's creativity, skill and vision.

As a result of all that she has accomplished, Judith Leiber has been honored time and again. She received her first award, the Swarovski Great Designer Award for her innovative and creative use of crystals and rhinestones.

She was the first designer of accessories to be given a Coty Fashion Award, which was quickly followed by the Neiman Marcus Winged Statue for Excellence in Design.

Contributing to that recognition, the Costume Museum of Fine Arts in Houston gave Judith its much prized Silver Slipper Award.



Above:

Multicolor Rhinestone Resting Crane Maudiere

1970 • JL0723

Below:

Pop Art Maudiere with Crystal Rhinestones

1990 • JL0513 (C.072)





Above Left:

*Black, Red & White Art Deco
Patterned Alligator & Ostrich
Envelope*

1982 • JL0507 (C.056)

Above Right:

Multicolor Quilted Karung Envelope

1993 • JL0719

Below:

*Book Bag with Multicolor Rhinestone
in Original Beading Design*

1988 • JL0501



Next, she received the Council of Fashion Designers Award for Accessories. No one created accessories of such originality, elegance, whimsy, and beauty.

And the honors just keep coming: She not only received an honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts from the International Fine Arts College in Miami, but just this summer, she received the ICONOCLAST Award in Handbag Design at The Second Annual Independent Handbag Designer Awards Ceremony which was held at the New York Historical Society. Judith was lauded for creating handbags that have stood the test of time and continue to earn international acclaim.

Finally in their seventies, the Leibers decided to sell the company that they had devoted thirty years of their lives to building. It had become an international powerhouse of creativity and innovation. No other company was able to copy the handbags of Judith Leiber. If you cannot copy or compete, then the next best option is to buy the company. And Judith Leiber Inc. still carries on the Leiber tradition of excellence, creativity, and unique artistry.

Now, Judith and Gerson Leiber have put their creative genius into the Leiber Museum, which not only exhibits a full collection of Judith Leiber handbags, but also the paintings of Gerson Leiber, their collection of antique Chinese porcelains, and other works of art that regularly attract hundreds of admirers.

The Museum, with its acclaimed treasures, is a highly prized resource not only for the East End of Long Island, but also for all those who travel from distant places to view a fascinating collection of art and artifacts in a sublime edifice set amidst an array of beautiful varied gardens, all designed by Gerson Leiber.



Interior photographs of handbags by Gary Mamay

*Cover photograph of Judith Leiber and her artful handbags
by Gordon Munro*



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