The Marriage of True Minds

Gerson and Judith Leiber

THE LEIBER COLLECTION
The Marriage of True Minds

By Jeffrey Sussman

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark...”
—Shakespeare

And the marriage of true minds is what Judith and Gerson Leiber have shared for more than 68 years. Theirs has, indeed, been such a marriage, each of their beings complementing and supporting the other. Without Gerson’s urging, Judith would not have ventured onto creating the Judith Leiber company, which has produced the most artful handbags the world has ever beheld.

Clockwise from top left then center:
Red Karung Triple Decker with Gold Frame, Details, Rivets and Lock 1992
Elephant’s Head Minaudière in Clear Rhinestones and Semi-Precious Stone Detail 1988
Multicolor Whipsnake Tiny Tote with Drawstring 1967
Gold Horse with Jet Eyes & Crystal Rhinestones on Mane, Tail and Hooves 1979
Gold Minaudière with Multicolor Crystal Rhinestone Wave Design & Onyx Stones 2004
And without Judith’s support, Gerson may never have become the acclaimed modernist painter that he is.

And now, perhaps for the last time, the public can enjoy a joint exhibition of 50 years of Judith Leiber handbags and the most recent paintings by Gerson Leiber. This year alone, at age 92, Gerson has created dozens of magnificent abstract paintings, many of which were included in his recent one-man show at the Carter Burden Gallery in New York City.

The Giddy Riot of Spring  
Oil & Graphite on Linen  
60 in. x 50 in.  
2013

Spring Deferred  
Oil & Graphite on Linen  
50 in. x 40 in.  
2013

Manifestations of Spring  
Oil & Graphite on Linen  
50 in. x 60 in.  
2014
Spring's Gladsome Vision  Oil & Graphite on Linen  36 in. x 30 in.  2013
Judith Peto and Gerson Leiber met in 1946 on the war-ravaged streets of Budapest, which had been the site of one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. “It was love at first sight,” said Gerson, who was a G.I. at the time. Judith added that “my parents didn’t want me to marry an aspiring artist, but I was determined to marry him. And I did!”

She and her sister and parents had all survived the war, and Judith was not going to let anything get in the way of her intentions. The Petos had all been on a list of Jews to be exterminated by the Nazis; but they survived through the miracle of a typewriter. Judith’s father had been arrested by the Gestapo and taken off to a Nazi labor camp to build anti-tank trenches. Judith had a friend whose uncle worked at the Swiss consulate, and she and Judith persuaded him to issue a Swiss pass, conferring diplomatic immunity on Judith’s father. The pass was delivered, via messenger, to the labor camp’s commandant, who reluctantly released his relieved prisoner. When the messenger returned with Judith’s father and the Swiss pass, a neighbor in their ghettoized Jew House recognized the typeface on the pass. It had been typed with an Olympia typewriter. He found such a machine in their building; and after the name of Judith’s father, he typed: “and family,” thus conferring diplomatic immunity on the Petos, saving them from extermination. That pass is now in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Soon thereafter, a marriage that would brook no impediments was born, and two distinct creative artists would make their marks on the world.
In this joint exhibition, viewers can see the culmination of the Leibers’ manifold accomplishments that were inchoate in 1946, but took a distinctive shape over the next few years. While their creative skills are entirely dissimilar, their fascination with color, composition, texture, and the need to be productive, creative artists has been a shared passion that has guided and enlivened their vocations for more than seven decades.

**Much To Be Thankful For**  
*Oil & graphite on Linen*  
40 in. x 50 in.  
2014
Judith’s handbags have been declared objets d’art by Geoffrey Beene, and 80 of her artful handbags are in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as in other major museums. In the New York Times, Hilton Kramer, the paper’s former premier art critic, praised Gerson for his mastery and skill of composition and color. Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote: “...there is a beautiful resonance of aesthetic interests between Judith and Gerson, especially in their mutual love of brilliant color and rigorous structure.”

Clockwise from top left then center:

- **Natural Scotch Bonnet Shell with Gold Frame, Lid and Shoulder Chain** 1979
- **Natural Whelk Shell with Gold Frame, Lid & Shoulder Chain** 1979
- **Natural Pearl Nautilus Shell with Gold Frame, Lid & Shoulder Chain** 1979
- **Natural Pearl Shell with Gold Frame, Lid & Shoulder Chain** 1979
- **Natural Lion’s Paw Shell with Gold Frame & Lid, Malachite Stone Lock & Gold Shoulder Chain** 1979
A After Prayerful Consideration
Oil & Graphite on Linen  50 in. x 40 in.  2014

B If Not Now, When
Oil & Graphite on Linen  50 in. x 40 in.  2013

C The Simple Swagger of Spring
Oil & Graphite on Linen  60 in. x 70 in.  2014

D Gladsome Day
Oil & Graphite On Linen  60 in. x 50 in.  2014

E Crimes of A Scuttlebum
Oil & Graphite on Linen  60 in. x 50 in.  2013
Now, through the generosity of the Leibers, countless lovers of art can behold the accomplishments of two fine artists who have complemented each other’s creative outputs. The Leibers welcome their visitors and are pleased to share the pleasures of their collections in their Renaissance-style Palladian museum and the seven acres of surrounding gardens.

The Leiber Collection
He was an artist before he knew he was an artist. From his earliest drawings, there is evidence of a sensitive eye for color and composition and skills that went beyond what most children are capable of creating. Many fine artists exhibit a natural aptitude for creativity at an early age, and Gerson Leiber was no exception.

As he grew up, he knew that he wanted to be an artist; he also knew that he had a responsibility to his poor family, and that responsibility might preclude his ever becoming an artist. If one’s family is poor, then wanting to be an artist may seem like a chimera. How many artists, after all, can support themselves solely through their creative efforts?
Gerson Leiber was born into poverty, the son of an immigrant second-hand furniture dealer and an immigrant, barely literate mother. He lived his first few years in Brooklyn, then the family moved to Titusville, Pennsylvania, a place that held out dreams of affluence, for it was there that John D. Rockefeller had oil wells. Though Gerson graduated with honors from Titusville High School, he was too poor to attend college. During the Great Depression, college for a poor boy was a romantic fantasy. So Gerson worked at odd jobs: soda jerk, newspaper delivery boy, and finally a printer’s apprentice at the local newspaper. He enjoyed learning the printer’s trade and excelled at it. Yet, he struggled to reconcile that trade with being an artist. Yes, the life of an artist would be financially precarious, but being a printer meant security and a steady salary. Reality was a burden to which one adapted. Of course, one could be a weekend painter, but weekend painters are primarily perceived as amateurs. They do not receive the recognition that professional artists achieve.
Controlled Substances No. 1
Oil & Graphite on Linen
22 in. x 18 in.
2013

Controlled Substances No. 2
Oil & Graphite on Linen
22 in. x 18 in.
2013

Controlled Substances No. 3
Oil & Graphite on Linen
22 in. x 18 in.
2013
Gerson had to make a living. Life wasn’t always fair, and one must accept the limitations imposed by reality.

Gerson’s world seemed severely circumscribed. He felt he would never know the greater world, the world where artists flourished, discussed aesthetic concepts, the latest trends, dealers, attended classes, learned new skills. As a boy, Gerson had been out of Titusville just once, on a trip with his father, to Pittsburgh. His parents had no understanding or appreciation for art. That their son would become a printer and enjoy the security of steady employment, believed his parents. The local newspaper, a Titusville institution, would be a secure port in the economic storm of the Depression.

Just as Gerson was settling into his role as printer, World War II erupted. Doors that had been slammed, locked and bolted shut would now open for the young aspiring artist. The military, in its bureaucratic wisdom, decided that because Gerson worked for a newspaper, he should be trained in the army’s Signal Corps. Not only were his newspaper skills considered an important credential, but when the army learned that Gerson had racing pigeons, which had been used in World War I to carry messages, the army knew it had made the correct decision. Gerson, the army believed, was ideally suited for the Signal Corps, where he would learn to be a radio operator.
From Titusville, Gerson’s journey commenced. He went to North Africa, then to Italy and finally, to Hungary. At war’s end, stationed in Budapest, Gerson often walked the streets, shocked at the destruction of architectural masterpieces that stood in the eerie silence that followed one of the bloodiest battles of World War II between the Nazis and Soviets. More than 75,000 Soviet troops and more than 35,000 Nazi troops died in the Siege of Budapest. What had been a beautiful, cosmopolitan city was littered with detritus of war. The air was filled with the acrid odor of dead humans and animals.

One day, while out perambulating the city with a fellow soldier, Gerson met the Hungarian-born Judith Peto, who would the following year become Judith Leiber. “It was love at first sight,” Gerson said. “I knew immediately that she was the woman I wanted to marry.” During their courtship, Judith suggested that Gerson enroll in the Hungarian Royal Academy of Art, which he did. It was there that his talent took flight, his skills were honed, and he was recognized by his instructors as a highly promising talent. He studied there for a year and shared a studio with another aspiring artist. The following year, 1946, Gerson and Judith, married and set sail for New York on a Brides’ Ship, a former Bermuda Runner, which carried hundreds of GIs and their European brides to America.
Back in the USA, Gerson and Judith visited his mother in Titusville. He asked his mother where were all the drawings of nude models he had sent to her from his studies in Budapest. She said, “I burnt them all in the fireplace. They were immoral.” Though Gerson loved his mother, he knew that her limited world in Titusville was a place he had outgrown and it would never be his home again. In New York, Gerson enrolled in the Art Students' League, which he was able to attend under the G. I. Bill. He became a student of renowned artist Will Barnet. After completing his studies at the League, Gerson studied with various masters of printmaking, etching and lithography. Along with several other artists, he formed a cooperative, and they rented a small store in the East Village that they turned into their gallery. It was a financially precarious operation and it soon folded, though not before giving the artists a chance to exhibit their work.

Still funded by the GI Bill, Gerson attended the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, where he studied engraving with Gabor Peterdi, who was esteemed as one of the finest engravers of his time. “I could not have asked for anyone better. He was a superb teacher,” said Gerson.

Gerson was now ready to set up his own studio and a graphic arts shop. His studio was in a portion of a studio run by Bob Blackburn, an African American artist who was, at that time, one of the most admired lithographers and printmakers in the United States. Blackburn had started an informal cooperative for experimenting with innovative lithographic techniques; that cooperative later became the Printmaking Workshop, a focal point where many artists developed their skills as lithographers.
Though busy producing paintings, etchings, and lithographs, Gerson found the time to teach at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts in Newark, New Jersey.

He was proving to be an artist whose work was gaining attention from noteworthy critics. In the New York Times, Hilton Kramer, then the paper’s premier art critic, praised Gerson for his mastery and skill of composition and color.

Within the next few years, museums also began acquiring his work. Amongst the museums that have works by Gerson Leiber in their permanent collections are the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Whitney Museum, the Boston Museum of Fine Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Library of Congress, the Walker Art Center, the Cincinnati Museum of Art, and many others.

Will Barnet wrote that “Gerson Leiber is a painter with full control over his vocabulary of means.” And Ruth Appelhof, the director of Guild Hall in East Hampton, wrote: “Gerson Leiber [is] of one of a pantheon of outstanding 20th Century artists...has explored styles, even movements, with the dexterity of a gifted, extremely self-confident person always expressing his own aesthetic at the core of his work.”

*Squint ~ And Ye Shall Find*  
Oil & Graphite on Linen  
60 in. x 50 in.  
2013
From his humble beginnings in Titusville, where young Gerson Leiber thought he would always be a printer, setting type for a newspaper, he has emerged as an important modernist painter, an inspiration to many other artists. And Gerson has been a generous patron of other artists, for he readily empathizes with the hardships faced by so many talented artists. Indeed, many artists have been helped in their careers by Gerson Leiber, for he well understands how important it is to realize one’s artistic dreams. “Wasted talent is one of life’s worst regrets,” he said. And when asked what advice he would give to young artists starting out today, Gerson said: “If you want, more than anything else, to be an artist, then you must persevere. If you do not, you will always regret that you never realized your dreams.” As the poet e.e. cummings said: “An artist is, and must never be a was.”
Judith Leiber
by Richard Martin, *The Fashion Encyclopedia*

Judith Leiber talks of herself as a technician and prides herself on the Budapest-trained craft tradition she exemplifies and continues. But her skill and the consummate perfection of her workshop are only one aspect of the recognition of her work. She is steadfast in advancing the artistic possibility of the handbag, and she is unceasing in her own artistic pursuits of this goal.

Yet, as Mary Peacock averred, "A sense of whimsy is integral to Leiber’s vision,” as the committed pursuit of craft is matched with a stylish wit and the cultural cleverness that is akin to craft’s creativity. A Leiber handbag is an item of expert handiwork and engineering, but it is also a charm, a potent amulet, and a beguiling object of beauty. Each bag takes six to seven days to create and can range in price from $700 to $7,000. The names of Leiber admirers are far too long to list but include Queen Elizabeth and every First Lady from Pat Nixon through Laura Bush.
Technique is central to the Leiber concept. A Leiber minaudière, for example, might seem at first glance like a Christmas tree ornament but in technique is more like an ecclesiastical censer, an object of perfection intended for long-lasting use. Her watermelon and citrus slices are farm fresh in their juicy handset rhinestone design, but these fruits will never perish.

Cathryn Jakobson, writing in Manhattan Inc. in February 1986, described the sound and impeccable impact of closing a Leiber handbag, "The engineering is perfect: it is like closing the door on an excellent automobile."
Leiber’s product may be jewellike and ladylike in scale, but her collectors are rightly as proud and avid about these small objects as any possessor of a Rolls Royce. There is perhaps one drawback to the Leiber evening bags: they hold very little. But Leiber’s aesthetic more than mitigates the possible problem. If going out is a matter of saddlebags and gross excess, then Leiber’s sweet purses and precious objects are not the answer. But if there is any truthful measure that the best things come in small packages, Leiber’s beautiful clutches make the maxim true. Leiber’s characteristic evening bags, in fact, compound their delicacy in scale with their solid form: these hardly seem, despite their elegance, to be places of cash and chattel.
Leiber has achieved a carrier that is neither wallet nor winnings—it is something intimate and personal. The ideas for her bags come from a variety of sources. Arguably, little is invented ex nihilo in Leiber’s work, but is instead understood and applied from other arts. She acknowledges her love of finding objects in museums and even the objects in paintings that lend themselves to her imaginative formation as the handbag, realizing the capability of an object to serve as a container. Leiber’s version of Fabergé eggs at substantial (but less than Romanov) prices are inherently about containment, but her inventions of the three-dimensional bunch of grapes or the frogs that open up or Chinese foo dogs with hollow insides are her own invention. Leiber has also looked to the arts of the East, especially netsuke purse toggles, for their wondrous world of invented objects and miniatures from nature. Leiber’s first jeweled evening bag was a metal teardrop purse, an ironic play on the soft shape of the purse or money bag converted into a hard form.
Alligator & Karung Envelope
Inspired by Georges Braque Painting
1990

Multicolor Karung Envelope
Inspired by Piet Mondrian Painting
1990

Envelope in Multicolor Karung and Calf
Inspired by Sonia Delauney
2000

Pop Art Minaudière With Crystal Rhinestones
Inspired by Russian Painter Popova
1990
Chinese Foo Dog with Multicolor Crystal Rhinestones
1985

Frog Shaped Flower Pattern
Crystal Rhinestone Minaudière
with Green Onyx Details
1978

Bunch of Grapes Shaped Minaudière
with Crystal Rhinestones and Garnet Lock
1986
Handbags by Leiber for the day employ beautiful reptile and ostrich skins, antique Japanese obis, and extraordinary embroideries. In the daytime bags she uses not only the softest materials and a colorist’s palette, even in skins, but lightens the touch with supple pleats, braid, and whimsical trims and closings. Leiber makes elegantly simple envelope bags accented by a single point or line of decoration.
As attention-getting as her designs might be, the designer herself tends to be understated. As a young woman in Budapest, Leiber narrowly escaped the Nazi concentration camps. She was accepted to Kings College in London and intended to study chemistry, with a goal of developing skin creams. But World War II began, forcing her to remain in Hungary. She instead became an apprentice to a handbag maker, and from that point, her course was set. Alex Witchel of the New York Times wrote that after escaping the Nazis as a teen, “She has considered it a virtue to
avoid the spotlight ever since. It seems only in her designs, whether the rich leather bags for daytime or the lush, detailed bags for evening, that the disparate elements of her own personality find release: whimsical yet functional (a yellow rose of Texas), stylish yet silly (a jeweled slice of watermelon), majestic yet devastatingly simple (a perfect seashell). She is a beguiling contradiction—a rather severe-looking matron with the artistic imagination, and freedom, of a girl.”
Leiber never makes a subservient bag, but an autonomous object that whether egg, minaudière, or piggy, is the finality and finesse of style. In this, Leiber observes fashion as critically and cognizantly as she scours art for her selection of objects, but she never creates a tartan to be coordinated to a textile or a frog or other animal to fit into an established environment of garments. Rather, she creates commodities that enhance dress and create style because they are self-sufficient. Leiber creates objects that are undeniably, despite the creator’s modesty, unique sculptures on a small scale.
“Chinese Pillow” Multicolor Crystal Rhinestone Minaudière 1988

Yellow Pleated Karung Frame Bag with Enamel & Marcasite Clasp 1982

Beige Parsee Ribbon Design with Silver Frame & Chalk Bead Lock 1991
Bone Ostrich Bag with Gold & Plastic Frame  
1988

Camel Ostrich Envelope with Embroidery  
1980

Fuschia Embroidered Karung Envelope with Amethyst Lock & Fuschia Tassel  
1973

Re-Embroidered Rhinestones & Parsee Ribbon on Multi-Pattern Fabric Frame Bag  
1990

Bone Ostrich Bag with Gold & Plastic Frame  
1988
The Marriage of True Minds

Gerson and Judith Leiber

THE LEIBER MUSEUM

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