

THE BAG LADY of PARK AVENUE

BY CAITLIN YOSHIKO KANDIL

the triple-level, double penthouse on Park Avenue in Manhattan has been on the market for two years, with a price tag of \$5.5 million. “Have you come for the open house?” the butler asks when I arrive, and looks disappointed when I shake my head. The apartment in question belongs to Judith Leiber, the designer whose handbags have graced the arms of nearly every First Lady on inauguration day from Mamie Eisenhower to Laura Bush. Her name may not be as recognizable as Louis Vuitton and Giorgio Armani, but her bags have been staples of fashion and pop culture for decades. Her distinctive creations are a regular presence at A-List red carpet events, appear in movies and television shows such as *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Gossip Girl*, and have even earned their own plot line in an episode of *Sex and the City*. “Judith Leiber is not a status symbol and Judith Leiber is not a luxury item,” says Ellen Goldstein, professor of accessory design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. “Judith Leiber is an icon.”

The butler ushers me into an Old World living room brightened by sunlight pouring in from a 30-foot floor-to-ceiling cathedral window. Sophisticated but not showy, the furniture is dark-wood European, set off by an eclectic mix of vivid oil paintings, blue and white Asian ceramics and Hindu and Buddhist sculptures. Leiber rises from the sofa to greet me. Even at 90 years old, her skin is flawless. Her short white hair is

streaked with gray; she wears no make-up, just a few modest rings on her left hand and a monochromatic outfit—a black turtleneck sweater, black pants and black flats.

A Hungarian-born woman who spent World War II hiding in a Budapest basement, she possesses a European formality. I join her on the couch and as we talk, she makes little eye contact and her words betray little of her inner life. For a designer known for her glittering and whimsical creations, her simplicity and reserve are striking. Throughout our conversation—as though we were not seated in the safety of her New York apartment but still in war-torn Europe—she returns repeatedly to one short sentence: “We are lucky to be alive.”

JUDITH LEIBER WAS BORN JUDITH PETO IN 1921 to an upper-middle class Jewish family in Budapest at the end of what is sometimes called the “golden era” of Hungarian Jewry. From 1867 to 1918, Jews, particularly those living in Budapest, flourished as businessmen, bankers, lawyers and traders and enjoyed the state’s official recognition of Judaism as a religion. “No other country in Europe had been as hospitable to Jewish immigration and assimilation, and no other country had won more enthusiastic support from its Jews than the Hungarian kingdom,” writes Columbia University historian István Deák in his 2000 book, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*.



Her father, Emil Peto, was a commodities broker who spoke five languages—Hungarian, Italian, French, German and English—and traveled frequently throughout Europe, while her mother, Helene, was a homemaker. “Her family story could be told time and time again,” says Tim Cole, a historian at the University of Bristol in England. “There is some anti-Semitism, but there’s a lot of assimilation on the part of Hungarian Jews, who saw themselves as really patriotic Hungarians.”

The political and social landscape began to shift in 1920 when the Hungarian government adopted the first anti-Jewish policy in Europe—a *numerus clausus* [closed number] act that restricted Jewish enrollment at institutions of higher education. Historians attribute the change to growing nationalism inside the country after the dramatic redefinition and reduction of Hungary’s borders in the wake of its World War I defeat, and the rising tide of fascism. “Jewish people were always separate,” Leiber says of pre-World War II Budapest. “We didn’t have too many non-Jewish friends—mostly it would be your own group of people.”

For Judith, a gifted student, who, like her father, spoke five languages, the law meant she could not attend university in Hungary. Instead, her parents made arrangements for her to go to King’s College in London, where they thought she would be safe if war broke out again. They urged her to study chemistry as a foundation for a career in the cosmetics business, and she agreed. “I could have been Estée Lauder,” she remarks. In 1938, at the age of 17, Judith set out for London, where she took classes to prepare for the King’s College entrance exam. She enjoyed London—where she tried Chinese food for the first time, watched American movies and frequented nightclubs—and spent nearly a year there before returning home in 1939 for the summer.

But before she could head back to London for the fall semester, Germany

invaded Poland, and war broke out. Her parents wanted her to return to London—even though the route would have been circuitous and dangerous—but Judith stayed in Budapest, not wanting to separate from them and her older sister, Eva. With a new anti-Jewish law restricting the number of Jews in certain professions, the Peto girls turned to trades—Eva trained to become a pastry chef and Judith turned to handbags, at the recommendation of her parents. “Hitler put me in the handbag business,” Leiber told writer Enid Nemy for her 1995 book, *The Artful Handbag*.

Handbags were a fairly new addition to woman’s fashion. Due to the Industrial Revolution and the increased popularity of railway travel, women had greater mobility outside the home and needed larger, sturdier bags to hold their belongings. The word handbag emerged to describe the new form of handheld luggage, which fashion historian Caroline Cox writes in her 2007 book, *The Handbag: An Illustrated History*, was “indispensable,” since “women’s clothes are very rarely designed with functional pockets.”

Judith became the first female apprentice in Hungary at Pessl, then the most prestigious handbag company in Budapest. She began by sweeping floors and cooking up pots of glue, working her way up from apprentice, to journeyman, and finally, master. “I learned it from the bottom up,” Leiber says. “I learned every phase of how to make a handbag.”

Despite the anti-Jewish measures, the young woman flourished, becoming an expert in making the three types of handbags then popular in Hungary: zipper, envelope and frame. Clients would select the material and design they wanted, and Judith would make it by hand; it usually took her 14 days. “Those bags were so well made that I wouldn’t be surprised if they were still being used by the heirs of those original customers,” she told Jeffrey Sussman, author of *No Mere Bagatelles*, a 2009 biography of Leiber.

I could have been Estée Lauder. [But] Hitler put me in the handbag business.

Beyond Hungary’s borders, war was raging. “When you think about what was happening across the borders, Hungary was an island of safety in the midst of this Nazi occupied sea,” says the University of Bristol’s Cole. “Ironically, Hungarian Jews were relatively safe up until 1944—very late in the war.”

When the Nazis occupied Hungary in March of that year, nearly a half-million Jews living in towns and villages outside Budapest were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz under Adolf Eichmann’s direct supervision. Jews in Budapest fared better. Forced to wear yellow stars on their clothing, they were pushed into yellow-star houses, the name given to about 2,000 apartment buildings, which residents could leave for only a few hours a day. “If you lived there, all the young women were taken to a football field and from there were deported,” Leiber recalls, looking down at her fingernails, then off into the distance. “Many of them became the whores of the Nazis.

“We had a very bad time,” Leiber adds in her typical understated way. “Once the Nazis came to Hungary and occupied it, you couldn’t work anymore. You couldn’t do anything...we were lucky to be alive.”

By fall, a new ghetto system was in place—there was one closed, walled-off ghetto in the Pest section of the city



across the Danube River, and an international ghetto, a series of houses under the protection of neutral powers like Switzerland and Sweden. To get into the international ghetto—which was thought to be much safer—families needed official documents, similar to a visa, verifying that they would be traveling to that country.

When Emil was picked up by police and taken to a local labor camp, Judith appealed to a friend whose uncle worked for the Swiss consulate, and with her help, obtained a Swiss pass for her father to free him. She was eventually able to get additional passes for herself, her mother and sister. “We were very lucky that way,” she says.

Judith and her family could then live in the international ghetto, which provided relative security but little comfort: 26 people were squeezed into a one-bedroom apartment. “Although you were not a citizen, in some ways you were seen to be protected by a neutral power,” Cole says. The exact number of Jews in Budapest who were able to obtain protected status is unknown, Cole says, but speculates, “thirty-thousand-ish.” The Swiss and the Swedes gave out the most passes, and countries like Portugal, Spain and the Vatican also participated. But even the international ghetto could not guarantee Jews safety. “Some of these houses were raided by

roaming gangs of radical fascist youth, and Jews were taken to the Danube and shot by the river,” says Cole. “A thug could just rip up the paperwork.”

As the Russian army closed in on Budapest in December, Jews were forced out of the international ghetto. Some went into hiding, some were taken to labor camps and others—like the Peto family—were taken at gunpoint into the closed ghetto. There, as the Russians battled the Germans in Budapest, the Petos and other Jews hid in basements of buildings to avoid the explosions of rockets, mortar shells and tanks, constantly terrified their building would be hit next. Even below ground, they could smell burning flesh from outside.

Unable to venture outdoors, emaciated from a lack of food and fearful for her life, Judith’s thoughts drifted to handbags. “I tried to fall asleep by dreaming of making handbags,” she told biographer Sussman. “Would it only be a dream, or would my family and I get out of this mess, this hell hole of destruction and find peace and security as we had known it before maniacs decided to wage war?”

Fortunately for Jews in the ghetto, the Russians captured Budapest in less than a month, which Cole says explains why so many Jews survived in the capital. “It was a case of hanging on,” he says. Most of the country’s Jews were

less fortunate: By 1945, only a third of the 825,000 Jews living in Hungary in 1941 were alive.

The Petos remained in hiding in order to avoid confrontations with the Russian army. Their fears were justified—Judith witnessed the gang rape of a woman by Russian soldiers just yards away from her window; and on a rare excursion, she was hit by a shell that badly injured her left arm. Only when the Russians pulled out in April did the Peto family return to their old apartment building in the hopes of regaining some semblance of normalcy in their lives.

Judith couldn’t wait to get back to making handbags. But Pessl no longer existed—its owners had been taken to a concentration camp and were never heard from again—so she asked one of her old teachers from the company to rent her space in his factory. When he agreed, she set up shop, and went into business for herself.

NOT LONG AFTER, ALLIED TROOPS ARRIVED in Budapest. Among them was American radio operator Gerson Leiber. Housing was scarce, says Judith, and “I had a girlfriend whose father was killed during the war, and they wanted to rent the room.” Her friend recruited her to help

LEFT: COURTESY OF VERES, BUDAPEST; RIGHT: ZACH JOPLING; OPENING PAGE: ZACH JOPLING



find a tenant from the new group of G.I.s because she spoke English well. “And that’s how I met my husband,” she says.

It was love at first sight. Like Judith, Gerson Leiber, known as Gus, was 24. For three years he had been stationed in North Africa, Italy and the Mediterranean, and had been in Budapest for only two days when he met Judith. “I thought, this was the gal for me—I’d been looking for her,” Gus says of the first time he saw her. “She wasn’t too tall, she was well-dressed, tastefully. And

THE GRANDFATHERS

They hid in barber shops, in steam baths, and on the benches of small concrete parks, spending their few remaining coins of laughter on each other, swallowing humiliation, like schnapps, in one gulp.

But tears were there like secret tidal pools doomed by salt. Though once they had discarded the villages of their fathers, here they remained strangers, choosing the enigmatic life of fish or bees: silence or that low dangerous hum.

—Linda Pastan

pretty, very pretty. She had great culture and a great love of music.” For their first date, he took her to the opera.

Judith immediately knew she wanted to marry Gus, the son of a shoemaker who had grown up on the other side of the world in Titusville, Pennsylvania. “In 1945, an American G.I. was something magical and heroic,” Leiber told Sussman. “And that was Gus...I just thought he was adorable. I loved his sweet smile and friendly disposition. I was completely charmed, and I still am.”

“It was a wonderful time,” Leiber says of their courtship. But her parents were against the match—he was poor and aspired to be an artist—and they thought he was not right for their brilliant and refined daughter. For once, she stood up to her parents. As she reports, “They said, ‘He’s a poor boy and that makes no sense,’ and I said, ‘I’m not worried—I’m going to marry him, and I’m going to America with him, and that’s that.’ And my parents finally agreed.” The couple was married in 1946, just a year after their first meeting.

Months later, they sailed to the United States on a “bride ship”—a government-sponsored boat for the many American G.I.s who had married European women—and settled on Charlotte Street, a poor, Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, where all the

residents kept kosher and observed the Sabbath, and the men wore black coats and beards. Both of the Leibers were a little shocked to meet Jews who looked and behaved like this—the couple considered themselves secular Jews—but they were delighted to be in New York. “It was our promised land,” Leiber has said. “The memory of the Holocaust was burned into our consciousness, and we were relieved to be away from the land where it had occurred.” Her sister Eva Peto also married an American and moved to the United States shortly after; their parents followed after a brief stint in Israel.

Gus worked and took classes at the Art Students League, and Judith dove into the New York fashion world. Most of the great European couture houses had stopped production during the war, and New York was emerging as the new fashion capital, especially for Jewish designers such as Anne Klein, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Michael Kors, Kenneth Cole and Diane von Furstenberg. Leiber found a job making handbags for Nettie Rosenstein, another prominent Jewish designer. “At the time she was the best in this country,” she says of the designer who invented the “little black dress.”

Leiber excelled, quickly mastering new styles. “She was the only woman doing this, so Judy was a phenomenon,”

says Gus, a spry man with a warm, expressive face. “While many women were working in fashion at the time, most—with the exception of Coco Chanel—were seamstresses sewing clothing,” he explains, “not designing clothes or making handbags.”

Her big break came in 1953 when Nettie Rosenstein was commissioned to design Mamie Eisenhower’s inauguration day dress and chose Leiber to create the matching purse. The small, pale pink clutch, which is now on display at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, is delicately embroidered with pearls and rhinestones. After staying with Nettie Rosenstein for 12 years, she bounced between a few other high-end design companies. In 1963, Gus convinced her to strike out on her own. “You’re not going to work for these shnooks anymore—you’re going into business. You have such good ideas, it’s ridiculous,” Leiber recalls him saying. “I was scared to death, but I did it.”

By then, Gus had emerged as a prominent modern artist in his own right. He taught in New York City and at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts in New Jersey, while creating his own work—oil paintings, drawings, lithographs, etchings and sculptures—which over the years has been displayed in more than 70 galleries and museums across the country. But unlike many men of his time, he was willing, even delighted, to put his wife’s career first, even giving up a teaching position at Ohio State University so his wife could stay in New York City to build the business.

The couple cashed in their savings and borrowed from their parents to rent a small, 275-square foot loft on Madison Avenue that became their first studio. Gus spent his days teaching and his evenings hauling boxes of handbags on the bus to department stores like Saks Fifth Avenue. “He was really wonderful,” Leiber says. Gus eventually became the vice-president of the company, and



learned so much about handbags that he could assemble one from start to finish.

The Leibers have a “warm, loving and mutually supportive relationship,” Sussman says. She is an ardent admirer of his artwork, while he is in awe of her sense of shape, and each provides the other with constructive criticism. During my conversations with her, I notice that she rarely says “I.” It’s always “we”—either she and her parents and sister, or she and her husband. Gazing at Gus, she says, “We struggled very much for many, many years. But we were very lucky that it all turned into such a success.”

THE NEW COMPANY’S FIRST LINE OF bags failed. Customers didn’t like their grayish green color, and the timing was off—the bags arrived in stores in the wake of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination.

Leiber went back to the drawing board, creating new patterns and experimenting with new colors and materials. “Our minds were completely focused on achieving success,” she told Sussman. “We were as focused on that as I had been on surviving the Nazi occupation. That experience taught me how to sharpen my focus and aim at specific goals.” Says Gus: “It was hard work.

Judy worked day and night—at night she made patterns and during the day she ran the factories.”

Producing her bags was time and labor intensive. “We had to go to Europe to get the hardware—the locks, the hangers and metal parts,” Gus says, “because in America, everything was mass produced and you had to buy everything in large quantities.” Leiber also scoured antique shops and flea markets looking for interesting pieces. “She was one of the few people who took antique quilts and objects and created incredible evening bags that were embellished with semi-precious stones or embroidery—no one else would do something like that,” FIT’s Goldstein says.

The work paid off and her subsequent lines of leather and silk day bags “put her on the map” in the fashion industry, according to Goldstein. Then, in 1966, she hit it big, almost by accident. Leiber had designed a metal box purse, but when the samples arrived, she hated them. Instead of throwing them away, she improvised, and covered the metal with rhinestones. “That’s how I started the rhinestone business,” she says. “Up until then, nobody made rhinestone bags.”

Her first rhinestone purse, which remains Leiber’s favorite bag, revolutionized the company, and the minaudière—the name for a small, gemmed purse—

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became the signature of the Judith Leiber company. Soon, half of the company's production was devoted to minaudières, the other half to purses made of more traditional materials; exotic skins such as alligator, ostrich and snake; and even seashells. "She created a jewel of a product," says Goldstein. In 1966, the year Leiber introduced rhinestones, the company sold 10,000 bags; four years later, she sold 20,000, and the numbers continued to increase each year. Her early rhinestone bags cost \$150, and decades later, climbed to \$7,000. The bejeweled bags came with a tiny comb and change purse, and are just big enough to fit a tube of lipstick, a credit card and a \$100 bill inside, because, according to Leiber, women don't need to carry anything else.

After the introduction of rhinestones, Leiber left behind the staid styles of her youth and designed purses as miniature asparagus, eggplants, apples, teddy bears, watermelon slices, puppies and other everyday objects. "Her ability to transform classic shapes, whether they're clutch, box or frame bags—no matter how small they are—into these elegant, beautiful evening bags, was just amazing," says Goldstein. "She really raised the bar and the recognition of a handbag, so it's not just a utilitarian item, but more of a conversation piece and a piece of wearable art." Leiber even dressed her saleswomen in black from head to toe to highlight that with a Judith Leiber bag, the purse, not clothes were the focal point of a woman's outfit.

Each bag seemed more fantastic than the last. Leiber designed one minaudière as a bright blue and green peacock, its feathers spread in a semi-circle behind its body. Tiny red, gold, green, blue and black rhinestones form the detail of the bird's feathers, which are also accented by gems. Another is a baby penguin, its head tilted down toward its stomach and its eyes contemplating its golden metal feet. The bird's back is made of black pavé rhinestones, and its belly decorated with

white gems in a diamond pattern.

The late Evelyn Lauder, the daughter-in-law of the cosmetics giant Estée Lauder, once asked Leiber to design an airplane-themed purse for her son, who was about to propose to his girlfriend on a romantic flight. "She said to make a bag with all airplanes for this girl," Leiber explains. "And her son gave it to her, but in the end he never married her—he married somebody else."

Leiber often found inspiration in the people she met. She designed a one-of-a-kind handbag for Dorothy Twining Globus, former director of the FIT museum, who curated an exhibit of Leiber's work at FIT. "At the opening I said to her, 'My name is Globus, which means globe in German,'" Globus recalls. As a thank you gift, Leiber made her a globe minaudière covered in light blue and green rhinestones. "That's my dressiest bag," says Globus, now the curator of exhibitions at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. "I use it sparingly but proudly."

JUDITH LEIBER BAGS BECAME WILDLY POPULAR in the following decades. Celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor, Pat Buckley, Mary Tyler Moore—even Queen Elizabeth II—wore them. "She managed to come up with a product that rich ladies found irresistible," says Globus. "Women are just obsessed with them."

In a 1992 *New Yorker* article, Susan Orlean describes a shopping frenzy at Saks Fifth Avenue caused by Judith Leiber's in-store appearance to promote her new line of summer bags. "One of her new designs [is] a fat little pig covered with pink rhinestones, hinged at the haunches, and with a grin on its face," Orlean writes. "One woman picks it up and says, 'I've got to have this, even if it's *trayf*.' Another one says, 'Take a look at this, he's even got cloven hooves. Is that biologically right?'"

I tried to fall asleep by dreaming of making handbags... Would it only be a dream or would my family and I get out of this mess?

While high-end department stores such as Saks, Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus filled their shelves with her bags, exhibits of her work also made their way into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian, the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art. "Judith Leiber's handbags are created with such exquisite workmanship and design that they transcend mere accessory. They become *objets d'art*," Stacey Schmidt, assistant curator of contemporary art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, has said. "Almost single-handedly, she has advanced the artistic possibilities of the handbag."

Bucking manufacturing trends, Leiber continued to personally oversee her bags from start to finish. "When I owned the business, everything was done by hand here, in New York," she says, referring to her factory in the handbag section of the garment district in the shadow of the Empire State Building. "What made her so different is that she had to know everything about the bags," Gus chimes in. "In America, everything was mass produced. A framer framed the bags, a cutter cut the bags—which was great for economics, but it dulled their quality and creativity."

IN 1993, LEIBER RECEIVED A LIFETIME achievement award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America—the Oscar of fashion. "I was lucky to win that," she says. Her company was thriving—it employed about 200 employees, produced around 180 new styles each year, and grossed \$74 million in sales per year, making it the wealthiest luxury handbag company in the world. But after creating nearly 5,000 different styles of handbags throughout her career, the couple decided to sell the company—and the Judith Leiber name—to Time Products, a British watch company. Leiber was kept on as a consultant for five years and officially retired in 1998.

"It was nice to sell the business and also painful," says Gus. The new owners instituted several changes to the company. While retaining some of Leiber's original designs, they tweaked others, and created many new ones. The Manhattan factory remained open until 2003, when the company moved manufacturing outside the United States. "The handbag district is all importers now," says Leiber. "No more factories. Everybody makes handbags in China and in the Philippines. I wish that they would come back because that would be much better for business in the United States—there's such bad unemployment here."

Even though Leiber herself no longer heads the company, her name still holds cachet. "Her minaudières, because they're conversation pieces, they never go out of style," Goldstein says. The quality of the handbags produced by the company remains high, says Milton Pedraza, CEO of the Luxury Institute, a consulting firm that researches the consumer habits of the wealthy. In 2008, the Institute gave Judith Leiber LLC a number one rating in luxury, beating out other high-end brands like Jimmy Choo and Hermes.

Celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Heidi Klum and Gwyneth Paltrow continue to

wear Judith Leiber brand bags to red carpet events. In August of 2010, reality television star Kim Kardashian commissioned the company to make black and white handbags for the women in her wedding party, and for herself, a minaudière replica of the wedding cake. "I remember when I was a little girl I would dress up in my mom's clothes and my favorite thing to do was to touch her Judith Leiber crystal bag!" Kardashian writes on her website. "I always wanted one when I was growing up, so to have one of these for my most special day is unreal!"

With handbags behind her, Leiber decided to try her hand at making silver *objets d'art*. Stores like Bloomingdale's and Bergdorf Goodman were eager to stock her products, but unable to use her brand name, they didn't sell. "When I sold the business I sold my name—so I didn't even have my own name," she says. "I could use my maiden name, but the buyers were not happy with that."

AFTER GIVING UP DESIGNING, LEIBER TURNED to a new project—building a museum to house a permanent collection of her bags. The Leibers already had the land—in 1956 they bought a farmhouse in East Hampton, New York—and in 2005 the museum opened its doors. The small building sits on seven acres divided with hedges Gus has sculpted over the years, and a two-acre sculpture garden featuring some of Gus's artwork. The Leiber Museum features about 200 of Leiber's bags, Gus's drawings and watercolors, and pieces from the couple's personal art collection. This summer, the museum will be entirely devoted to Leiber's handbags to display more of the couple's 900-bag collection.

In addition to the museum, the Leibers have also worked to preserve their legacy by creating a scholarship fund at the FIT, and through Jewish-related charities such as the Anti-Defamation League. The Leibers are passionate about Israel and they give generously to various Israeli

causes, and even donated an ambulance several years ago. "Although we don't really believe in the religious part of Judaism," Leiber says, "we are very anxious about Israel."

For now the Leibers split their time between their Park Avenue penthouse and the Hamptons. Leiber's sister, Eva, now 93, lives in the building next door, and accompanies them every weekend to the Hamptons. There, she visits the grave of her late husband, who is buried in a Jewish cemetery just a mile away. The three hope to live in the Hamptons full-time once the Leibers' apartment sells.

Despite her age and suffering a stroke in 1998, Leiber is "remarkably clear-headed, cogent and intelligent," says Sussman. She stays healthy by swimming laps in her pool. "She and Gus are very independent and very self-reliant," Sussman says.

Gus still paints every day. His studio, in an east-facing solarium, shows signs of daily use—drawings tacked onto a board, oil paints, colored pencils and paint brushes spread out over a table top. Judith's third floor office is nearly empty, revealing a career that has come to an end. Just a few stacks of cassette tapes labeled "biography notes" remain. Now she spends most of her time scouring eBay to buy back some of the vintage bags she has spent decades crafting.

"There's an essence of love in each one of her bags," says FIT's Ellen Goldberg. "It's almost like one of her bags is being born and given to you." The comparison is also one that Leiber, who never had children, makes herself. According to a 1970 *New York Times* article, the Leibers often tell friends that their children "hang on walls and from arms and shoulders."

"She's put every creative impulse of her being into those handbags," Sussman says. "As children reflect upon their parents when they go out into the world, so do her handbags. Judy once said, at least her handbags don't talk back." ♡