



JUDITH LEIBER

*An American Journey:
From Artisan to Fashion Icon*

THE LEIBER COLLECTION

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INTRODUCTION

THE MUSEUM THAT JUDY AND GUS BUILT

by *Elsa Klensch*

When Judy and Gus Leiber first told me of their plans to build a museum adjoining their home in Amagansett, I was delighted. Not just for them, but for Hamptons residents and visitors. What pleasures lay ahead for those who would be able to view the work of these two artists.

I have known Judith Leiber for 40 years, and my respect for her creativity has grown so that I now look back in amazement at what she has accomplished.

I first met Judy when I was at Vogue magazine. This is how it happened. On one winter morning when I was working in the office I shared with Vogue's other senior fashion editor, the unflappable Count Nicki de Gunsberg.

We both started when accessories editor Jade Hobson rushed in. Jade was not an excitable person. She was far from the hand-clapping, screaming "It's-so-right-I-could-die" type of fashion editor—in fact she was the epitome of the all-American girl, with long swinging hair and thin model's figure.

Jade's normal manner was as cool as her looks. She was dignified, reserved, and rarely showed great enthusiasm.



The Leiber Collection

But that morning she stood in the front of my desk and leaned forward eagerly.

“Elsa,” she said, “You know Judith Leiber?”

Of course I knew of Judith. She was a rising star. But I rarely went into the accessories market. My job was covering the ready-to-wear designers like Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta and Bill Blass.

“She’s come out with an extraordinary collection,” Jade said. “The bags are absolutely beautiful and they deserve a Coty Award this year. I want to do everything I can to see that she gets one and I need your help.”

The “Winnies” as they were called, were America’s most prestigious fashion awards for more than 40 years. In 1984 the Coty awards were succeeded as America’s top fashion honors by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) awards celebrated each year with a gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



*Bauhaus-Inspired Multicolor Envelope
in Suede, Calf & Patent Skins*
1973

*Bauhaus-Inspired Envelope
of Satin, Leather & Skins*
1973





Red Art Deco-Inspired Envelope of Leather & Skins
1973

Jade herself could not nominate Judith for the award since she was not a member of the nominating committee. So she asked me, as a member, to present Judy's collection for consideration.

I went to Judy's showroom with Jade to see the collection. It was just as extraordinary as Jade said. Judy based the collection on art deco, using envelope or square shapes, mixing colors, geometrics, and a variety of skins.

One bag I remember was a mix of leather and different snakes in tones of burgundy. Cunningly stitched circles swirled across the front.

It was easy to get Judy's nomination at the committee meeting. I held up the bags and got an instant, unanimous agreement. I was slightly upset as I was ready to present my reasons for the nomination. But Judy's bags spoke for themselves.



*Penguin-Shaped
Minaudiere with Crystal
Rhinestones*

1991



*Polar Bear-Shaped Rhinestone Encrusted
Minaudiere with Onyx Eyes*

1992

When Coty announced Judy had won the award a few weeks later she celebrated with a grand lunch at the chic French restaurant La Grenouille. It was the first of our many lunches, and I am happy to say, the beginning of a long and valued friendship.

I learned and admired many things about Judy over the years: the versatility of her designs, the wide range of luxurious and exotic materials she used, her insistence on perfection, and her determination to have it her way and have it right.



*Buddha-shaped
Minaudiere with Multicolor
Crystal Rhinestones*

1987



Elephant's Head Minaudiere in Clear Rhinestones and Semi-Precious Stone Detail
c. 1988



Ladybug-shaped Minaudiere with Rhinestones & Jet beads with Onyx Lock & Details
1989

Some time later, after seeing another collection, I sat in her office before we went to the early lunch that Judy, being an early riser, preferred.

Her assistant came in and said a store executive was on the line with a problem. Judy took the call, and as I watched, Judy the designer disappeared and the businesswoman took over. I don't recall the conversation or what it was about, but Judy took no nonsense and firmly won her point.

There are few designers who understood how women can value a handbag as a practical necessity and also as a work of art. Judy did and women responded by collecting her minaudieres, not just to wear but to treasure.

There is the Los Angeles woman who admired Judy's handbags so much she made them part of her décor; she had glass etageres specially built to display them.



Frog Shaped Flower Pattern Rhinestone Minaudiere with Green Onyx Details
1998



White Satin Evening Envelope With Rhinestone Ornament, Original Bag Made For Nancy Reagan For Her Inaugural Gown

1984

Nancy Reagan is a Judy fan. I had tea with the former first lady in her favorite yellow room at the White House one sunny afternoon to talk about fashion. I remember her explaining about the bags Judy designed to match her inaugural-ball gowns. She held her hands to explain their shape as if she were caressing them.

Mrs. Reagan was obviously sad to have them go to the Smithsonian to be displayed with her inaugural-gala dresses.

I did a number of CNN Style stories on Judy and on her husband Gus, a painter, print maker and master gardener. I showed their work and their treasure-filled homes in Manhattan and the Hamptons. One of those pieces I am most fond of is the garden story I did with Gus. In stages over the last 50 years he has designed and built a series of landscaped gardens that extend from the rose garden by the house to the museum over in the sculpture garden. He composed them as he would a series of canvases. He knew every plant, when he had added it, and its function.



The Garden



Garden Path

Gardens are notoriously hard to capture on videotape, but Gus's explanations made it easy for my cameraman to work. His meticulous and caring eye had obviously been an influence on Judy's work.

He also taught me something about gardening, and about life. "You can plan what you like," he said, "but in the end nature has its way."

My favorite piece with Judy was when she took me into her factory. I was doing a story on her unique minaudieres. There were so many it was hard to choose. A spotted pig had a gleaming silver body covered with spots of different colors and sizes. Even so, he seemed comfortable in his skin. A growling Chinese dog was covered in a dozen colors of rhinestones, all the same tone but equally brilliant.

I wanted to show how they were finished, so Judy took me into her workshop. One of her skilled craftsmen was using tweezers to pick up tiny crystals to finish the head of the Chinese dog. Gradually she formed a golden highlight above the dog's black eye.



*Chinese Foo Dog with Multicolored
Crystal Rhinestones*

1985



*Pig-Shaped Minaudiere with Rhinestone
Flower Pattern & Green Onyx Nose*

1982

"I design the shading and highlighting so that every crystal counts," she explained. "It's the way to make it perfect."

That is the Judith Leiber I know and respect. She made fashion history with her exquisite designs. As I was, you will be overwhelmed by the beauty of her collection. Enjoy it.



*Gold Scroll Pattern Metal Envelope
Minaudiere with Rhinestones*

1969

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.



Snake Decorated Oval Box with Rhinestones
(front view)

1984



back view



*Fabergé-Inspired
Multicolored Rhinestone
Egg with Pearls*
1988

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."



Watermelon-Shaped Pillbox
1991

Lemon-Shaped Pillbox
1991



*Bunch of Grapes-Shaped Minaudiere with
Crystal Rhinestone & Garnet Lock*

1986



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,



*Butterfly-Shaped Minaudiere in
Multicolored Crystal Rhinestones*

1982

*Obi Fabric Re-Embroidered
with Gold Crystal Rhinestones,
Fabric Handle & Lock*

1980's





*Black Satin Clutch with Penguin Ornament
in Enamel, Rhinestone & Pearl Lock*

1998

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



*Book Bag Minaudiere in Rhinestone Pattern
inspired by Charles Rennie Mackintosh*

1994

*Pop Art Minaudiere with Crystal Rhinestones
Inspired by Russian Painter Popova*

1990





Alligator & Karung Envelope
Inspired by Georges Braque Painting
1990



Multicolor Karung Envelope
Inspired by Piet Mondrian Painting
1990



Sonia Delauney
Envelope in Multicolored
Karung and Calf
2000

*Black Satin
Chinese Handwarmer*

1981



*Triple Decker with Inro Design in Crystal
Rhinestones & Jet Beads*

1989

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.

Handbags by Leiber for the day employ beautiful reptile and ostrich skins, antique Japanese obis and extraordinary embroideries. In the daytime bags



*Original Chatelaine, The First Metal Bag
Designed by Judith Leiber*

1967



*Orange Pleated Ostrich Bag with
Gold & Multi-Stone Bar on Frame*

1982

*Natural Python Boxy Frame Bag
with Gold & Self Handle*

1978

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.

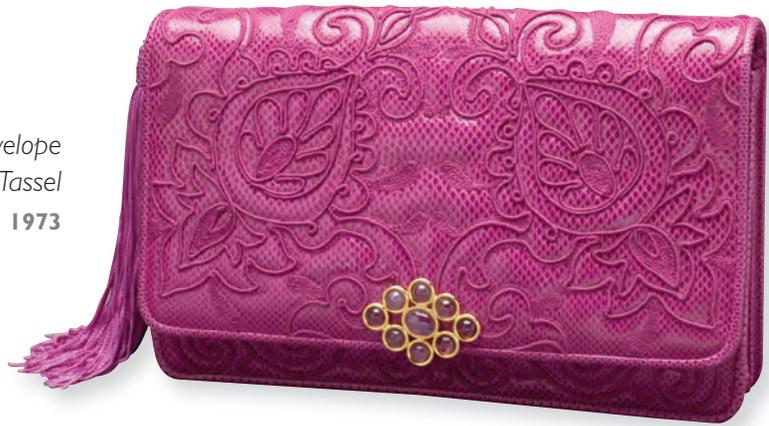
*Orange & Pink Obi Fabric
Re-Embroidered
with Crystal Rhinestones*

1979





*Camel Ostrich Envelope
with Embroidery*
1980



*Fuschia Embroidered Karung Envelope
with Amethyst Lock and Fuschia Tassel*
1973



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

*Bone Ostrich Bag with
Gold and Plastic Frame*
1988



*Rust Pleated Karung Bag with
Gold Frame & Onyx Lock*
1983



*Off White Pleated Alligator Frame
Bag with Green Onyx Lock*
1979

*Beige Parsee Ribbon Design
with Silver Frame &
Chalk Bead Lock*
1991





*Black Patent Mini Envelope
with Enamel Watermelon
Ornament Lock*

1989

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."



*Beige Karung Frame Bag
with Rhinestone & Pearl Shrimp Lock*

1989



*Watermelon-Shaped
Minaudiere with Crystal
Rhinestones & Onyx Details*
1991

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.

*Natural Nautilus Shell with Gold
Plated Lid and Drop-in Chain*
1979





*Gold Florentined Miser's Bag
Minaudiere with Rhinestones*
1991



*Purple Gathered Karung Bag with Scalloped
Gold Frame & Semi-Precious Stones*
1972



*Black Calf Double Decker
with Gold Acorn Clasp*
1980

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