



Judith Leiber

Line and Shape



THE LEIBER COLLECTION

Judith Leiber : Line and Shape

“I was determined to make my bags as beautiful as possible in line and shape, without ever compromising on materials and workmanship. I have never swerved from that goal”

Judith Leiber

I grew up in Budapest, Hungary. My father used to work for the Kereskedelmi Bank, where he was a general manager, and he was very, very successful. He did a great deal of traveling at that time. He used to go to the West, to Spain and France and England and Italy, and he was a great businessman. Eventually he retired from banking and went into the jewelry business.

My mother never worked. She was a housewife. She used to play bridge with her friends and she played tennis in the summertime. She also worked on our education, my sister Eva's and mine, and she was very successful at teaching us. We had a very nice apartment in Pest. It was large and had beautiful furniture. Eva and I had our own bedroom, which was next to my parents' bedroom. My father loved Persian carpets, and we had many. We were very fortunate.

When I was a girl, my mother had a lot of very good handbags because my father used to buy her nice bags whenever he went to the West. Every time he came home he brought her a beautiful bag. She kept them in a closet, and she wore one every day. She had a brown alligator and she had a red leather bag. Some of the bags were from Vienna, where my mother was born and raised. Others were from Italy, and from Spain, and England. She had a lot of different bags. I liked them. They looked very good.

I went to elementary school and high school in Budapest. Our elementary school was very close to the apartment, and our high school was bit farther away. The high school we went to was a private high school. We were very lucky. We had a very good education.

Before the war, we used to travel west. We went to Italy and France and England. In the summers we went to Baveno which was on the Lago Maggiore in Italy, and another summer we spent on the sea shore near Forte dei Marmi. My father in those days had a business in Milano. My sister and I went to Paris and London, and we went to many museums. It was already a period when the Germans were very active. Hitler was already in power from 1933. In 1938 Hitler occupied Austria and my two uncles decided to move to England, to London, from Vienna, and my third uncle went to America. He decided to go to Seattle from Switzerland

because he was not sure that Switzerland would remain independent from the Nazis. So he moved to America and opened a pastry business.

I wasn't terribly interested in fashion in high school. I became interested in fashion really when I was in London in 1938. I became very interested in clothing and I liked the way it looked. But still, I had clothes that were very good that my mother bought. When I was young my mother bought all my clothes, of course.

I never finished high school. My parents sent me to England in 1938 at 17 to take the Matriculation Exam, the university entrance exam, for King's College in London. I was going to King's College to study chemistry so I could go into the cosmetics business. I went to London, all by myself. I sensed it was time to go. I travelled right through Germany, then I went to Dover and then took a train to London where one of my uncles picked me up. I passed the Matric and was registered at King's College but unfortunately, I never got to go. I came home from London for the summer and then the war broke out on the 1st of September, 1939, and I couldn't get back anymore. I stayed in Budapest with my family. Hungary had become a German ally and had declared war on America. All the young men were taken to Russia for the labor battalion, but my mother, sister and my father were able to stay together and stay in our apartment, at first.

During the war we suffered quite a bit, but we were lucky. We survived. The lives of Jews were severely limited and the Hungarian Government had a policy that prevented Jews from going to University. But I wanted to do something, so my parents helped me get an apprenticeship with a Jewish Handbag manufacturer named Pessl. I learned everything about making handbags there. I could do the patterns, I could do the sewing, I could do the framing. I could do everything to make a handbag. I became a master handbag designer and entered the Hungarian Handbag Guild. I was the first woman ever accepted into the Guild. So first I was an apprentice then I became a journeyman and then I became a master, and I could work on everything, I could complete it all.

I was also the first female apprentice ever. I was the first girl

to try to learn the trade. I was about 18 years old at the time. In the beginning they wanted me to do errands that I didn't want to do. I really wanted to learn the trade. So after they sent me out on an errand the second time, instead of doing the errand, I went home for lunch, because I didn't like the idea. So after that, they never sent me out on errands again, and I learned the trade, which was the right idea. They thought since I was a girl, I couldn't learn the trade. But I showed them.

One of my first jobs was to set up the glue in the morning. In the beginning, I worked on mirrors that had a leather back on them. I put the leather on the back with paste and then on the front of it I put newspaper and on top of the newspaper there were the pieces of leather that I turned over then cut off where the mirror was visible.

I used to make a pattern for a little purse that belonged in the handbags. I made the pattern then sewed up the piece of leather or silk, turned it over and then framed the purse. This is how I learned pattern making. I did this for a short time. Then I worked on the linings, then I worked on the outsides of the bags. I learned the trade from the bottom up. I learned everything! I could make my own pattern and I could then make the entire bag.

I used to work with Mr. Szucs. He was the master and there were several apprentices. He was the best pocket book maker they had. Before the war he went to Spain for a few years, then he came back to Pessl, and much later, he came to work with us in New York. One boy who was an apprentice with me in Hungary, and became a Master as did I, many years later ended up coming to America too and he worked for me. He was a very skilled pattern maker. For many years I made all the patterns myself, but as our business got bigger, he helped me with the patterns.

It took a couple of years to become master, and I kept working at Pessl. Then the war got worse in Budapest. Times got so bad that you couldn't work. They wouldn't permit Jews in the streets, or sometimes only for certain hours. When times got bad, you couldn't get leather anymore. Leather was only for the military. You were lucky to get anything. Nothing was available. I used to make bags out of the strips or bands of burlap that were used for upholstery of furniture. I made a few envelopes this way, but you couldn't work, really.

Then we had to evacuate our apartment and we moved to a house that was closer to the Danube. It was behind the Isle of Margaret. We lived there for a while. When we moved, my mother took eggs in vinegar and a lot of flour, and she took fat, all that she could take with her, and she brought all that

to this house. We couldn't go out of this house. All of us had to stay in there, you couldn't get out. But you know, we used to have a maid who would come and visit us there. She was not Jewish. She was a farm girl, a servant. She couldn't even bring anything to us either. Everything was restricted. But she came to visit. Food was very scarce. We could buy food but there wasn't much around. There was an Italian family who lived in our apartment building on the 3rd floor. Once a horse was killed on the street outside our apartment building, and the Italian lady and my mother went out with two knives and got the horse meat and cooked it so we could eat.

In March of 1944 the Germans came in and they took my father off the street and took him to a work camp. He was taken to Kispest, a suburb, to dig trenches against the Russians. He built tank traps. It was pretty awful.

Eva and I went to live at the Jewish Community Center because in August of 1944 they took all the girls. Girls were taken to a stadium and from the stadium they were taken to Poland and many of them became whores. That was the only way they could survive. We went to the Jewish Community House in order to avoid that, and Mommy stayed by herself in the apartment.

A friend who lived in the Community House with us was able to get a Swiss Pass for my father, so luckily, he got out of the Labor Camp. My friend's uncle was working in the Swiss legation, and through him, we got this paper for Daddy. Our Swiss credentials were forged. A young boy that lived in the apartment building with us, Thomas Baroth, noticed that the pass was typed on an Olympia type writer, and he located one and added the words, 'and family' after my father's name, so we would all be saved. My mother got the paper and sent the postman to the camp where Daddy was and got him out, and he came to the Swiss House.

Eva and I were at the Swiss House already because in October, my Uncle Felix, who later was killed by the Nazi's, sent a soldier for us and the soldier brought us to the Swiss building. It was Swiss protected. Uncle Felix was the head of the largest textile manufacturing factory in Hungary, so he had influence. He was my father's brother.

My boyfriend at the time, Carl Rose, took my mom to the Swiss House. He used a push cart and took all of her things in the little cart while she hid underneath her belongings.

Carl Rose had escaped the fate of the other young Hungarian men who were put into labor battalions by the Germans. They took these labor battalions and they used them, they drove them into the mine fields in Russia to clear them. Most of the young men were killed.

So, we all moved to a Swiss building. There were 26 of us living in a one bedroom apartment in that Swiss building. Everyone slept on mattresses on the floor. In that Swiss house I would design handbags in my head to keep sane during all of the bombing and gunfire. In a way Hitler made me a handbag designer.

We stayed there until Dec of 1944 when the Hungarian Nazis emptied the Swiss house and moved us to the ghetto. All the people that lived in that Swiss House they moved to the ghetto, even though we all had Swiss protection, it didn't matter. The Hungarian Nazi's walked us to the ghetto from the Swiss House. There was a big synagogue there and the whole area was walled off. I would design in my head there too. It was survival. There were gunshots and bombing all day and night. It was a huge battle. We were down in the cellars. It was utter chaos but I was able to keep sane by designing many handbags in my head. And we survived. We were in the ghetto from December until January when the Russians conquered Pest. During war times, things were very difficult.

At The Battle of Budapest, the Russians broke through and liberated the Jews from the ghetto. They killed and captured the Germans and the Hungarian Nazi's and opened the ghetto and let the Jews go back to their homes. We were finally able to go back to our apartment building. Our home was intact, but the windows were all broken out and there was no heat. The entire building was a mess. So we lived in the basement after the war until we could live upstairs again. Everyone from the entire building lived in the basement. There were around 60 people living together in the basement until the windows could be fixed. The man who worked on my father's vineyard and took care of things there came and brought us food, so we were able to eat.

No one lived in our apartment while we were gone, thankfully, and all of our belongings were still there. It was all there. It was very lucky, because the Red Army, the Russians, fought all over the city and they looted. The Russians had such a primitive life in Russia. They did not know about Persian carpets. They would cut them up and put them in their trucks, their American supplied trucks. Pieces of these great carpets were in the Russian trucks. But luckily all our belongings were safe.

Daddy had a big batch of watches that he gave to a man who worked for him for safe keeping, but that man said the Russians took them. Daddy lost his entire stock of jewelry, which was not unusual. Things were looted, and smashed. Half of the buildings were destroyed because of the shelling and the fighting that was going on.

After the war was over, I began to make bags again. The master pocketbook maker I had apprenticed with, Mr. Szuis, opened his own shop and I worked with him. He was great! He could do everything! That is how they did it in Old Europe. In America there were specialists with different people doing different things. But the old European way was that they knew how to do the whole process.

The Americans were flown in from Italy and Gus came with them. He stayed in a pension down the street from our apartment. I met him a few days after he arrived in Budapest. He was standing in front of the pension with a couple of friends. My girlfriend, Agnes Baroth and I walked up to them because she had a big room in her family's apartment with windows still intact, and they wanted to rent it out to an American, hopefully an American General. I did the talking because I spoke English. Gus asked me to go to the opera with him, and we started going out together and had a great time. After a year of courting, we married in my parents apartment.

After the war Gus studied art, at the Royal Academy of Art and in his own studio he set up with a friend, and I made handbags. We got to travel a bit. We went to Paris and London. We went to all of the museums. We often went to the opera. It was a time of great creativity and cultural advancement.

I made handbags for all the American girls from the State Department. I made handbags for the whole legation. I was making bags for the whole year for the Americans. I managed to make pretty decent bags for them. We were able to get supplies again. I made silk, I made leather.

Gus and I went on the bride ship back to America. I had a Nansen Pass, which was an internationally recognized refugee travel document, sort of like an International passport for refugees. We went by train to Vienna, and from there we took a train to Salzburg, then Munich in Germany. We then flew to Frankfurt and flew to Bremerhafen and caught the bride ship. That is how I came to America. My parents could only go to Israel so they went there and stayed in Tel Aviv where my mother had a cousin. Later they were able to come to America and so did my sister, Eva. We all survived and we were all together in New York.

When I arrived in America, I got a job working in a factory that made very inexpensive handbags. I was supposed to work on an electric sewing machine, and I was only used to a foot treadle so I couldn't do it and they kicked me out. I went to the national authority for the handbag industry. The president was Mr. Berkowitz and he said "You know in

America everything is different. Here each operation is done by a different person, it's not like everybody does everything by themselves." And there was a sewing machine operator who said, "you don't belong in this place. You're not working in a place that is proper ". It was a \$5 bag and I came from an area where everything was made by hand. You know it was just incredible, real different . So I went to see the president of the Handbag Workers Association and he told me "You really can do all this?" and I said "Yes, you just send me wherever you want and I will do it."

So he sent me to Nettie Rosenstein which at that time was the finest handbag company in America. I worked there for around 12 years, and in the end, before the business was closed, I was making much more money that I ever made before. And I ran the factory too, the whole thing. Usually only men were in the trade. The few women were only helpers. When I came to the States, there were no women doing handbag designs, pattern making. Since I knew the whole process, everything about it, I became a pattern maker. In the early 60's they closed the factory. The owner wanted me to become his contractor, but I didn't want to do that, so I had to find a job.

I went to Richard Koret. Koret was at that time a very fine handbag maker. I worked there for about 6 months and then I was approached by Morris Moskowitz who wanted to offer me more money, so I moved. I went there and was there for a couple of years, and then their business got very poor and 'last hired, first fired', that's what happened to me. I was the last pattern maker that they hired, which meant that I would be the first one fired when they had a bad year.

Gus said, you're not going to work anymore for anybody else. You are going into business for yourself. And Me, Crazy Judy, I was scared to death, but we went into business. We had a very tiny loft, only about 240 square feet, on Madison Avenue, right around the corner from 33rd Street, and we had four workers. Now, I could make things the way I wanted to.

So we established Judith Leiber Handbags in April of 1963. We worked very hard but achieved great success . We found support from the top department stores very quickly. Bullocks Wilshire in L.A. was our first customer. Then all the top department stores in New York City followed. Bonwit Teller, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf's, Bendels, Neiman Marcus, Macy's, Gimbels, and others. We also sold to exclusive boutiques, lots of boutiques all over the country. Orders were light at first but they increased rapidly. I was very lucky and Judith Leiber Handbags was a huge success.

I made patterns every single day of my life as long as we were

in business. I always did. Every day I was working on something. Sometimes it looked good or sometimes it was no good and I threw it away.

When we went to Europe we went to all the museums in all the cities we went to, and saw all kinds of things. It may not have been actually something that looked like it could be a bag, but we thought of things that could be used and we did a lot of thinking like that.

Once I made bags in America and I would send pictures of them back to Mr. Szuis, he was very impressed, because they were very different than what they had over in Hungary.

We made so many bags, in so many different materials. We made bags in calfskin, cape, patent leather, reptiles, lizards, snakeskin, alligators. It was amazing! You could order six alligator skins and order them in whatever color you wanted.

In 1967 I made my first metal bag. I wanted to make a metal bag that the women didn't have to go to the bank to take out of their safety deposit box. So I made it in brass and it was gold or silver plated. I had these metal bags made in Italy and when they came back to my factory in New York City, they were all stained at the bottom. I didn't want to send them back and lose money, so I had to come up with a solution to save the bags. I decided to cover the stained metal with crystal rhinestones. It was a huge success and this was the start of the whole rhinestone bag industry.

I made many metal bag designs. People loved them, and still do. Some people collect every metal bag I ever made and many of the skins and fabric ones as well. Beverly Sills collected them. We met her in Milano. We stayed in the Continentale on the Via Montzoni and she stayed in the same hotel. She walked in with her manager, and me, I ran over to her and I started talking to her. And after we came back to New York we went to the City Opera and instead of a bouquet of flowers, I brought her one of my bags, a beaded metal bag. And she loved it! And we then gave her things very often, and leather bags once in a while too, but mostly beaded bags. We were very good friends.

I designed bags for many First Ladies. The first one I designed was for Mamie Eisenhower. I designed her bag for her husband's inaugural ball when I worked for Nettie Rosenstein. Nettie made her dress and I designed the pattern for her bag and I put it together. It was very beautiful. After I went into business for myself, I made bags for Mrs. Ladybird Johnson, Mrs. Pat Nixon, Mrs. Hillary Clinton, Mrs. Barbara Bush and Mrs. Laura Bush. It was just wonderful. I even made a little bag for Chelsea Clinton.

My bags have always been in museum collections which I am

very happy about. The Metropolitan Museum has 88 of my bags. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has one. The Smithsonian has quite a bit, along with all the First Ladies bags. Those are shown with the dress and whatever jewelry and shoes she wore.

We were incredibly fortunate and Judith Leiber Handbags was hugely successful.

After 30 years of being in business we decided that the rhinestone bags were going to be a big problem because everybody was going to start making them and we didn't like that idea, and we decided, well, it was time to sell. In 1993 we decided to sell our company, and we sold to an English watch company. The man who bought it had a wife who used to come to New York and buy my bags at Bergdorf Goodman for her friends and for herself and she said, "You should buy that company". So we negotiated with him and we eventually sold it to him.

When we sold the business we had 200 workers making over 25,000 handbags a year. It was incredible. I stayed on for five more years while the new management learned the ropes and then I came back to design special bags from time to time. The last handbag I designed was in 2004. It is the Peacock Minaudière and is a favorite.

It was my husband who wanted to have the museum. He was very anxious to do it. He said we need to leave a record of what I did. So Gus said he'll build a museum. And we built a museum.

Gus: 'Well, we always felt that in our business we produced the finest bags that could be made, as well as the most beautiful. So, no museum of handbags that we could build could be less than beautiful. So we built the museum to what were the highest standards that we could afford, and I believe it shows. Great parquet flooring and fine colors and the feeling of quality which is evinced in our bags.

My wife received awards all over America. I believed that

these pieces shouldn't just disappear as most commercial products do. They needed a home, something that would treat them as works of art. I felt that the museum was the only way to go. And we felt that since they were, we believe, works of art and would in the future be a sort of a template, or examples for future generations of handbag manufacturers and fashion followers, and historians, particularly historians, that the museum should be of the highest quality and the exhibition areas the same.

I became influenced by the great architects of Europe and the great garden makers, and one of the features of English gardens, the old ones, are these temples that are scattered about. At the Great Gardens of Stowe in England there are classical temples dotted here and there.

I believe the museum is pretty much an outgrowth of those famous little temples that are on the grounds of the very large gardens in England. We visited a lot of gardens and famous houses. When we bought a summer house out here in Springs in East Hampton in the early 50's, I immediately started a sort of a flurry of activity, and it developed into an almost encompassing, overwhelming desire to garden, or to landscape. It was definitely an overwhelming thing. I used to drive out from New York just to spend a couple of hours raking in the spring. We started out with 1 and 8/10ths acres and expanded that and bought a piece and added it on, and then again and again, and so finally we have about 6 and 1/2 acres.

One thing that I felt was necessary in a garden was decorative objects, like statuary. I felt that very early on. I really like the civilized look of a garden. It's a great contrast really to the shrubs and the lawns. I just enjoyed it continuously and completely."

Judith: Our museum, The Leiber Collection, is located in the East Hampton hamlet of Springs. We do hope you will come visit us and see what we're up to now.

*Peacock Minaudière with Multicolor
Crystal Rhinestones and
Semi-precious Stone Details*
2004





*Classic Frame Gold Kid Bag
with Re-embroidered Persian
Fabric with Green Agate
Buddha and Coral Details*
1988

*Turquoise Karung Envelope
with Embroidery*
1980



*Cream Patent Leather Envelope
with Flower Motif Embroidery*
1979

*Bone Cape Re-embroidered
Flower Pattern Ribbons
with Multicolored Crystal
Rhine-stones and Chalk
Bead Details*

1965



*Red, Green, Black and White Crystal
Rhinestone Tartan Patterned Gold Satchel*

1992



*Black and Clear Crystal
Rhinestone Minaudière
with Onyx Lock and Semi-
Precious Stone Details*

1977



*Envelope with Flower Patterned
Japanese Obi Re-embroidered with
Multicolored Crystal Rhinestones with
Onyx and Rose Quartz Ornaments*
1972



*Purple Calf Envelope with
Karung and Calf Details*
1975

*Hollywood Minaudière with
Black and Clear Crystal
Rhinestones and Onyx Lock*
1978



*Gold Sea Shell Minaudière with Crystal
Rhinestones and Ruby Detail*
1979



*Natural Sea Urchin Shell
with Gold Frame, Lid and
Shoulder Chain*
1979



*Natural Lion's Paw Shell with Gold
Frame & Lid, Malachite Stone Lock &
Gold Shoulder Chain* **1979**



*Snake Decorated Oval Box
with Crystal Rhinestones
(front view)*
1984



(back view)

*Gold Minaudière with Multi-
color Crystal Rhinestone Wave
Design & Onyx Stones*
2004



*Original Chatelaine,
The First Metal Bag Designed by Judith Leiber*
1967



*Envelope in Multicolor
Karung and Calf
Inspired by Sonia Delauney
2000*



*Multicolor Karung Envelope
Inspired by Piet Mondrian Painting
1990*



*Black Patent Leather
Mini Envelope with
Enamel Watermelon
Ornament Lock
1989*

*Bunch of Grapes
Shaped Minaudière
with Crystal
Rhinestones and
Garnet Lock*
1986



*Penguin Shaped Minaudière with
Multicolor Crystal Rhinestones*
1991



*Tiffany Inspired Rhinestone
Ball Minaudière with
Passementerie Tassel
and Cord*
1980



*Butterfly Shaped
Minaudière
in Multicolor Crystal
Rhinestones*
1982



*Ladybug Minaudière with Red, Jet and
Clear Crystal Rhinestones and Jet Beads
with Onyx Lock and Details*
1989



*Pink Grapefruit Minaudière with Crystal
Rhinestones and Rose Quartz Details*
1991



*Faberge Inspired Egg with
Multicolor Crystal Rhinestones*
1973

*Orange & Pink Obi Fabric
Re-embroidered with
Crystal Rhinestones*
1979



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



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





*Yellow Pleated Karung Frame Bag
with Enamel & Marcasite Clasp*
1982



*Beige Karung Frame
Bag with Rhinestones
& Pearl Shrimp Lock*
1989



*Turquoise Karung Frame Bag
with Native American Inspired
Ornament*
1992

*Natural Python Boxy Frame Bag
with Gold & Calf Handle*
1978



*Silver Florentine Metal Box
with Crystal Rhinestones*
1989



*Black Satin
Chinese Handwarmer*
1981





Gold Horse with Jet Eyes & Crystal Rhinestones on Mane, Tail and Hooves **1979**

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THE LEIBER MUSEUM

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*Taffeta Patchwork Pouch Re-embroidered with
Multicolored Crystal Rhinestones 1991*

Judith Leiber



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