



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

Janet Lipkin

Through May 17, 2020, the Philadelphia Museum of Art *presents Off the Wall: American Art to Wear*, a major exhibition that highlights a distinctive American art movement that emerged in the late 1960s and flourished during the following decades. It features the work of Janet Lipkin. "The exhibition examines a generation of pioneering artists who used body-related forms to express a personal vision and frames their work in relation to the cultural, historical and social concerns of their time.



A major figure in the art-to-wear movement of the late sixties, Janet received no formal training in fiber art! While a Fine Arts Major at the Pratt institute, she explains that although Pratt had a fashion design department, it was oriented toward commercial production and design. She learned to crochet from her friend Jean Cacicedo. Together with her other roommate, Marika Contompasis, Janet continued her crochet exploration with the Pratt friends who were at the beginning of a new kind of crochet: Dina Knapp Schwartz and Sharron Hedges.

After graduating in 1970, Janet went on to pioneer the new 'creative crochet' with her child-like vision: uncensored, unconditioned, unspoiled, ripe with possibility, sensuality, and ritual. It set the tone for the first wave of art

clothing. Working in a variety of media: painting, drawing, sculpture and ceramics, Janet combined crochet with these media, but quickly learned to translate what she had learned solely into crochet. A grounding in traditional disciplines that taught that the basic principles of color, design, dimension, and composition apply regardless of medium. Technique could not be an artistic end, but rather an essential means of achieving freedom to deal with concept.

Stitches were combined in unorthodox ways; and new stitches were created. Janet made wire forms and crocheted around them; she made wooden forms covered in quilted material and crocheted over these. In addition, she combined crochet with beads, leather, feathers, stuffed muslin, weaving and stitchery. Concerned with realizing an image and making a statement, crochet just happened to be the medium she chose



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at that time. She found that crochet could be treated like painting; it was, therefore, limitless in its potential.

Her sense of freedom was born of the climate of the sixties. From the early seventies, Janet devoted herself entirely to clothing, although many of the early pieces were so sculptural that they became artworks in the shape of garments. The purpose was not to create something that could be worn daily, but to transform the body in a theatrical way.

After a period of transition, living in Africa (1976-78), Janet returned home and began to work commercially. Pressed to earn a living, she could no longer find the vast blocks of time necessary to work creatively in the field of wearables. More than two decades after she learned to crochet, this one-time Fine Arts major was a respected textile teacher and had created her own business with 6 employees who worked from her designs to produce high-quality, hand hand-knitted garments from hand-dyed yarn. 'I began to hand knit', explained Lipkin. 'It was a marriage of the texture from crochet and the graphics from the knitting machine. I could communicate a story or an emotion.'



By 1991, she maintains that her work became almost too predictable. The focus on management and on product, rather than process, caused the hands-on feeling of being an artist to begin to fade. She chose to give up her business and changed mediums. Having oscillated between fashion and art, Janet differentiates these fields: 'Commercial work is intellectual, rational; art is emotional.' For Janet, art is about not compromising, but about reaching within for something personal and unspoiled,

for something of the soul.'



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Images:

Bird Coat: wool yarn, wool jersey, crocheted, hand-spun, hand-dyed, appliqued; 1972.

Bone Bag. Wool, metallic, cotton, mohair yarns, crocheted, painted, ceramic & glass beads, wood; 1974.

Russian Majesty: acrylics, mixed media; 25 x 47 inches

Resources:

Alba, Victoria. "Dressing the Body Addressing the Body." *Fiberarts Magazine*, March/April 1996; pp. 41-45.

Schafner Dale, Julie. Janet Lipkin; Art to Wear. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986; pp. 44-53.

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