



Judith Leiber Handbags Capture Attention from a Trio of Museums

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by Anisah Abdullah

Some 54 years ago, [Judith Leiber](#) began her own handbag business in New York City after escaping Nazi persecution in Budapest. Her innovative and luxurious bags have gained worldwide success over the decades, found in the hands of Presidential First Ladies and celebrities. In 2005, Judith Leiber and her husband, the artist [Gerson Leiber](#), built the [Leiber Collection](#) museum in East Hampton, N.Y. to house their works of art and to chronicle their careers.

Now, returning back where it all began, a museum in New York City is currently showcasing her handbags as a window into a personal history while a Long Island museum presents a joint show featuring both the couple's art. The couple's Hamptons museum also presents works by both Leibers revealing their artistic journey through three exhibitions.

[The Museum of Arts and Design](#) in Manhattan presents the solo exhibition, "Judith Leiber: Crafting a New York Story," from April 4 to August 6, 2017. The [Long Island Museum](#) in Stony Brook on Long Island exhibits the joint show, "Brilliant Partners: Judith Leiber's Handbags & the Art of Gerson Leiber," from February 24 to June 4, 2017.

At the [Leiber Collection](#) in East Hampton, a Garden Tea Party on Saturday, May 27, 2017 from 2 to 5 p.m. serves as the opening celebration for the museum's new seasonal exhibition, "Magnificent Obsession—Passion, Fashion and Collection." The show presents works from three passionate Judith Leiber collectors in the Main Gallery. In the Painting Gallery, Gerson Leiber paintings and prints from his "Fashion Series" of the '70s, '80s and '90s will be exhibited. In the Permanent Gallery, special bags from Judith Leiber's collection will be shown. The trio of shows will be exhibited from May 27 through September 4, 2017.

Gerson Leiber's paintings and prints from his "Fashion Series" will provide some visual commentary on the fashion scene that the artist and his wife were a big part of, said Ann Fristoe Stewart, the director and curator of the Leiber Collection.



"Butterfly Ornament with Semiprecious Stones and Crystal Rhinestones on Karung Clutch" by Judith Leiber, 1992. 6 x 8 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches. The Collection of Mrs. Saini Kannan. Courtesy of The Leiber Collection.



“Model in White Gown” by Gerson Leiber, 1981. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches. The Gerson and Judith Leiber Collection. Courtesy of The Leiber Collection.

The exhibition at New York’s Museum of Arts and Design chronicles Judith’s life story, from growing up in the midst of World War II to becoming an iconic designer and entrepreneur. Although not organized sequentially, the exhibition allows viewers to see the different phases of her work and influences she gained along the way through her diverse set of handbags.

“I just really wanted people to see the great variety of works that Judith was making,” Assistant Curator Samantha de Tillio said. “If someone is familiar with her, they’re usually familiar with her rhinestone minaudières, but she was doing so much more than that. I really just hope that people can see the vastness of her influence on the fashion industry.”



“Purple Eggplant-shaped Minaudière with Crystal Rhinestones” by Judith Leiber, 1988. 3 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 3 inches. The Collection of Mrs. Saini Kannan. Courtesy of The Leiber Collection.



Installation view of “Judith Leiber: Crafting a New York Story” at the Museum of Arts and Design. Photo by Jenna Bascom. Courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design.

While planning this season around fashion-related exhibitions, de Tillio found that Judith’s work fit really well with the museum’s theme. She also pointed to other reasons why this was the perfect time to highlight Judith Lieber’s designs.

“I think that at this moment in the greater art and scholarly world, there is a lot of interest in looking at women artists, particularly women of a certain age and kind of bringing their careers back into the fore,” de Tillio said. “There’s a lot of emphasis on women-specific exhibitions right now.”

This exhibition also speaks to the current political climate in the United States, de Tillio said, particularly the divisive issues surrounding immigration. Moving to New York City in 1947, Judith was an immigrant who flourished, developing into a skilled designer and craftswoman through her

business. In the context of Judith's life, her profound success allows visitors to think about how immigrants have contributed to the fabric of American society and culture, de Tillio said, especially in a place like New York City.



Installation view of "Judith Leiber: Crafting a New York Story" at the Museum of Arts and Design. Photo by Jenna Bascom. Courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design.

The [Long Island Museum](#)'s exhibition displays Judith Leiber's handbags as part of a joint show presented alongside art by her husband Gerson Leiber. The couple have heavily supported and influenced one another as artists from their early years together up until today. The exhibition at the museum on Long Island explores the shared aesthetics and themes in their work that one might not notice in solo shows.

"I think that this is a great time to look back at what they've achieved and also to celebrate what they've done, as they are in their 70th year of marriage in their mid-90s," said Joshua Ruff, the museum's director of collections and interpretation.



Judith and Gerson Leiber after their engagement. Courtesy of Judith Leiber.

While showing the strength of the couple's support system, Ruff also made sure to emphasize their independence as artists.

"While they've had a tremendous influence on each other, they're also strong individuals who have had strong individual careers, and in one sense there's a departure as well," Ruff said. "You can't simply say, 'Well, everything Gerson did had Judith's handprints on it,' just as much as you can't say that her handbag career was always influenced by his efforts, but I think it is great to see the two of them together shining."



Natural Nautilus Shell with Gold Plated Lid and Drop-in Chain by Judith Leiber, 1979. Courtesy of the Leiber Collection.



“Simple Swagger of Spring” by Gerson Leiber, 2014. Oil and graphite on linen. Courtesy of the Leiber Collection.



Judith and Gerson Leiber. Courtesy of Judith Leiber.

The approximately 3,000-square-foot, open gallery space features 120 of Judith’s handbags and 54 of Gerson’s artworks on loan from the Leiber Collection, the Smithsonian and private collectors. One of the most exciting features of the exhibition, Ruff said, is the purse that Judith made for First Lady Mamie Eisenhower for the 1953 inauguration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

“It looks really tremendous in the case,” he raved.

Although Judith’s bags and her other fashion creations are often perceived as design, both museums honor Judith Leiber as an artist as well.

“At MAD, we have a much more fluid perception of what is art, what is craft and what is design,” de Tillio said. “There are aspects of all of it, from the quality of her craftsmanship to the fact that, yes, very literally her objects are designed by her, but her work really does go beyond what we think of traditionally as design work, and there’s a lot of artistic innovation in the work that she’s doing.”

In The Hamptons gallery scene, the couple has work included in the group show “[East End Collected3](#)” at the Southampton Arts Center in Southampton, N.Y. Curated by artist Paton Miller, the show is on view from April 14 to May 29, 2017. The exhibition is designed to reveal artists currently working in The Hamptons.

The impact of her handbags on a personal level can be seen when the Leiber Museum’s exhibition, “Magnificent Obsession—Fashion, Passion and Collection,” opens in East Hampton, N.Y. Running from May 27 through September 4, 2017, the show will feature an extensive collection of day and evening bags, belts, jewelry and trinket boxes from three collectors. More than 500 Judith Leiber designs will be on view throughout the museum.

“I am so thrilled to be exhibiting designs that are loved and acquired by these passionate Judith Leiber collectors,” Judith wrote in an email. “These women are highly successful, powerful women and their love for my bags makes me very happy. I am excited that people who come to the Leiber Collection this summer will be able to see designs that we may not have in our personal collection, so they might never have seen them before!”

BASIC FACTS: “Judith Leiber: Crafting a New York Story” is on view April 4 to August 6, 2017 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle, New York, NY 10019. www.madmuseum.org.

“Brilliant Partners: Judith Leiber’s Handbags & the Art of Gerson Leiber” is on view February 24 through June 4, 2017 at the Long Island Museum, 1200 Route 25A, Stony Brook, NY 11790. www.longislandmuseum.org.

“Magnificent Obsession—Fashion, Passion and Collection” is on view May 27 through September 4, 2017 at the Leiber Collection, 446 Old Stone Highway, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.leibermuseum.org.

“East End Collected3” is on view April 14 to May 29, 2017 at Southampton Arts Center, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. www.scc-arts.org.

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