

P O R T R A I T

Judith Baker Montano

CATHERINE AMOROSO LESLIE

Judith Baker Montano grew up near Longview, Alberta, on the Bar U Ranch, now a Canadian National Historic Site. Trained as a painter, she started quilting in 1976. In 1982, she won Best of Show for a quilt at the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede (her great-grandmother, an expert quilter, had received the same award in 1934). *Pekisko Memories*, an appliqué quilt depicting Montano's childhood home made in 1982 to commemorate her Uncle Harry Hays, won a host of awards; Montano presented it to the Bar U Historical Museum in 1995.

Montano has written seven award-winning needlework books, including *The Crazy Quilt Handbook*, *Elegant Stitches: An Illustrated Stitch Guide and Source Book of Inspiration*, and



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The Art of Silk Ribbon Embroidery (Lafayette, California: C&T, 2001, 1998, and 1995, respectively), and is an associate editor of *Belle Armoire*, *Art to Wear* magazine. She teaches and lectures throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and Australia and has taught classes on crazy quilting, silk ribbon embroidery, art-to-wear, and embellishments; in November, she'll be teaching free-form and silk ribbon embroidery on a Mexican cruise sponsored by Quiltworks Northwest of Bellevue, Washington.

Montano's fiber art has appeared at the Denver Art Museum and the Dairy Barn in Athens, Ohio, among other places, and her designs have been published in scores of needlework magazines, including *PieceWork*. Montano and her husband live in La Veta, Colorado.

Catherine Leslie: What is your idea of perfect needlework happiness?

Judith Baker Montano: Being able to create with a mixture of embellishments and techniques without a deadline.

CL: Which historical needleworker do you most identify with?

JBM: I most identify with that renegade needleworker who did not listen to her teachers and lashed out to create something from her heart regardless of the criticism. I guess I have always admired the kid who did not stay within the lines.

CL: Which living needleworker do you most admire?

JBM: There are so many

people I admire and give credit to my career. I most admire Rosie Greer, the football player, because he had the guts to do something he loved and then laughed all the way to the bank. The image of that big man sitting in the locker room doing needlepoint makes me chuckle and shake my head in awe. I also admire Erica Wilson because she promoted herself in the early years and brought a lot of enjoyment to women with her books and kits. I love Virginia Avery because she is a great designer, has an amazing spirit, and most of all because she sent me a letter of admiration and encouragement when I was just starting out. I keep the

letter in my desk and still read it when I am feeling unsure. I have admired Kaffe Fassett for years and treasure his books. He was the designer I most identified with because of his eye for color and fearless mix of print upon print. I actually followed him to the men's bathroom years ago and waited for him to come out in order to get his autograph! We have become friends over the years, and he never ceases to amaze me with his sense of design.

CL: What is your greatest extravagance in needlework?

JBM: My threads are my greatest extravagance. I am a firm believer in the thought that you must have

good materials to produce quality needlework. I work with silk; I hang them on hoops and put them up on the wall so I can see the range of colors.

CL: What is your current state of mind in terms of your needlework?

JBM: I am standing at the crossroads trying to decide which way to turn. At the age of fifty-eight, I feel a great longing to create a body of work such as landscapes and seascapes of mixed media, but on the other hand, I love to teach, and it brings me great joy. I feel I should write a few more books, but that takes a great sacrifice of time. I am now showing in art galleries and selling my

work on my website (www.judithbakermontano.com), and the success of it all has shocked me into action. I am now building a studio and a guesthouse in my backyard so that students can come to me and I can have more time to be creative.

CL: What do you consider your greatest achievement in your needlework?

JBM: Taking a Victorian needlework technique [crazy quilting] and pushing it into an art form. Although totally self-taught and dyslexic, I came up with a machine technique for the base work and over the years have added embellishments. Through my books and teaching, I have opened a door to a delightful art form, and my greatest pleasure is seeing the progress of my students.

CL: What is your most treasured needlework possession?

JBM: I have three: a set of

eighteenth-century English embroidered and beaded curtain ties, a Pakistani cashmere embroidered shawl, and a wall hanging created by Ruth Stonely for my wedding.

CL: What is your favorite part of your work?

JBM: My favorite part is teaching. Seeing that light bulb turn on or seeing a student venture out from the safety net of kits and patterns makes all the hours of travel worthwhile.

CL: What is the quality you most like in a needleworker?

JBM: The bravery to be different and the ability to realize that good needlework takes time.

CL: What do you value most in your needlework friends?

JBM: I value their creativity and dedication.

CL: Who are your favorite needlework writers?

JBM: I seem to turn to the English writers such as Jan Beaney, Julia Barton, Erica

Wilson. I collect books for inspiration, and there are far too many writers to list here.

CL: How would you like to be remembered?

JBM: I would like to be remembered as a good teacher and as a fiber artist. It took me many years to realize that I am an artist who works with fabrics, threads, and embellishments.

CL: What is the most marked characteristic of your needlework?

JBM: The mix of needle techniques.

CL: If you could choose to do any needlework project, what would it be?

JBM: A landscape of mountains and rolling hills, just like the Alberta foothills where I was raised.

CL: What do you most deplore in needlework?

JBM: The make-it-in-a-day mentality. A beautiful needlework project will take a great deal of time and patience. I feel that we have

sacrificed beautiful craftsmanship for the sake of instant gratification, and that makes me very sad.

CL: What is your greatest regret in needlework?

JBM: Not listening to my mother when she was trying to teach me to embroider. I looked at it as a punishment and would hide in the barn from her; I would rather have been out on my horse, riding through the hills. I did not take up a needle and thread for enjoyment until my early thirties, and then it was to try to create a collage of patches to cover a hole in a dress!

CL: What is the greatest love of your needlework life?

JBM: Taking traditional stitches and pushing them into different shapes to create.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Catherine Amoroso Leslie is an assistant professor in the School of Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.