

# P O R T R A I T

## Candace Kling

CATHERINE AMOROSO LESLIE

Twenty years of exploring private and museum costume and textile collections across the country have both satisfied and fueled Candace Kling's longstanding enthusiasm for antique ribbonwork and fabric embellishment. Kling credits studies in portraiture and flat-pattern drafting for training her eye to catch the fine details of the stitched and folded trims that she discovered in the course of her research.

Kling began teaching the techniques of antique ribbonwork in 1983; her book on the subject, *The Artful Ribbon: Beauties in Bloom* (Lafayette, California: C&T, 1996), has been a needlework bestseller. Her exquisitely detailed textile sculptures



Candace Kling.

Photograph by John Bagley.

are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Art + Design (formerly the American Craft Museum), the Oakland Museum of California, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; she has a featured spot in the documentary video *Wearable Art from California* (Davis, California: Instructional Media, University of California, Davis, 1985). Examples of her work have appeared in *Victoria, Threads, Fiberarts, Treasures in Needlework*, and *PieceWork* (see "Scented Silk Ribbon Sachets to Make," July/August 1997). She lives and works in Oakland, California.

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

**Candace Kling:** I'm always happiest in my studio, but it's an added bonus if it's a warm and sunny day, the doors are open, the birds are singing, chilled watermelon is fresh cut on the sink, some chocolate is lingering nearby, the newest Harry Potter book has just been put out on tape, dozens of needles are prethreaded, and I'm taking up where I left off yesterday.

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

**CK:** I want to work larger. Room size or bigger. It's like learning a whole new language of cloth.

**CL:** What do you regard as the lowest depth of needlework misery?

**CK:** The do-over because of bad design, especially on a deadline, is the worst. All that work, and it looks like #@\*\$. Now what?

**CL:** What is your favorite part of your work?

**CK:** The "eureka" moment that happens at least once in most

pieces is the best. Although I have a pretty good idea of the general look of a work before I start, I flesh out the details as I go along. Invariably, I get stuck somewhere in each work. I try every trick, but nothing seems to please me. After I've exhausted my arsenal, I try to stay upbeat. I let the piece sit, for as much as a month or two if I have no deadline, and then one day, in the morning, in the evening, in the car, in the studio, Eureka! the idea comes to me. I'd swear I wasn't thinking about it, but subconsciously the wheels keep turning and the puzzle gets solved. Phew!

**CL:** When and where were you happiest doing needlework?

**CK:** I seem to recall doing hundreds of hours of embroidery in a beanbag chair back in 1969. That was fun.

**CL:** What is your greatest extravagance in needlework?

**CK:** An extra set of hands. Having Zenaïda Cosca help me to create *The Artful Ribbon*.

What a luxury it was to have help and company. Perseverance, humor, curiosity, passion for the work, and a sweet and

steady nature were among the many gifts she brought to me.

**CL:** Which needlework talent would you most like to have?

**CK:** The same ones that I'd most like in other aspects of my life: courage and decisiveness. To feel sure more often than I do. To just dive in. To take a chance. And then to feel the joy of victory if and when it comes.

**CL:** What is your most treasured needlework possession?

**CK:** Knowledge. My research is my wealth. Over the last twenty years, I've visited many museum costume collections around the country on the hunt for ribbonwork. Collectors have lent me their most beautiful pieces. Students have brought their treasures to class. Unbelievable, the things I've seen! Hats and more hats, gowns of all description, slippers, shoes, baby bonnets, garters, day dresses, lingerie. It's like a dream, sitting with them, touching the fabrics, visualizing the folds, decoding the stitches. The hundreds of photos that I've taken and the samples that I've made are my lasting memory of all these beautiful

things. They offer continuing inspiration and instruction.

**CL:** What is your needlework motto?

**CK:** If it doesn't show, it doesn't count.

**CL:** What do you most deplore in needlework?

**CK:** The long hours of repetitive stitching are a killer. I'm always thinking of great new ideas, but I'll never get to them, because this is taking forever! I wish I had those mice from Beatrix Potter's *The Tailor of Gloucester*.

**CL:** Which living needleworker do you most admire?

**CK:** At the moment, I am knocked out by the flamboyance of British high-fashion designer Alexander McQueen. The extravagance! Unbelievable.

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

**CK:** I am in awe of a good colorist. What a gift and a talent.

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

**CK:** I'm especially proud of writing *The Artful Ribbon*,

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although I'd hardly take sole credit for it; so many people helped in the creation of my book.

**CL:** What is your greatest regret in needlework?

**CK:** At the moment, the disappointment of not having finished my second book weighs on me. I would like to see it done, not to mention the other three books I have envisioned to fill out the set. Where *The Artful Ribbon* is about making flowers

from ribbon, this new one is about making fabric flowers: shaped ones, bias ones, wired ones. Once again it will be filled with photographs of vintage beauties from private collectors.

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

**CK:** I am a member of a loose-knit group of artist friends called Group Nine. One perfectly beautiful sunny afternoon, we were having lunch on Jean's deck, swapping stories

and sharing ideas, personal as well as professional. Marian said, "I want to meet like this forever." The thought that we might, that we could, filled us all with an unmatched sense of comfort and support. Friends are everything.

**CL:** Who are your heroes in needlework?

**CK:** The anonymous stitchers. In museums, at flea markets, in antique stores, that's who you meet and admire the most.

Some dresses have designer labels, but most are lovingly stitched by unknown dress-makers. I've found fabulous invention, patience (and impatience!), perseverance, ambition, boldness, playfulness, and delicacy in what they do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

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