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# Miriam Schapiro: Woman-Warrior with Lace

*Changing the way women see art, and the way art sees women*

by Linda Stein

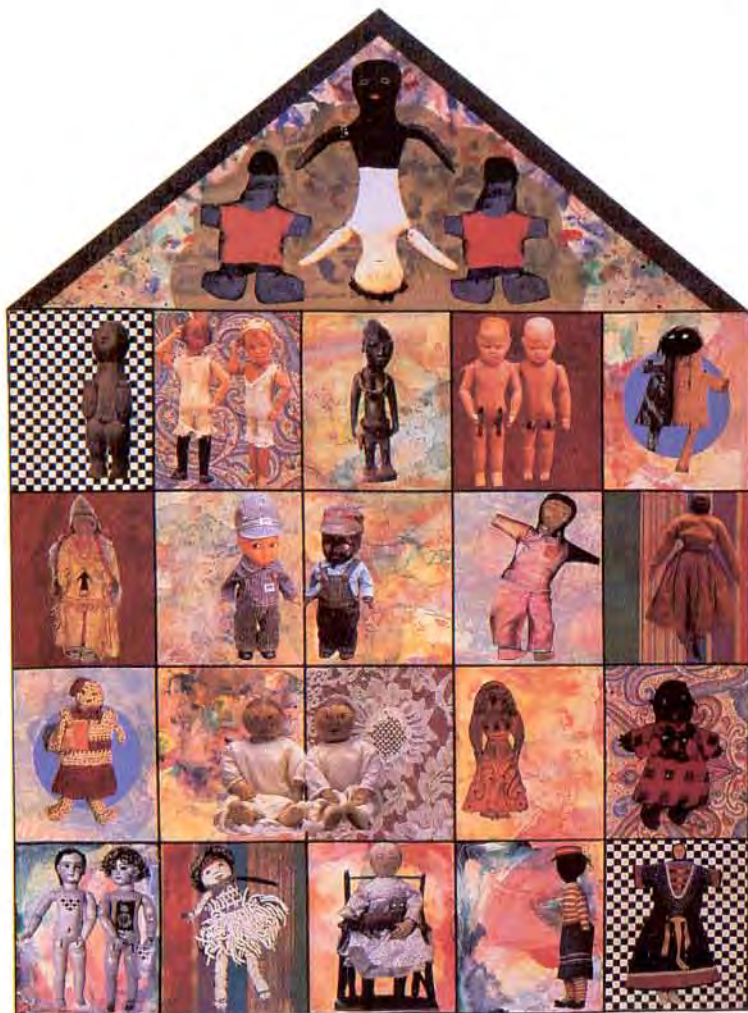
Miriam Schapiro is a rebel as well as a mover and shaker. An artist for more than 50 years, she has fought since 1970, with all her strength and talent, to erase the line between high art and craft. In paintings that imitate fiber, in "femimages" that include remnants of fabric, in symbolic shrines, theaters of the mind, and biographical collaborations, Schapiro pays homage to women by incorporating familiar fragments from their everyday lives. Using handkerchiefs, doilies, aprons, lace, quilts, and swatches of textiles, she creates an iconic effusion of household objects and associations: teapots and cups, hearts and flowers, fans and necklaces, tablecloths and silverware, houses and

furniture—all laid out before us on a fantasy stage or intimate setting.

In essence, Schapiro has become a medium through which women can speak of their past and present roles in society and their thoughts of themselves and their families. "I bring to my paintings all the elements of craft because I believe that craft belongs to women," Schapiro says. "That's how it's been designated. Our culture insists that ornamentation and decoration are innately female. But, unfortunately, it then follows that what is female is considered inferior." It doesn't have to be that way, she explains. "Eastern and Islamic cultures don't feminize their decorative arts. What is done here is sexist as well as racist. The binary concept of fine art being above craft is false."

With brush and scissors as battle gear, Schapiro confronts the patriarchal dragon head-on by flaunting her organdy and lace expressions of womanhood and turning the mainstream monster of the art world on its head, as she joyfully revels in the home and, especially, the kitchen. "Art resides in domesticity," she declares. "Fabric and the decorative arts connect me to that domesticity. I want to push the limits of sentimentality, to test how far I can go with it because it's such a taboo subject."

Using icons, such as the heart shape, associated with femininity and women's work, Schapiro confronts the male-dominated art establishment and demands that it take notice. In paintings such as *Garden of Paradise*, with its floral decorations, geometric patterns, and bursts of color emphasizing pink, she invites the viewer into the realm of a woman's being. "I'm really interested in the heart image because I see the ways in which women are made fun of and trivialized. I see the ways they are used, intellectually as well as emotionally. Too often, men use women to have someone to put down, so they can feel better. So I took it upon myself to raise up this symbol, the heart, because hearts are pillows, hearts are candies, and hearts are Valentine's Day. And it's like a sop that men give to women on February 14th. But, really, it's because they don't think much of women or respect them.



*Dollhouse*, 1997; xerox, acrylic, paper on paper; 35 by 26-1/4 inches. Photo: courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC. (© Miriam Schapiro)





Father and Daughter, 1997; acrylic and fabric on canvas; 72 by 60 inches. Photo: Brent Wahl, courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC. Collection: Aaron and Marion Borenstein. (© Miriam Schapiro)

They have never dignified or ennobled them. Well, somebody has to do it, so I do it in my work. I make these broad, simple kinds of iconic images and then fill them with flowers and geometry and things that I love."

These images and symbols have remained with Schapiro through the years. She describes them as being "part of my entourage. My dancers, for example, are very alive to me, very much in movement, very free. They are marvelous characters that I'm happy with. They stay with me, as do other constants in my art, like theater and costume. Also, I'm terribly excited by what I call 'geometry and flowers,' which is really a kind of yin-yang idea. I set up a very rigid construction which you would think would be destroyed by the flowers. But, it isn't destroyed. In fact, the Chinese and Japanese have been combining the grid with flowers for a long time. Yet, once again, people here look at all this as 'just craft work' and it's not given the respect it deserves."

Respect for women's work is something that Miriam Schapiro has sought over long years of hard work and outreach. "I've been going through the country every single year since 1970, speaking to audiences everywhere—in small towns, in colleges, in Europe, in Australia. I have lectured and shown the work of women artists who were inspired by domestic imagery. I've asked for, and was given, an incredible slide archive of women's art."

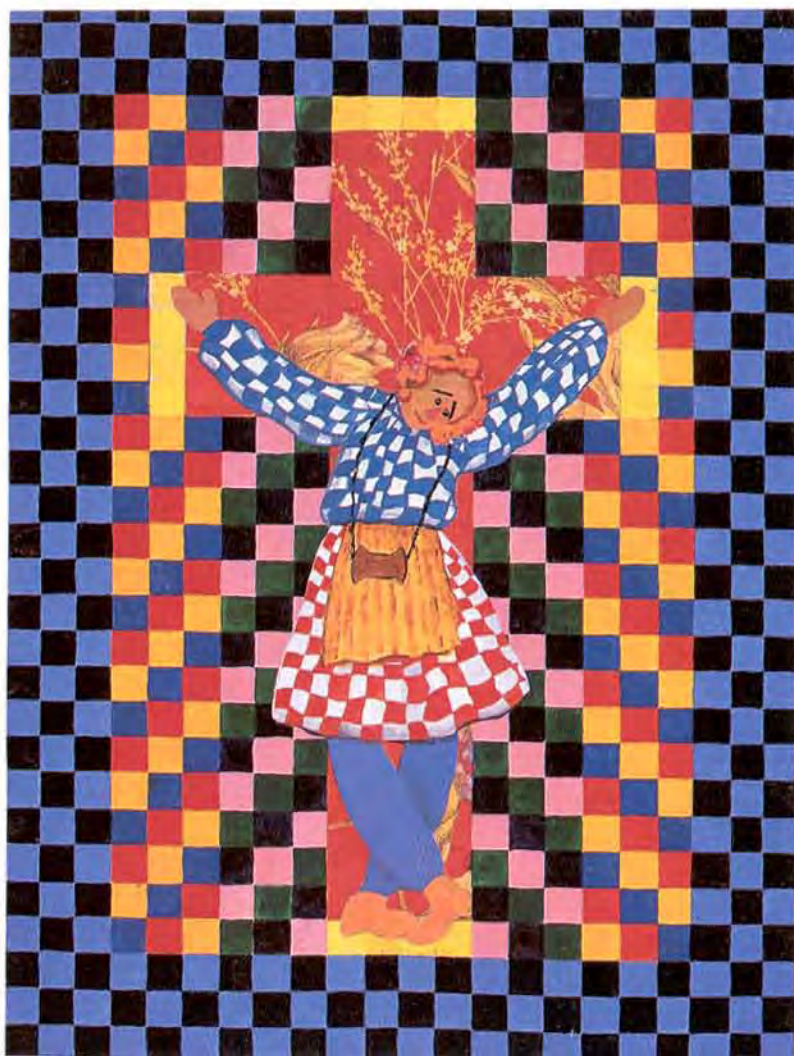
Over the years, women gravitated to Schapiro as she invited them to emerge from isolation to join her and others in working groups on collaborative projects. With Judy Chicago, Schapiro team-taught classes for women artists at the California Institute of the Arts and, in 1971, they formed the Feminist Art Program, which broke new ground by addressing how the self-esteem of women had been damaged by patriarchal culture. Schapiro and Chicago received national attention that same year for *Womanhouse*, a collaborative environment designed with students from the program. Schapiro's *Dollhouse*, created with Sherry Brody for that environment, is viewed by many as a significant icon in American art. Schapiro explains that "we wanted to create a *Dollhouse* that represented a real and fanciful world of its own. In order to do this successfully, we had to regress and reconnect ourselves with our childhood fantasies of love and terror." A three-dimensional construction, it combines, as Schapiro relates, "the beauty, charm, and supposed safety and comfort of the home with the unnameable terrors existing within its walls." Moreover, the order and sumptuousness of the patterned textiles in *The Seraglio*, one of the six miniature rooms of this architectural cross section, are startlingly reminiscent of the most formal geometric compositions of past masterpieces, such as *The Artist in his Studio* by 17th-century Dutch artist

Jan Vermeer. And yet, it is not at all surprising if one considers the formal training in composition that was so much a part of Schapiro's education. "I have been rigorously trained as a modernist," she declares, "and I have a feeling for composition and the ordering of things. So much of my art begins with shapes and colors because I was schooled that way."

Schapiro's series of large, hard-edged, geometrically structured, intensely colored canvases of the late 1960s paved the way for the formally structured compositions that contained her personal symbolism. She explains that her *Anatomy of a Kimono* "has a Cubist reference for me. The vertical stripes have been subdivided into curious patches that resemble the geometric divisions in Cubist painting." She adds that before she exhibited this piece at the Andre Emmerich Gallery in 1976, she "went to the gallery and stayed there awhile, remembering my last show there and how unhappy I was in the space, with all my 60- by 50-inch paintings looking like postage stamps in the huge gallery."

When she returned home, she began to think about what she wanted her work to say,

*The Passion of Raggedy Ann, 1997; acrylic, fabric on paper; 30 by 22 inches, 30-1/4 by 22-1/2 inches. Photo: courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC. (© Miriam Schapiro)*



**"I HAVE SUCH REGARD FOR PEOPLE WHO MAKE WORK THAT IS CALLED 'CRAFTS.' BECAUSE OF THE WAY I USE FABRIC, I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE PART OF THEIR WORLD. I FEEL A CLOSENESS TO THEM." — MIRIAM SCHAPIRO**

to whom, and how best to say it. "As always, since my conversion to Feminism in 1970, I wanted to speak directly to women. I chose the kimono as a ceremonial robe for the new woman. I wanted her to be dressed with the power of her own office, with her inner strength. I wanted the robes to be rich and dignified, which meant that I would use a lot of gold and silver. I wanted the robes to be a surrogate for me and for others. Later, I remembered that men also wore kimonos and so the

*My History, 1997; paper, acrylic/fabric on paper; 33-3/4 by 25-1/4 inches. Photo: courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC. Collection: Eleanor and Len Flomenhaft. (© Miriam Schapiro)*



piece eventually had an androgynous quality." But paramount for her in exhibiting this 50-foot, ten-section painting, was what she calls "the question of territory."

Schapiro takes pride in the fact that "this exhibition was one of the first times a woman took that kind of space." She refers to all the women left out in the art history books, and reiterates the repressive, culturally taught mantra that "a woman must not make waves, must not be immodest, must not challenge habits that are men's habits. So I thought that, like Angelica Kauffman, I would do a larger painting to announce the comfort that a woman has with 'territory.' I hoped that other women would be secure after me in this way. Indeed, they have been."

Schapiro puts into perspective the time in which her territorial expansion was taking place. "Do you realize," she asks, "that in the 1960s, two women did not go into a fine restaurant to have dinner by themselves? This was because they felt it was necessary to be accompanied by a man. In those days, women had so much difficulty in taking space for themselves." With this in mind, Schapiro created a painting series of fans and, once again, addressed the issue of territory. "I took a woman's object, the fan, the flirtatious little fan, which can be seen as a trivial, insignificant aspect of women's culture, and I heroized it. I made each painting huge—six feet by twelve feet—that's a big piece of art!" She remembers that "the fan series began in those fabulous days of the 1970s, when we were just starting to think in terms of feminist art. Can you imagine how exciting those times were? We were all women working together on our own art, on our own terms."

As Miriam Schapiro gradually gained security and confidence, she extended her search for a genealogy of creative women, and her collaborations continued. She was one of the founding members of a group of artists who became the originators of the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement, receiving much critical attention in the mid- and late 70s. "When the women got together at the beginning of the P&D movement, there was a need to bring pattern to a high art level. There was a whole raft of people doing it, a bunch of wonderful artists who were women, such as Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon, as well as artists who were men. We saw craft as a bridge to a new democratized art of the future, and we've had an influence on artists in America and abroad." Going forward, Schapiro is sure that the technology associated with the P&D movement, including computer graphics and animation, "will help to change the look and definition of art. There will be a fusing," she believes, "of music, film, and digital technology. Craft and high art will continue to merge."



Miriam Schapiro will continue to be seen as a medium through which women can speak, as woman-warrior battling the patriarchal dragon of bigotry, with ornament and pattern as her shield. She will continue to exalt the role of the homemaker by giving her the space she might be hesitant to take for herself.

*Linda Stein—sculptor, curator, lecturer, writer—has been reviewed as one of the “Bad Girls” for her sculpture series, BLADES, which*

*addresses issues of power and vulnerability by fusing steel machete blades with curvilinear wood forms and embedded fragments.*

*Schapiro's art can next be seen in a traveling exhibition of works on paper, coordinated by Robert Yassin, director of the Tucson Museum, where it will premier in 1998. Also scheduled for the fall of 1998 is a book on Schapiro, written by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and published by Abrams.*

*Needlework, 1996; paper on paper femmage, mixed media collage; 59 by 46-1/2 inches. Photo: Noel Rowe, courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, NYC. (© Miriam Schapiro)*