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Chelsea's Fiber Artist

Stanley Bulbach Creates Tapestries Using Old-World Techniques



Bulbach creates his imaginative fiber art on a 9 feet by 4 feet hand-built upright loom in his apartment/art studio in Chelsea. He is involved in all aspects of the process of weaving, utilizing wool from Lincoln sheep, known for their luster and long fibers. The unique qualities and characteristics of the handspun yarns are central to his art. Photo by Marilyn Holstein

Fiber Artist and Chelsea Activist

*Stanley Bulbach creates contemporary
tapestries using old-world techniques.*

*by Karen Leitner
Community contributor*

Long time Chelsea resident and renaissance man Stanley Bulbach is an artist, scholar and community activist. He is highly skilled in fiber art - flat weave tapestries - and his designs combine old-world technique with contemporary sensibilities. With a bachelor's degree in the history of religion and a master's and PhD. in Near Eastern Studies from N.Y.U., Bulbach is an expert on ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, and location of modern day Iraq and Iran. This background gives him a rich vein to mine from, regarding who we are and where we came from. Mathematics, astronomy, the law, writing and commerce all originated in ancient Mesopotamia.

In his studies, Bulbach discovered that a wealth of transactions recorded in cuneiform tablets dealt with the wool industry, highlighting the importance of weaving to this culture. However, Bulbach's inspiration and introduction to weaving came on a trip to Morocco during graduate school. While traveling through the Atlas Mountains, he was taken by the Berber rugs, impressed by the quality of the wool, and enthralled by the weavers on their looms.

Bulbach creates his imaginative fiber art on a 9 feet by 4 feet hand-built upright loom in his apartment/art studio on West 15th street. He is involved in all aspects of the process of weaving, utilizing wool from Lincoln sheep, known for their luster and long fibers. He prepares the unprocessed wool, by cleaning, teasing, carding, and spinning all by hand. The unique qualities and characteristics of the handspun yarns are central to his art. He prefers to use undyed wool, and sorts the yarns into shades of grey, from silvery to almost black. When colored yarns are called for, Bulbach dyes them himself, using natural dyes. Shells of Cochineal insects provide red dye, while the indigo plant is processed for blue dye. Bulbach dyes the yarns on his 1920s-era kitchen stove, with extra-large burners.

Much of Bulbach's inspiration for his designs comes from the vibrant city around him. Bulbach says, "Although the roots of this art form go way back to the ancient Near East, it's an excellent art form for expressing this city in contemporary terms."

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Stanley Bulbach

Once Bulbach conceives an idea, he carefully preplans his work, at times improvising according to the unpredictable nature of the yarn. His abstract designs are not superficially applied, but are woven into the structure of the piece, the horizontal weft yarns creating the complex design. Due to the contemplation in the planning phase and the intensity of the work, only a few pieces are completed each year. Stephen M. Cadwalader, vice president of the Jason McCoy Gallery on East 57th Street, explains that "Stanley imbues a spiritual significance to his work, without copying a style or adapting to a school of thought. What makes him so special are his interests in culture and history, because of his own interests in weaving and textiles, carrying on a great tradition in a more modern context."

Artistic inspiration

While many of Bulbach's ideas for his artistic creations come from the city, some ideas are more bucolic in origin. Bulbach grew up in the 1950s in a suburb of Newark, NJ more rural at that time. In addition, he grew up reading the Leatherstocking Tales and spent much time in the Ticonderoga, NY area. In fact, to this day, he spends time photographing in the area overlooking Fort Ticonderoga. He asserts that his art is enhanced by viewing in this natural light.



A Chelsea landmark inspired the piece, "Third Sephardic Cemetery," also combining the urban with the sylvan. In the cemetery, ancient dogwood trees act as canopies over the fractured tombstones. Geometric forms represent the tombstone, and dogwood leaves are interspersed throughout the piece. Photo © Stanley Bulbach The artist works out of his Chelsea apartment/studio. Photo by Marilyn Holstein

Strongly influenced by his impressions of New York City, in the piece, "6th Avenue," the varying effects of light are portrayed, from near darkness in the early morning, to the way light hits the tips of the buildings during sunrise and sunset. Triangles give the work a sense of the architecture. The energy of the city is conveyed in the piece, "Times Square." Diagonal geometric shapes emanating from the center call to mind a sense of rushing, converging yellow cabs, neon signs, and street lights. Inspired by a poem in "The New Yorker," the tapestry "Ginkgo" is both urban and bucolic. The piece represents the one night every autumn in which this tree drops all its leaves, appearing much like yellow taffeta dresses floating to the ground.

A Chelsea landmark inspired the piece. "Third Sephardic Cemetery," also combining the urban with the sylvan. In the cemetery, ancient dogwood trees act as canopies over the fractured tombstones. With a feeling of Moroccan tile work, geometric forms represent the tombstone, sand dogwood leaves are interspersed throughout the piece. Bulbach says, "I wanted to capture a sense of sleeping in the enfolding flowering branches of the ancient, huge dogwood trees and dreaming about the past, about how death borders life so closely, and how all of these dimensions are inter-layered together in my city."

Presently, Bulbach is working on a piece entitled "November, 57th Street." Horizontal skyscrapers are layered, with the viewer not sure which area represents the building, or the space in between, much like an Escher painting. Bulbach claims, "Most weavers do hazy mountains, I do hazy buildings."

Bulbach maintains that "the fiber arts are the largest in the contemporary craft movement, yet they are a step child to glass, ceramics, and woodworking."

Bulbach's work is intended to be viewed and enjoyed hung on the wall, like contemporary paintings. However, stylistically, he divides his art works into three categories, derived from the near eastern origins of the art form. His "prayer carpets" have a focal point, the better for meditation and contemplation. His "bed carpets" provide elements of support for sleeping and dreaming. "Flying carpets" provide a sense of movement, and represent traveling from this world into another. Each of his works contain three signature symbols, a moth, a spider, and twisted yarns, inspired by the pictographs used in Mesopotamian cuneiform, the world's first written language. The twisted fibers represent the creation of the yarns, spiders are nature's weavers, and the moth is the destroyer of fabric, all metaphors for the cycle of life. In some of his works, these symbols are obvious, while in others they are carefully concealed, and can be searched for much like the "Ninas" in Hirschfield drawings.

Recognition for fiber arts

Highly involved in the community of weavers, Bulbach actively contributes to journals and conferences in the field. He adamantly asserts that the fiber arts do not get the respect and recognition they deserve. Fiber arts are often treated with invisibility and insignificance, possibly due to gender prejudice in art research that branded fiber art - a medium traditionally associated with women's creativity, skill and labor - as a craft for hobbyists and not as real art. He urges American Tapestry Alliance members to engage in dialogue concerning the materials used, leading to improved scholarly research. Bulbach maintains that "the fiber arts are the largest in the contemporary craft art movement, yet they are a step child to glass, ceramics, and woodworking." He feels that more effective research would bring greater legitimacy to the field, better positioning it in museums and art galleries.

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Stephen M. Cadwalader, Jason McCoy Gallery

Bulbach is also a vocal advocate for his neighborhood. As one of the pioneer artists to settle in Chelsea more than four decades ago, he has seen tremendous changes. A former public member of Chelsea and Clinton's Community Board, he is now involved in addressing community issues as a member of the Council of Chelsea Block Associations helping to broker compromise between conflicting parties.

He is heartbroken about changes in the neighborhood, particularly the high-rises going up around him. They are pushing out his neighbors, changing the character of Chelsea. A former board member of both the Chelsea Housing Group and the Chelsea-Village Partnership, he was also on the advisory board of the Union Square Community Coalition. Highly attuned to Chelsea's historic legacy, he wrote an article for the December 2012 issue of "Chelsea Life" on this topic. He describes the works of the organization "Save Chelsea," created to protect the residential character and quality of life of the area. Bemoaning the loss of the shipping, manufacturing and printing businesses that have left the area in favor of tourism, he urges residents to become involved in the preservation of Chelsea.

It is clear that Bulbach's weaving ideally combines his passions for history and culture, his love of the city, and his spiritual sensibilities. And he is truly unique, even outside "outsider" art. As Cadwalader points out, "Bulbach's work is imbued with meaning. He is completely authentic about what he's doing and how he's doing it." In addition, "in our Western culture, he doesn't fit neatly into the artistic cannon. This makes him quintessentially a New Yorker."

For more on Bulbach and his art, visit bulbach.com.



Top row, from left: Strongly influenced by his impressions of New York City, in "6th Avenue" the varying effects of light are portrayed, from near darkness in the early morning, to the way light hits the tips of the buildings during sunrise and sunset. Photo © Stanley Bulbach Middle row, from left: Bulbach uses wool from Lincoln sheep. Photo © Stanley Bulbach Due to the intensity of the work, only a few pieces are completed each year. Bottom row, from left: His abstract designs are woven into the structure of the piece. When colored yarns are called for, Bulbach dyes them himself. Photos by Marilyn Holstein (3)