

# Louise Silk: BubbeWisdom

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American Jewish Museum intern Tori Maatta and artist Louise Silk talked recently about Silk’s art practice, links between spirituality and art-making and the *BubbeWisdom* exhibition that celebrates her 65th birthday.

**Tori Maatta: When did you start quilting?**

Louise Silk: I earned a degree in home economics education from Drexel University, in Philadelphia. I read an article in *Ms. Magazine* about quilting as an art form. The crux of the article was that men didn’t care about quilting, so they left women to do this beautiful work. I was very active in the women’s movement at that time, which was consciousness raising and discovery. I was a sewer by nature, but no one in my family quilted. I joke that “Jews don’t quilt and quilters aren’t Jewish.” I taught myself to quilt and made my first quilt in a year and a half. I loved it, and I just kept working. 1976, the Bicentennial, signaled the rebirth of interest in American handcrafts. What I was doing was five years ahead of the times.

**TM: Describe the functionality and the artistic symbolism of your memory quilts.**

LS: Quilts are everything. They are the microcosm of the world, of the universe, of life. The materials indicate so much about the person, the place and the history. You get comfort, function and warmth. You can never have too many quilts.

**TM: Tell me about your process of making quilts.**

LS: A large part of my business developed from making memory quilts. Those are quilts that use other people’s materials. As I work with the materials I can zero in on exactly who that person was, without ever having known them. The essence of the person comes out in the way the materials are brought together. The people who receive them are appreciative of what it means for them.

**TM: How do you correlate the wisdom of a bubbe with quilt making?**

LS: I started quilting in 1971. Now I have two grandchildren. My son had followed my artistic process; I didn’t realize how much he had gleaned, accepted and grown with what I was doing. He encouraged me to make needlework portraits of his children, to make bed quilts for them and to make something for their wall. He talked to me about children needing experiences reflecting their family and heritage. And for me, anything I do comes through quilting. So, when my grandchildren were born I had to decide what I wanted them to call me. I feel like I’m a contemporary woman and a bubbe is an important name that needs to take on a contemporary view. One of the great things about modern Judaism is that you grow and take it to the next step. I decided I would take the name bubbe proudly. Bubbes are wise. They know so much about so many things. They have a wealth of life experience. I decided that’s part of accepting the bubbe in me.

**TM: I read about your quilt *The Coat Off His Back*. I felt the deep father-daughter connection you had with your father and your imperative to preserve his memory.**

LS: Right. His coat was important. All of those memory quilts—because they were from my parents—were about materials I didn’t want to give up. I paired my mother’s camel-hair coat with a coat that conjured a humorous memory and a quintessential story about my father. Thinking I was honoring his request to give an old coat of his to a Jewish refusenik in Russia who needed it, I actually mistakenly gave away his good cashmere coat. My dad was so generous it hadn’t occurred to me I gave away the wrong coat. The coat in the *The Coat Off His Back* is the replacement coat. I didn’t like the way the quilt was initially coming together. I didn’t like the way it was aesthetically. Something was wrong about it. I left in the middle of working on it to go on a walking tour in Maine. The quilt was still bothering me. I was walking and saw these beautiful green ferns on top of a pine-bed forest. I realized what I needed to do was to add green. I had to instill something of myself into the quilt. It’s embroidered with green with the idea of new growth coming up and me taking it on.

**TM: Describe a memory that makes you very happy.**

LS: I took care of my first grandchild twice a week when she was a baby. That is the highlight of my existence.

**TM: Who are your art heroes?**

LS: Louise Bourgeois is probably my favorite. She used a lot of textiles. She had a very pained childhood. I didn’t have a difficult childhood, but I like how she expressed conceptual work in a textural-oriented way. It’s forward thinking.

**TM: Do you have a favorite book?**

LS: My favorite author is Carol Shields. She wrote *The Stone Diaries*. What I like about it is throughout the book she shows readers different points of view. Every character is coming at the story from a different angle. It’s historical in that it’s about several generations of the Stone family. A current author I like is Andrew Solomon. He wrote a book called *Far from the Tree*. Each chapter is about different marginalized groups of people and how they fit in, or don’t, to society.

**TM: Referring to *Six Days We Create*, you wrote “This quilt is a microcosm of the concept of working hand in hand with God, requiring that the same kind of involvement to be reviewed.” Tell me more about quilting as a connection to God.**

LS: Well, God created us. What we’re doing as a microcosm is creating. The quilts are just a very hands-on textile of creation. The whole process—and each step and decision I make—contributes to that if I’m aware. It’s creation. It’s creating.

**TM: Have you always viewed quilting in this way?**

LS: I had an adult Bat Mitzvah in 1985, which was a great opportunity. You learn when you can understand and think about it. For my first American Jewish Museum exhibit in 1994 I was trying to learn about Judaism. Initially, I didn’t understand anything. I didn’t know why people stand up or sit down. I didn’t know why the calendar revolves around the moon. I didn’t really know anything. I decided the only way I could learn about it was to quilt. I made a commitment to quilt what I was trying to understand. I knew what I was doing was going to be relevant. That’s where the *Six Days We Create* came from. I didn’t want to have a wine and cheese reception to celebrate my Bat Mitzvah. I wanted to have a ritual. I wanted to do something meaningful. I talked to Rabbi Sharon Henry about it and she said, “it sounds to me, Louise, that you want to find your voice.” There’s a term, *Kol Isha*, which refers to men not wanting to hear women’s voices in a synagogue because that may incite the men sexually. Having women on the other side of the *mechitza* will keep them quiet. Thinking about keeping women silent, I decided I was finding my voice. I conducted a ritual with 36 women. Each of them represented a woman’s voice. We started it back to my mother Sarah and we came to current women like Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Participants made a statement and then stood at a specific place in the gallery I had marked. Standing together, the women spelled the word voice. I was the dot on the letter i. I felt like that was my midlife ritual.

**TM: How do you choose passages from the Torah to incorporate into your quilts?**

LS: Leslie Golomb, an artist and founding director of the American Jewish Museum, and I made a really big quilt. *How Are You Called?* was for all the women who weren’t named in the Bible. For example, Noah had a wife. She worked really hard cleaning up the ark, but we have no idea what her name is. She’s just Noah’s wife.

**TM: What type of experience do you hope children have with the *Children’s Spiritual Tent*?**

LS: The thing about children is that they can go inside the tent and play and pretend. They’ll feel the spirit. They’re not thinking consciously about that. It’s not an issue for them, it just *is*. I’m just giving them that private space where they can be themselves.

**TM: How is this spiritual tent different from the *Women’s Spiritual Tent* you made for the 1994 exhibition at the American Jewish Museum?**

LS: I was angry when I made the *Women’s Spiritual Tent*. I was studying with an orthodox rabbi and we were constantly battling each other. I was angry that men don’t care about how spiritual women really are. Men don’t think women’s spirituality is important. I wanted to give women a space separate from men and not let men enter. The women I was associating with found that space I made for them to be meaningful. The original tent had a sign at the entrance: Women Enter Only. Two men told me privately that they entered anyway.

**TM: So you think spirituality comes from the solitude without the influences of others? That spirituality for children comes without the influence of adults and for women without the influence of men?**

LS: Right. Because our spirit is pure. And then we layer—we have to because we’re humans. We live in a human world.

**TM: How do you think women’s role in the art world is changing?**

LS: Women, thank goodness, are changing everywhere. There were always great women artists and fiber artists, but they were an unacknowledged aside. Things changed once fine artists like Miriam Schapiro started using fiber. Male artists like Lucas Samaras started using fiber, too. I think fiber has become its own legitimacy just like women have become their own legitimacy.

**TM: Using your bubbe wisdom, what advice would you give emerging artists, particularly women?**

LS: Be heard. Stand up. Be an artist first. It took me years to be an artist. I was a craftswoman. I was a teacher. I was a mother. It took me forever to take on the name of artist.

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