

Once upon a time, you couldn't throw a stone in New Hampshire without hitting a sheep or two. But with the state's once-thriving textile industry long gone, its legacy is now carried on by flourishing pockets of weavers, knitters and fiber artists. Most of them — almost all of them — are women who turn out designs ranging from the utilitarian to the jaw dropping.

Arguably one of the most complex crafts, the fiber arts combine sculpture, painting and drawing, not to mention spinning, patternmaking, sewing, dyeing and stuffing. The women working within the medium can be as diverse in style, personality, presentation and aesthetic as what they create: gloves to swaddle our hands, rugs to cover our foyers, pillows on which to rest our heads, or quilts to keep us warm.



Jennifer Carson of South Sutton is living proof that when you come full circle to the things that interested you first in life — things that grabbed your attention early and hard — you can find a deep and abiding success.

For Carson, that thing was the otherworld of fairies and princesses, knights and dragons. "I've always loved fantasy, medieval and Renaissance

times. It seems so magical," she says.

Carson grew up near Ann Arbor, Michigan, and though she had a vivid imagination, she put off plans for art school when she won a full scholarship to a local community college. Then at 19, she became pregnant with her first child, and married her high school sweetheart at 20 — so art school again fell to the bottom of the list.

Three more children followed and, as they grew more independent, Carson began taking art classes. She played with pastels, watercolor paints and dabbled in photography. "I couldn't settle on what I wanted to do," she recalls.

But the characters in her mind were still there, waiting to be born. "I have always been a dreamer and the characters in my imagination longed to come alive." She began painting murals on the walls of her kids' rooms — dragons, trees with knotted Celtic roots, a frog. She also learned to sew so she could make bedspreads for her children.

Slowly, Carson migrated toward doll making, sewing together Teddy bears and capybaras (the largest living rodent). A few years later, her high school art teacher, Melinda Trout, taught her how to use a felting needle to push fibers through a backing of coat-weight wool.

It was sort of like painting with

wool, and what followed was a revelation: her first felting project, a wall hanging of three rabbits. "It was the first one I ever did, and the first one I sold," she says. When Carson, her husband and four boys moved to South Sutton from Michigan, "I just went for it. I discovered wool at the Door Mill Store, and I never looked back."

The coupling of Carson's interest in fantastical creatures and her talent with sewing and felting was serendipitous. Her first doll — a dragon — took a few hours to finish, and she stuck with dragons for a time. "A year later I made my first fairy-type doll." The doll — what she calls a fairy foundling — is still in her studio, waiting for a name. Her work continued to evolve, and her characters to multiply. Whimsical creatures — like Brody Ragamuffin, a 2-foot-tall hobbit with droopy eyes, brown plaid knickers, yellow-brown corduroy jacket, and plaid hat — fill Carson's home studio, as do bolts of fabric, sketches, spools of colored thread, needles, pencils and tufts of wool.

With her orders steadily climbing through Etsy, a website where crafters can sell their wares to the public, Carson began selling patterns, doll kits and custom orders. She also sells them on her own website, www.thedragoncharmer.com

Now Carson has a tried-and-true process: when a character emerges in her imagination, she begins to sketch. "When I finish the face and start to dress them, that's when their names

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(Right) Jennifer Carson with a few fuzzy friends at her home studio

Weaving Women



Kearsarge fiber artists combine sculpture, painting and drawing

BY *Corin Hirsch* • PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jim Block*



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come to me," she says. On her light box, she'll trace her pattern onto manila folders, then transfer the pattern to fabric. "And from there I go to my sewing machine."



One of Jennifer Carson's creations

After she joins the pieces of fabric, she stuffs them and does the finishing work, such as buttons and hair. Carson uses wool from yaks, rabbits and llamas, supplied by a wool supplier in Maine. If a customer requests natural dyes, she'll break out Kool-Aid® and a vinegar fixer — but more often she sticks with chemical dyes, which are less cumbersome. Carson makes the dolls as durable and nontoxic as possible, filling them with poly pellets and using Velcro instead of snaps and buttons. "Kids love my dolls, so I make sure that children can play with them."

Nestled in among the fabrics like an afterthought is Carson's computer, where she spends a little time each morning on her newest venture, writing children's books. Her first, *To Find A Wonder*, was published in September 2009. It's the story of an adventurer named Mortimer and his band of companions. It is illustrated by a compatriot in fantasy, Pat Ann Lewis, and Carson hopes she'll agree to illustrate her second book, *Edge of the Wedge*.

Carson also works as an editor at *Faerie* magazine, and teaches aspiring fiber artists how to wield a felting needle, just as Melinda Trout taught her several years back. But what continues to engage



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her is creating new characters, whether on the page or in fabric. “I like to set up my own little worlds,” she says. “Worlds I would like to personally live in.”



New London fiber artist **Laura Chowanski** conjures landscapes — not with a paintbrush, or even a camera, but rather pieces of fabric and spools of thread. Her wall hangings and necklace bags are like windows into alternative worlds, worlds that might have an undulating batik sky, a hillside made from waves or an ocean beset by heads and faces. “The fabric is my palette,” she says.

The collages are an exuberant melding of abstraction and measurement, precision and play, born of the dual axis in Chowanski’s life — art and math. “I was always an artist,” says Chowanski, who has been coloring, painting and drawing for as long as she can remem-



Laura Chowanski’s obsession bags

ber. Essentially self-taught, she tried out different mediums over the years, and fabric fit like a glove, so to speak. “It’s what I get. I’m good at it.”

Chowanski’s laid-back countenance belies her decidedly disciplined background — she majored in physics and

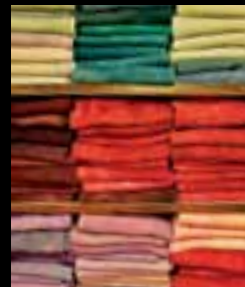
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engineering in college, and eventually joined the U.S. Air Force, working as an electronics calibration technician. She was stationed in Arkansas for several years, where she married, gave birth to a son, and — in her spare time — began doing appliqué patterns on vests and

t-shirts. “Once I started doing things I like, they sold,” she says.

Eventually, she moved from appliqué to fabric collages, drawing on her engineering background to piece together precise patterns. Once she has an idea, Chowanski uses a Sharpie to draw a pattern on cloth. “Then I choose

fabrics. It’s not an exact science,” she says. What comes out in the collages is often unexpected. “There’s a lot of symbolism. Sometimes it’s an emotion, just getting out whatever I am feeling.”

Chowanski moved from Arkansas to New London to help her parents tend a local bed & breakfast. It is here



Sue Maurer spins yarn at a demonstration at the Croydon Historical Society.

she began making her signature item: “obsession bags,” 3-by-4 inch sewn bags graced by miniature collages. “They let you wear your obsession close to your heart,” says Chowanski. That obsession could be crystals or coins or lip gloss, or something as simple as a cell phone or credit cards.

There are ocean obsession bags, beaded obsession bags fringed with tassels, Oriental obsession bags made from Asian patterns and characters, and — close to Chowanski’s own experience and that of her father, also a veteran — red, white and blue patriotic obsession bags with words: “They are soldiers. We are free.”

Despite the carousel of obsession bags in Chowanski’s small, impeccably organized studio, it is her fabric wall art that stuns — explosions of color the size of a small window. Some of them indeed look like windows, broken into panes that reveal surreal beaches, mountainsides, and even the inside of someone’s mind. Some are decorated with scientific symbols and mathematical equations, others are covered in dragonflies or starfish or... skulls? “I like skulls. I like creepy. Crows, graveyards,” she says.

While Chowanski has a strong compulsion to create, that doesn’t always translate to profitability. “You can’t get the money out of them for the time you put into them. It’s time consuming. Most of the time you’re only making \$5 an hour,” she says.

Partly due to the grueling life of a working crafter, partly due to her natural curiosity, Chowanski has taken a creative detour and is working on a novel, racking up hundreds of pages in the space of a few months — a new obsession.



On her blog, **Sue Maurer** describes herself “as a middle-aged married church lady,” but the Sunapee native turns out a range of hats, scarves and linens so classically styled that they speak to an ageless spirit.

Maurer’s signature items — her boiled wool hats made with fair trade wool from Peru — are colorful and full of clean lines. Some of the fedoras, bowlers, skimmers and caps are adorned

with undulating patterns, some with rolled edges or stylish folds, and others with partridge feathers. “It doesn’t matter what color it is — if I put a feather in it, it sells,” she says.

Maurer, a lifelong knitter who also works full time as a senior staff assistant at Colby-Sawyer College, ventured into millinery five years ago after being less than impressed with some hats she saw in a magazine.



“I thought, ‘I could do way better than that!’ So I started looking at different embroidery stitches, beading and feathers,” she recalls.

Felting wool is a lengthy process involving two buckets of soapy water — one hot, one cold — and much dunking. Between the temperature change and the agitation, the wool fibers are forced to “grab onto one another,” she describes.

At the Sunapee home she shares with her husband, Peter, a sign maker and wood artist, she keeps three angora goats: Peanut, Bill and Wilbur. She has them shorn twice a year and uses the hair in her weaving projects. “It’s more work than I thought it would be, but they provide daily amusement,” says Maurer. “Their hair is a luxury fiber, super soft and wonderful to work with. I like to use it for scarves and shawls that are worn next to the skin.”

Though Maurer been knitting since she was 8, she has become fully in thrall of spinning and weaving in the last four years. At a New Hampshire Sheep & Wool Festival five years ago, Maurer bought her first spinning wheel, and she recently purchased a large floor loom so she can do more flatwork, such as linens or frontispieces for her local church. Since then, she has been honing her weaving skills, and joined the New Hampshire Weavers Guild to work with those who

know more than her. “I’ve learned a lot from the other weavers. Some of them just blow me away,” she says.

When she’s weaving, Maurer adores the different colors born from the interlaced threads. “I’m fascinated with that. I’ve gotten interested in the chemistry of



color and where colors come from. It’s a lifetime study,” she says. She just finished reading the book, *A Perfect Red*, about the history of the color.

Like Carson, Maurer sells her wares on Etsy, as well as at craft fairs and the New Hampshire Sheep & Wool Festival. And like Chowanski, Maurer calls fiber art an interplay between math, chemistry and the fine arts. “These three things I use all of the time — in knitting, in figuring out color,” she says. **K**

Corin Hirsch is a freelance writer and designer in Lebanon.

Jim Block enjoys photographing people and wildlife in natural settings. And he loves to share his photo knowledge with others. Jim teaches small group digital photography courses to enthusiastic adults in his home studio in Etna. He spends part of the year living on Great Island in Lake Sunapee and can be contacted at jab@valley.net