

## Archives

### COLLECTIONS

# Baskets That Go Beyond Vessels

## Norma Minkowitz

By RUTH ROBINSON **New York Times**

Published: September 24, 1989

THERE'S nothing functional about the baskets that Norma Minkowitz creates. Indeed, although the Westport artist's work is included in "The Tactile Vessel: New Basket Forms" at the American Craft Museum in New York through Nov. 12, it is doubtful whether her poetic sculptural forms of crocheted thread, painted and stiffened, are really baskets at all.

It is true that they relate to the basket in that there is the containment element. Her vessels could hold "thoughts, visions and things of that nature," Mrs. Minkowitz said. The fact remains there is no way in or out. Her forms are actually cages or traps. Baskets or not, the Minkowitz works are sought by private collectors and museum curators alike.

"I've known Norma for about 20 years and have seen her work progress," said Jack Lenor Larsen, curator of the show at the Craft Museum, which was organized by the Erie Art Museum in Pennsylvania. "She is totally unique in her technique of crocheted pieces that are soft until they are blocked and stiffened with shellac. I don't know of anyone else in the world who works this way." Mr. Larsen acquired a Minkowitz vessel for his personal collection and included her work in both of his art fabric books.

The artist works at home in her light airy studio or, when doing the routine crochet work that forms the basis of her pieces, in the adjacent family room. Often she watches television as she crochets. Two or three sculptures are in evolution simultaneously, 18 to 20 completed each year.

A work in progress - tossed carelessly on the sofa - looked like a cloche to which a brim was being attached, though it was nothing of the sort. "It's going to be long, sort of a mountain," Mrs. Minkowitz explained, holding it up. "It may change, though. I may cut a hole in it. Everything starts with a circle, which signifies things never end. The life cycle is going on." All kind of experimentation is under way in the studio. Little cubes are made by crocheting around children's building blocks; then the crochet work is stiffened and one side is cut open and the two pieces are painstakingly glued back

together, matching stitch for stitch. The cubes are to be incorporated in future sculptures. A piece entitled "Floater II," to be auctioned on Oct. 31 at the "Bewitched by Craft" benefit for the craft museum, consists of a ball set in a cube. The ball was crocheted around a basketball and the cube around the wooden pedestal upon which it sits for the moment.

The technique has stood the artist in good stead from the early days of her career. For a more solid work, which was part of "The Great American Foot" show at the American Craft Museum in 1978, Mrs. Minkowitz crocheted around her own feet, stuffed the forms, and embellished them in the flowery baroque fashion characteristic of the early days of the textile movement. This was before she developed her own style, today definitely minimal.

"Every fiber artist has changed," she said. "Now the art form is more important; the material is secondary, the technique repetitive. I'm more concerned with why I'm doing it than how I'm doing it." It annoys her that, because she works in materials traditionally used in crafts, everyone wants to know how she does it. They do not ask a sculptor what chisel he uses, she pointed out.