



FIG. 29. Top left: *Two Women Standing 322*. Wood, stone, metal; 37 x 24 x 16 inches; 1999. Collection of Richard and Carole Siemens. Top right: *Soft Curve 312*. Wood, stone, metal; 19 x 18 x 8 inches; 1998. Collection of Will Barnet. Bottom: *Overlay Double Shield 219*. Wood, metal, stone; 32 x 38 x 8 inches; 1994.

# *Linda Stein's Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females and Related Works*

Gail Levin

Linda Stein's *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* is a remarkable series of large hanging collages on fabric that she calls "tapestries." Though these pictorial works are assembled and then sewn together, they are made to hang on the wall as a tapestry does. Still, they are technically more like appliqués than woven tapestries. They are actually constructed, not woven, except in a metaphorical sense. It is true that Stein "weaves" a story about each of the women who is the subject of one of these works. In *The Iliad*, Homer describes Helen as weaving the story of the sufferings of the Greeks and the Trojans. In that sense, Stein has created "woven tapestries."

Stein has gathered published research about each of the women to whom she dedicates a work. She has chosen these women by asking, "What makes a hero?" "What defines bravery?" She then searches for multiple photographic images for each of her subjects and combines these with found texts that she either quotes directly or paraphrases. She also adds other pertinent images from history and figures from popular culture. Stein employs varied materials, contrasting textures, patterns, and colors. For example, she juxtaposes diverse printed fabrics recalling calico cotton against the dramatic starkness of black leather. She sets up a huge contrast of the seemingly light-hearted and homey prints with the weight and density of black leather that carries with it multiple associations ranging from powerful, sensory, and erotic to the toughness of biker culture.

For good measure and visual interest, Stein also incorporates disparate three-dimensional items - from zippers and buckles to handles. She has even included metal elements left over from the calligraphy business she once owned. In this sense she rescues her past and gives it new life. Her recycling of these old pieces of metal recalls the painter Lee Krasner cutting up rejected drawings left over from her days as a student in the Hofmann School and putting the fragments to new use in collages that she made decades later.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in contrast to artists like Krasner and Hofmann, who worked abstractly, Stein now creates tapestries with a specific mission and a social message. Like certain performing artists, from Lady Gaga<sup>2</sup> to the Canadian musicians who in 2012 banded together as *True Colors*, Stein campaigns against bullying anywhere. She also celebrates others who tried

to protect the vulnerable, even in the impossible setting of the Nazi regime during World War II. Stein admires Lady Gaga's activist stand against bullies and thus her image is one that recurs in these tapestries.

Stein wants us to know about heroic women during the time of the Holocaust, who are, she points out, less recognized than their male counterparts. She wants to encourage everyone to stand up for those who cannot defend themselves. She intends for these works to educate and to motivate their audiences.

Thus, Stein works in the tradition of American Social Realists of the 1930s, who identified with the downtrodden and the needy and made works that were in a sense a call to action. I am thinking of particular work by artists like the photographers Dorothea Lange, Berenice Abbott, or Lewis Hine, or painters like William Gropper or Ben Shahn. While Lange, through her photographs, for example, brought to public attention the plight of the poor during the Great Depression, Stein updates this kind of social vision through her concern for the victims of bullies and for gender equality. She has become committed to being an activist as well as an artist.

Not content just to exhibit her artwork, Stein also engages in performance to get her message across. But message, she does convey. She founded the non-profit corporation, Have Art: Will Travel! (HAWT). In the Jewish tradition of *Tikun Olam*, "to make the world a better place," Stein tours her art with a missionary zeal to stop injustice.<sup>3</sup> Her sincerity and dedication to her cause pervade her art work. The tapestries are the result of years of researching this topic and then designing and making what she imagines as the most effective vehicle to convey her message. To do this, her creations have to be easily portable (to travel) and they have to speak directly to her diverse audiences.

A contemporary feminist exhibition project on the Holocaust has art historical precursors. For example, Judy Chicago collaborated with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, on a touring exhibition called *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light*, which was first exhibited in 1993.<sup>4</sup> Those monumental works were made of diverse materials and

employed varied techniques – from actual tapestries (designed by Chicago, but woven by her collaborator, Audrey Cowan), to photographs by Woodman, to fabricated stained glass. While Chicago's project told of her own personal discovery and study of events that had taken place during the Holocaust, Stein has chosen a different emphasis – the stories of individual heroic women. Few of Stein's subjects appear to have received much attention, especially from visual artists. Stein says that she identifies with each woman as she makes her visual account of that woman's experience.

Beyond feminist art, Stein's aesthetics reflect other influences – from her visit with Robert Rauschenberg in Captiva Island, Florida, over Christmas week in 1983<sup>5</sup> – to the work she once did in calligraphic engraving and printing to earn her living. Her previous production had to be both visually attractive and able to communicate its message, skills that serve her well now. As for Rauschenberg's influence, however, we can perhaps see it in Stein's creation of "body-swapping armor" and other life-size figures. She has designed transformative avatars just as Rauschenberg once made costumes for performances in modern dance choreographed by Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and others. But, unlike Rauschenberg, Stein continues to inspire and motivate her participants before each performance.

We can perhaps also identify in Stein's current tapestries the delayed influence of Rauschenberg's use of multiple vignettes arranged on textiles. Stein responded to Rauschenberg's habit of breaking down the boundaries between painting and sculpture in his *Combines* and to his penchant for using both traditional art materials and ordinary objects such as clothing and urban debris. Stein not only incorporates such scraps in her tapestries, but she also actually designs clothing, protective "bully-proof vests," that she sells as art works to wear.

After Stein chooses her fragments of fabric, leather, wood, and metal, she attaches them to a flat soft support material that can be rolled up. She also incorporates multiple photographs of the heroic women in question into the soft background. In a sense, Stein's "tapestries,"



while suppressing the decorative, can also be linked to the tradition of quilting in its best narrative aspect. Quilts, once dismissed as “woman’s work,” became an important source of inspiration for feminist artists during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In refusing to be decorative, Stein rejects the geometric repetition and colorful components of so many traditional patterned patchwork quilts, usually made by women. Yet, she instead seizes the opportunity to tell the heroic stories of these women who were caught in the Holocaust. Determined to share their stories, Stein makes them into visual icons to convey her message of what she believes they tried to accomplish.

Stein repeats the image of each of her subjects across her tapestry. In this sense, her works function like a predella on a Renaissance altarpiece, a comic book or a graphic novel, as distinct frames in a continuous film, or even like Asian handscroll paintings, where the characters reappear as the narrative unfolds horizontally across both literal and symbolic time and space. Many handscrolls also contain written commentary that accompanies the images.

We can see Stein’s tapestries in the same context as the work of other socially active contemporary artists who work in textiles. Prominent in this area is the feminist activist Faith Ringgold, who tells her own narratives of African-Americans on what she calls painted Story Quilts. Buddhist *Thangkas* from Tibet or Nepal inspired Ringgold, who was drawn to these pictures painted on fabric and quilted or brocaded so that they could be easily rolled up and transported.

Stein, too, sought the advantage of portability, but she was drawn to Japanese Buddhist scroll paintings rather than to Buddhist *Thangkas* from Tibet or Nepal. Such vertical scroll paintings suggested to Stein the model for hanging her tapestries on rods just as the horizontal handscrolls offered scenes with characters repeated across time. On the several trips Stein has made to Japan, (often in the company of her spouse, Helen Hardacre, a scholar of Japanese religions and society),<sup>6</sup> she has found not only traditional materials, but also suggestive content that lends itself to her own message.



**FIG. 30. Protector 844. Leather, metal, mixed media; 78 x 24 x 8 inches; 2015. Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy.**

Stein’s earlier series of protection figures recalls the monumental Japanese figures called *Kongorikishi* or *Nio* that stand guard outside Buddhist temples. The form of these monumental figures is to cause fright, implying that they will call upon physical force to protect against evil, present even within the pacifist tradition of Buddhism. One from Stein’s series, *Knights of Protection*, accompanies the tapestries and *Spoon to Shell* sculpture in this exhibition. For the tour, she chose the monumental *knight*, *Protector 841 with Wonder Woman Shadow* (2014). The shadow shows Wonder Woman, not violent, but waiting to defend and protect as needed.

Stein employs the motif of Wonder Woman, not only with *Protector 841*, but also in all of her tapestries. Stein's content is not just historical, for she can be at once serious and playful. The seed for incorporating images from comic books may have been planted on that same trip to visit Rauschenberg in Captiva, where Stein met and played tennis with his friend and neighbor, the Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. She likes to tell that it was then and there that she finally gave herself permission to beat a man in an athletic contest and how she won their set. But perhaps, more useful, years later, she began to follow Lichtenstein's example in referring to comic book imagery, a practice that he had begun in 1961. In her case, however, she chose an early feminist icon: Wonder Woman.

In 1972, Wonder Woman, the comic book superhero introduced thirty years earlier, reappeared on the cover of the first regular issue of *Ms.* magazine, linking 1970s feminists with the Wonder Woman of their 1940s childhoods. "Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the '40s," editor Gloria Steinem wrote, "I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message."<sup>7</sup> Stein, who as a child had herself identified with Wonder Woman's heroics, chose this comic book character along with several other characters from pop culture to stand in as symbols for the actions of her *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*. She uses such recognizable references as unexpected exclamation points to raise the awareness of her audience. She says that the Pop culture icons that she includes are "talking points" for her performances.

Wonder Woman is not the only pop hero that Stein turns to over and over again. There is the superhero, Storm, from *X-men* comics with her superhuman and compassionate qualities, and Lisbeth Salander from the novel, then film, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, a character created by Swedish author Stieg Larsson.<sup>8</sup> Lisbeth Salander survived rape and a traumatic childhood, and is especially hostile to men who preyed upon and abused women, taking satisfaction in stopping their violence.

Stein also loves to include references to the iconic Princess Mononoke, from a very popular

Japanese anime film of 1997, released in the United States in 1999. Stein seems to have identified with Princess Mononoke's bravery. Raised by wolf-gods, Princess Mononoke is said to be fearless in her desire to save the environment. She is said to be as strong as a force of nature.

Another of Stein's favorite images that recurs in her tapestries is Kannon, the Japanese name for the East Asian Buddhist deity of mercy, associated with compassion and saving people. Kannon, who hears the prayers of the world, is known by other names in different cultures, for example, as Guan-yin in China. Stein's source for this image, however, is Japan.<sup>9</sup> She is partial to the depictions of this figure that show the deity as having many arms. Such an image of Kannon appears, for example, in the upper right corner of the tapestry dedicated to *Nancy Wake* (2013), a leading figure in the French Resistance.

Ultimately, Stein's work engages with activism and cannot be separated from its moral purpose. Once abstract, she has now found herself engaged with narrative in her tapestries, combining research with a reformer's zeal. Though, once Stein assembles her constellation of images, she still constructs her compositions as if she were working abstractly.

Stein's earlier preference for abstraction inspired her to make twenty *Spoon to Shell* sculptures, which are variations on a Holocaust theme, each with a spoon, encased in a box and containing shells, which she sees as nature's protective shelters. While researching for her series of tapestries, Stein came across the story of one woman's report of the sexual privileges demanded in concentration camps in exchange for a spoon, which was felt to be necessary to avoid exposure to contagious disease while forced to eat from a communal food vessel.<sup>10</sup> Stein could not get the image out of her mind. Instead, she produced twenty sculptures, which are all variations on this theme.

In her *Protector* figures, the stories she tells in her tapestries, and through her *Spoon to Shell* sculpture, Stein has the goal to encourage her viewers to become "Upstanders," not bystanders. She is inspiring them to join in the fight for social justice. She is leading the way. ■