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A Tribute to Mariska Karasz (1898–1960)

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A new day for needlework artists dawned in the late 1940s when the Bertha Schaffer Gallery in New York chose to show the fabric collage and embroidery of Mariska Karasz. The exhibition signaled recognition of textile arts as being worthy of inclusion in the fine arts. But then, Mariska Karasz always was ahead of the times. To celebrate the pioneer efforts of this artist, her daughter, ceramist Solveig Cox, gave a special presentation about Karasz's life and works at the opening session of the 1989 American Quilt Study Group Seminar.

Mariska Karasz was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1898, and came to America when she was sixteen years old. Almost immediately she began designing clothes and showing them at pleasant little openings in New York. Her work had the distinctive flair and detail of the truly creative designer.

Sometime later Mariska Karasz began doing needlework. She went to the abstract-expressionist painter, Hans Hoffman, and asked him how she could paint with a needle. "Just do it!" he said. From then on, the whole world was her source for design. She sent to France for every color of DMC thread. she looked for unusual fabric—muslin, linen, even woven horsehair and mesh potato bags—and every kind of thread, yarn, and string. Wherever she went she had an eye for unconventional materials to incorporate into her work.

Frequently she drew designs from the garden and landscape of her home in Brewster, New York, or from her travels to Mexico. She embroidered portraits of her daughters, Solveig and Rosamond, and stitched copies of their childhood drawings.

As contemporary handcrafted furniture and accessories became fashionable, much of her work was designed for particular architectural spaces. These pieces took on a heavier, textural quality and larger proportions. One of her techniques was to couch down multiple strands of coarse threads with broad chain stitches. Indeed, the chain stitch in endless variation became her trademark.

Karasz exhibited her work in more than sixty shows. She was the author of *See and Sew*, *Design and Sew*, *Adventures in Stitches*, and a revised edition, *Adventures in Stitches and More Adventures—Fewer Stitches*. Her work is included in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and the Cooper Hewitt Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, both in New York; the Cleveland Museum of Art; and many other institutions and private collections.

As guest needlework editor for *House Beautiful* in the 1950s, and with her work appearing in such magazines as *Woman's Day*, Karasz influenced hundreds of women by her innovative approach to needlework. At that time, fresh ideas in decorative arts were finally replacing attitudes held during the Colonial Revival period of the preceding decades. She was able to free embroiderers and others to experiment with their own modes instead of being slaves to the designs of "professionals." Such a simple plan as couching down randomly scattered threads and filling in the resulting shapes with stitches and embellishment offered an escape for novice fabric artists.

Mariska Karasz died in 1960, offering a legacy to many who are blessed by her adventurous spirit. A show of hands at the 1989 AQSG Seminar revealed dozens of lives influenced by the work of this remarkable woman.