

# *Miriam Schapiro, 91, a Feminist Artist Who Harnessed Craft and Pattern, Dies*



Miriam Schapiro in her studio on Long Island in 2000. Credit...Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

By [William Grimes](#)

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Miriam Schapiro, a pioneering feminist artist who, with Judy Chicago, created the landmark installation “[Womanhouse](#)” in Los Angeles in the early 1970s and later in that decade helped found the Pattern and Decoration movement, died on Saturday in Hampton Bays, N.Y. She was 91.

Her death was confirmed by Judith K. Brodsky, the executor of her estate.

Ms. Schapiro, who broke through as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist in the late 1950s, embraced feminism in the early 1970s and made it the foundation of her work and career. From that point, she dedicated herself to redefining the role of women in the arts and elevating the status of pattern, craft and the anonymous handiwork of women in the domestic sphere.

“Mimi came to feminism later than most of us, in early middle age,” said [Joyce Kozloff](#), one of Ms. Schapiro’s allies in the Pattern and Decoration movement. “It shook her world, transformed her into a radical thinker. She was a vocal, outspoken presence — a force.”

In 1971, at the newly created California Institute of the Arts, she and [Ms. Chicago](#) founded the Feminist Art Program. (An earlier version of the program had been established at Fresno State College the year before.) It quickly became an important center for formulating and disseminating a new understanding of art based on women’s history and social experience.

That year they enlisted 21 students and several local artists to create “Womanhouse,” taking over a decaying Hollywood mansion that made an effective set for dramatizing the American home as a prison for women and their dreams.

One of the seminal events in feminist art history, “Womanhouse,” which opened in January 1972, drew thousands of visitors and attracted the attention of the national news media.

Time magazine, in an article headlined “Bad-Dream House,” called it “an exhibit that proved to be a mausoleum, in which the images and illusions of generations of women were embalmed along with their old nylons and spike-heeled shoes.”

Soon afterward Ms. Schapiro began incorporating decorative scraps of fabric, ribbon and trim, and later entire handkerchiefs, doilies or aprons, in acrylic paintings she called femmages . The intent was to honor the silent centuries-old work of women engaged in humble tasks like sewing and knitting, or, as she put in a 1977 interview, “to choose something considered trivial in the culture and transform it into a heroic form.”

In the mid-1970s, she and Robert Zakanitch joined with a group of artists, including Ms. Kozloff, [Robert Kushner](#) and [Valerie Jaudon](#), in the movement they called [Pattern and Decoration](#). Rejecting the austerity of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, its members incorporated decorative elements drawn from sources as varied as Amish quilts, Islamic tile work and wallpaper. The goal was provocative: to break down the traditional boundaries between high art and craft and to validate the decorative pattern work that female hands had applied to ceramics and textiles throughout the ages.

Miriam Schapiro, known as Mimi, was born on Nov. 15, 1923, in Toronto and grew up in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. After graduating from Erasmus Hall High School, she enrolled in Hunter College but transferred to the University of Iowa, where she studied under the printmaker Mauricio Lasansky. She earned a bachelor’s degree in graphic art and a master’s in printmaking before receiving her master’s in fine art in 1949.

While at Iowa she married a fellow art student, [Paul Brach](#), and they moved to New York in the early 1950s. There, Ms. Schapiro exhibited her large, exuberant paintings, which

included landscape and portrait elements, in the 1957 installment of the “New Talent” shows at the Museum of Modern Art. She received her first solo show at the André Emmerich gallery in 1958.

Soon, her brushy expressionist paintings began admitting windowlike geometric forms and more open spaces on the canvas. Her “Shrine” paintings of the early 1960s presented, on a colored ground, a vertical rectangle divided into four compartments with beveled edges that suggested painting frames, or windows. In all the “Shrine” paintings, the top compartment was gold, like a Byzantine icon, and symbolized aspiration. The bottom was silver, like a mirror, inviting self-reflection. One of the middle compartments included a reference to art-making or art history: two tubes of paint in “[Shrine for Two Paint Tubes](#),” and Mona Lisa’s smile in “Shrine: Homage to M.L.” The other compartment contained an egg, a symbol of female fertility.

Ms. Schapiro expanded the idea of the frame or window in the painting “Sixteen Windows” (1965). As she embraced hard-edged abstraction, the female egg mutated into the vaginal O of “Big Ox” (1968), a severely geometric form with four “limbs” extending powerfully from an open octagon.

In 1967, her husband was hired as chairman of the art department at the University of California, San Diego, where she taught as a lecturer. When he became dean of the art department at CalArts, Ms. Schapiro was hired as a professor and, with Ms. Chicago, taught a course on feminism that led to the creation of the Feminist Art Program. Mr. Brach died in 2007.

Ms. Schapiro, who died at the home of her caregiver, is survived by a son, Peter, who uses the surname von Brandenburg.

For her contribution to “Womanhouse,” Ms. Schapiro and Sherry Brody, her assistant, used old liquor crates to create a dollhouse with a parlor, a kitchen, a movie star’s bedroom, a seraglio, a nursery, an artist’s studio with a male model made of stuffed fabric, and a miniature version of “Sixteen Windows” on an easel.

The work served as a dress rehearsal for her later explorations of fabric and pattern in works like “[Anonymous Was a Woman](#),” an series of etchings in the mid-1970s that showed embroidered antimacassars and doilies; “Souvenirs,” a collage of handkerchiefs on a quiltlike grid dripped with paint; and the 10-panel work “Anatomy of a Kimono.” Later she produced lavishly decorated valentine hearts and fans.

The new work, which led to a split with her dealer in 1976, was sometimes dismissed as sentimental, a critique she rebutted enthusiastically. “Men think that sentiment is not valid; women think that sentiment is important,” she said in a 1977 interview with the art historian Paula Harper. “Some men suppress their feelings. Some women explore theirs. Sentimentality for me is a very powerful idea.”

In the 1980s Ms. Schapiro turned to dance as a subject. She later produced a series of paintings that engaged female artists of the past, notably Frida Kahlo, the focus of

several works with mythic overtones. The monumental “Diva” (1999), originally intended for the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas, celebrated the black contralto and civil rights heroine Marian Anderson.

Ms. Schapiro, whose work was the subject of several traveling retrospectives, wrote two books, “Women and the Creative Process” (1974) and “Rondo: An Artist’s Book” (1988).

“She had her vision, and it was damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” Mr. Kushner said. “On the one hand the work was very carefully calibrated, but there was also something spontaneous and a little wacky. She had her own truth.”