

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



AP

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at her home studio, Beechview

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Interviewer's Note

Art as soft and as colorful as thread and fabrics. Art as hard, symmetrical and patterned as marble. Both art forms—of the daughter and of the father—with their roots in Italy. The fabric sculptures transcend embroidery. They are three-dimensional tours de force which need to be seen to be believed! Hours upon hours of work, each piece a labor of love. Celebrated at the Sweetwater Arts Center, at the Phipps, at the Society for Contemporary Craft, the Three Rivers Arts Festival,

among many other venues....

Interview

bc: Let's take a look at the studio. [My first and immediate reaction on entering the 2nd floor studio is, "Woa!"]

AP: This is serious work here. I've been around for a while.

bc: [I reiterate my astonishment.]

AP: This is called "A Bit of Spring"—little bugs, butterflies. This was in an exhibit at Sweetwater Center [for the Arts in Sewickley, PA]. And this is some jewelry that I sell once in a while only to make a little extra money, but it still takes a lot of time, a lot a lot of time. And everything is original.

bc: The manager of the Beechview Branch of Carnegie Library showed me the "Centennial" quilt that you worked on.

AP: This is my drawing for it.

bc: You put some kind of structure, some kind of support under it.

AP: Actually, they asked me first to do the lettering. I did that, and then they asked me to do this little girl here. And after a while everybody did a patch, ten by ten. In the meantime, the space they gave me—ten by ten—it wasn't enough, so I made a trolley and, after a while, there was still more room....

bc: [My attention is distracted by a "sculpture" on the tabletop.] That bird is really cute.

AP: I'm working on this guy here. [With a superhero as a part of it.] It took me a long time: see, I don't like to copy work. If I make my own [design], it's easier. To try to copy—from there to here...Oh! [AP explains the sculpture in progress:]It's a bird; it's a plane; it's Superman! I have to make a little plane yet, [she explains.]

bc: You've done an incredible job, though.

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[My attention shifts to a very large piece.] I've got to take a look at this because that's the first thing I saw when I walked in here.

AP: This is really a big piece, a large piece.

bc: How long does something like that take?

AP: It takes months. You're talking about real dedication. It's not just you pick it up and let it go—oh no.

bc: Is that your scrapbook there? With photos of your work?

[There's a photo of a watermelon.] The watermelon looks great.

AP: I gave it to the James Gallery. I don't have it here anymore.

[I've exhibited at, among other places:

Phipps Conservatory, 1991;

Society for Contemporary Craft;

Mellon Bank, downtown;

Beechview Branch, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh--I love bottles, and I have a collection of antique bottles, which I exhibited at the Library);

Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall;

Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, 1996;

Three Rivers Arts Festival;

PPG in town;

Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill;

Claremont Graduate University outside Los Angeles, 1998;

Oglebay Fine Arts Center, West Virginia, 1998;

Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center;

and many many other places.]

[We continue to look at photographs.]

This coat, this is a piece of work. I have the coat here. This [coat started out as] a blanket that I brought from Italy in 1957. And they asked me to do a coat, a "dream coat."

This is my guild, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

I have copyrighted my work. I sent it to Washington. When I sent in my copyright piece, I sent in a patch, something like that, four by four. I had to do that one time only. Then they sent me this certificate to make it legal. At that time I used to do flat work, but now I do sculptures.

I have been featured in the *Post-Gazette* a few times too. When Donald Miller was there.

And this is my collection of matchbook covers. This also was displayed at the Carnegie Library.

bc: Photos don't do your work justice.

AP: You need to see the actual work.

I did that piece in 1972. At that time I used to do this kind of work and I gave away so many pieces. I didn't know they were good. [When someone liked my work, I would say to them:] I'm going to give it to you; you like it; go ahead and take it.

And where is it [now]? Who knows where everything went?

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Oh this is a project! 4000 Christmas cards stitched. And then they're in a frame. (I've got the frame in the basement. It's big.) The cards are like an accordion and I hang them all around the frame. On top are the planets. I have all the planets. I made nine planets. And, because they keep coming up with new planets, I'll have to make more; and I'll make more as new planets come up. [She laughs.]

bc: Not only adults, but kids must love this stuff too.

AP: Oh yeah—I have to keep the door locked when I have company. The kids love to come up here on their own.

bc: Is this Romulus and Remus?!

AP: Yes. That's the true picture [of the Classical statue]. But my interpretation was—[I asked myself] where did this take place? Was it in a river? Someplace really terrible: it wasn't really nice. This is the riverside. I used marble as the base.

bc: That is incredible. The face of the wolf is absolutely amazing. The pictures of this piece don't do the wolf's face justice.

AP: I love that piece. People wanted to buy it; I just can't sell it.

bc: And you've got some kind of wire frame under that.

AP: Oh yes. When I shape something like this, it has to be wired. And then I go through so many layers of stitching and stitching until I get the right look.

bc: And here's a stitched "plaque" of a carrot and an asparagus.

AP: That's easy to do. I sold quite a few to make a little extra money. It's very simple. I try to make it look like the real thing.

bc: You succeeded.

AP: See, for some people it draws more attention—something simple. But, I can't do whatever people tell me to do. I have to do whatever comes into my head, whatever makes me happy to work on. [In her studio AP has a visitor's register for signatures and comments.] I want you to sign that before you leave.

All my life that's what I did. It takes dedication and perfection and patience. And good eyesight too.

bc: [I skim through a number of articles reviewing AP's work.] One of the articles describes you as a "fiber artist." Did you go to school for this?

AP: I came from Italy when I was 19. When I was in Italy, I did this [a Nativity scene.] I did this in Italy when I was ten-years-old. Can you imagine that? In other words, I was trained at an early age. My father sent me to sewing school to learn how to make dresses, (and I did do that) but my love was to do this type of work. I made a lot of clothes. I just like the feel of the thread, the color, in my hands. Everything has to do with color.

bc: You have a plastic box here and it is labeled "Thread Palette."

"Fiber artist" doesn't do you justice. "Folk artist" comes closer, but that doesn't really describe what you do either.

AP: When I was on "On Q Magazine" [on WQED-TV] they described me as a fiber artist. I belong to the Fiberarts Guild of Pittsburgh.

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This [photograph was taken] at the [John Heinz] History Center. [These are bowling shirts for my husband's company's bowling team.] The shirts are still there; I donated them to the History Center. (I also donated a number of family heirlooms to the History Center as well.) I still have the pattern for the [design of the] truck on the shirts. My husband is in construction.

bc: [I notice a beautiful, framed piece on the wall.] This reminds me of a Van Gogh painting, "Wheat Field with Crows." [In AP's work there are three horizontal bands--blue, orange and green.]

AP: The title is "Sky, Sun, Earth." Sometimes I have thread left over that is too short to work. It's all cut up.

Oh, Van Gogh. I love Van Gogh. Because he went over and over [with his brush]. That's me. You see blue, but there are so many layers. It isn't just one layer. Oh Van Gogh—I do like his work!--the way he applies layers upon layers. Stitching and painting are similar. I feel the more that I layer a piece, the stronger the color if it ever bleaches out: the piece may "live longer"!

bc: [I notice another framed piece.] Good heavens! This must have taken forever!

AP: Who knows? A year...? Because it's very very fine thread.

bc: Your work is traditional, but at the same time it isn't traditional.

AP: You have to make jokes out of it once in a while. You can't be too serious. You figure this is a fruit—nothing to it. This pear—it took about two weeks of work.

bc: It's very obvious that, once you get the frame set up, you have to go back and forth over and over and over again.

AP: [The stitching] has to be close, otherwise you see space.

bc: What do you call what you do? Stitching? Embroidery?

AP: In Italy, in my resume, I call it *punto pittura* which means "paint stitch" because you "paint," but you stitch the work.

bc: Is this how you were taught?

AP: Why sure. At times people want to learn what I do. I do give small classes here and there. They start, but they cannot finish the work: it's way too much: too overwhelming for them; and they just don't follow through. The first thing in people's minds is—how much do I make with this? The money first. For me, I don't care if I'm poor. I'm not interested about the money.

[AP shows me a piece which is, quite literally, cosmic.] This piece, titled "UFO-USA"—the work I did on this! This is the moon and earth here. This is backed on a piece of linen to get it going, to get it started. (Then the linen disappears.) Here is a UFO; Saturn; there's more than one sun; Aurora Borealis; the little flag on the surface of the moon. [She chuckles.] Now, to see the true work of this, you need to see the back. [She turns the piece over.]

bc: The back of it looks almost pointillist. The back is different, but it is every bit as nice!

AP: This took a lot of time too.

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And this is an island—all personal things in there. I got an award for this from my Fiberarts Guild—for the most innovative work. This is fruit. A tropical location. (One time I was on jury duty and I was there for seven weeks and this lady—she was a rich lady—and this is her.) A lighthouse. And ships.

bc: You're pushing your skills and your imagination to their limits.

AP: Oh yes—it becomes real to me. This is real! See this guy—he's killing a snake. This is a bird that came out of the ocean—an unusual bird.

bc: When the manager of the Beechview Library took the quilt out to show me, I thought you were someone who did this in her spare time.

AP: Oh no, it's full time. Full time. And yet I have housework....

[AP shows me a stitched portrait of Grace Kelly, based on the commemorative U.S. stamp honoring her.]

bc: If you did these years ago--[framed, two-dimensional works on the walls of the studio]-- you've gone beyond that....

AP: Yes, "rougher" but more 3D...more "contemporary" [rather than "traditional"].

My guild is going to have an exhibit: it's called "Vessel." "Vessel" means you can hold water, so I figure a watering can holds water. [AP shows me a watering can enveloped in embroidery.] If the jury doesn't pick this, I don't mind. "Anything that can hold water"—I think, an elephant holds water too. Elephants take a drink, hold a lot of water.

bc: When you're doing this, what do you think about?

AP: It makes me happy; you have to have a love for it. It's the only time during the day that I relax—when I work on this. Sure. It means a lot to me, working. I don't call it "work"—it's what I want to do.

[AP shows me music boxes covered in her stitching.]

My husband fishes a lot so I made this for him. It's a fisherman.

bc: [I find the sculpture strangely reminiscent of a fisherman figure in the Neapolitan Presepio at the Carnegie Museum of Art.]

AP: Someone [Joseph Karasek] wrote a poem ["Space Fishing"] about this fisherman. It appeared in the *Pittsburgh Quarterly*. [Volume 7, Number 1, Spring 1997.]

[bc: AP shows me a photograph of a stitched hornet's nest]

AP: Outside my kitchen window there was a hornet's nest. It was truly amazing [watching them build it]. I have a video [of the hornets constructing it]. So incredible. This part here: they would fan the nest so it cools off with their little wings. They would spin like crazy. [In one of the photos there is a handmade sign that says, "Beware of Hornets."]

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bc: Have you exhibited at the Carnegie?

AP: No.... I talked to Richard Armstrong [Director of the Carnegie Museum of Art]. I said, "Look, you could travel all over the world to find artists. I'm from another country...." And he says, "I know...but it doesn't work that way." What are you going to say then? That's the way it is. But if I see him again, I'm not going to give up. I would love to have my work there some day. I'm still trying anyway. Who knows what's in store for me? The worst thing in life is not to do anything. If you do something—even if it doesn't turn out okay—that's okay, no matter....

I entered my work with the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh at the Museum. (Obviously they didn't pick my work.) But, in the meantime, a gallery in Crafton, *le Poire*, four-years-old, saw my work. The people at *le Poire* gallery saw my work when I was dropping it off for the Associated Artists. I'm scheduled to have an exhibit there on April 20, 2007.

You can never give up or be discouraged. I'm not.

I always wonder: what am I going to do next? When I'm done with this piece, what am I going to do next? I never know.

I have no one to tell me *not to do* or *to do*. Whatever pleases me, I just go and do it.

And yet, that's wonderful work. It doesn't take too much strength. It's clean, noiseless. When my husband sleeps, I can do the work. Sometimes I'll wake up at night and I do my work.

This was a fashion show of my clothes.

This was all about Pittsburgh. I sold that. [We are looking at a photograph. AP identifies structures in the work:] the U. S. Steel Building; PPG; this is fireworks.

bc: Of course, there's always fireworks in Pittsburgh.

AP: Ice skating at PPG Place.

The support for the letters [in the Beechview quilt] was wood—because of the tree [design], you know. [The central design of the Centennial quilt is a beech tree.]

bc: Your work has become more relaxed, freer as you've gotten older? Not as "focused" and intense? I'm reminded of the Pittsburgh painter, Samuel Rosenberg, whose work became abstract as he got older.

AP: Right. Because it gets boring after a while. With this, there's more life to it, I think—3D. I like that.

I brought this piece from Italy. When you see some work in a store, it's done with a sewing machine, but this is original—done all by hand. This piece (I'm so glad I brought it!) [This is practice work when I was in school.]

bc: This was your "canvas."

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AP: My showpiece.

bc: A book of your work would be a tough thing to do. Not impossible, but tough. Have you thought about a book?

AP: Yes, many times.

bc: You would need the right kind of lighting and somebody who was a sensitive photographer. For a number of things you would need photographs of details, closeups. Like closeups of the wolf's face in your "Romulus and Remus."

bc: What did your parents do for a living?

AP: My father was a bricklayer. He worked with marble too. He was really good. My mother stayed home. She did crocheting. [My father] did brickwork here in Pittsburgh too. He did the table [inlaid with marble] outside that I have. And the front of his house! If you pass by—1812 [Broadway] there's a front marble porch. He did all the porch himself.

I don't like to waste things: I used to bowl years ago. I had these bowling trophies and I took them apart and I said, Wow, they look like steps [the marble]....

bc: Do you bring "clients" up to your studio?

AP: No, only when my work gets in a gallery [that's when it gets shown]. I'm not anxious to sell my work, actually. I'm really not. I sell just enough to keep me going.

I really don't tell my kids what I really feel about my work because they would think, Oh you love your work more than you love us! I just have to hold back. Honestly, I have to hold back because it's like I take something away from them.

bc: Did you make their clothes when they were growing up?

AP: Sure. Two little girls! I had fun making their clothes. I lived in New York for two years and there I worked in a factory with a sewing machine in the Garment District.

bc: What a big difference.

AP: Oh I loved it there.

bc: You loved it?

AP: Oh sure. Because in the factory there were ladies there that I grew up with in Italy; and we had a ball. And then my husband had his family here in Pittsburgh; I had to come back to Pittsburgh.

[AP shows me a photograph.] That's my house in Italy where I grew up. It's so funny: when you see this house on Broadway [in Beechview that my father worked on, you sense the same design as the one in Italy.]

[bc signs the guest book and we adjourn to the dining room to continue the conversation over a cup of coffee. There are mounted fish on the walls. Her husband is a fisherman after all. AP directs me to a window to see the table with the marble inlay her father had done. I look through the articles written about AP's work.]

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bc: Here it describes you as a sculptor in needle and thread. I can't label what it is you do.

AP: Yes. "Unusual works of art." It's considered textile, but I don't like that [designation] either. This is textile. [She touches the tablecloth.] You've read about Van Gogh and other artists: they did something that other painters didn't do. And, for me, I really think...all the ladies that I know, they don't even want to get into that: it's too hard: they say, You're crazy; I'm not going to do that. But, for me, oh my God, I love it! No problem.

bc: I was unprepared for what I was going to see here today.

AP: That's what others say. You don't need to talk about it. It's me: the "rest of me" it's upstairs [in the studio].

[Don't misunderstand me:] I'm a good person. Believe me: I'm a good grandmother (yesterday everybody was here). I like the family reunions: they all come here for the holidays. I have wonderful kids. I'm so fortunate. And my husband is a very good guy too.

bc: You met in Nusco.

AP: Yes, in Italy.

bc: And your parents came to the United States after you did.

AP: I sent for my parents.

bc: How did your homemaking mesh with your art? What kind of balance did you strike?

AP: In different ways. I used to make more clothing—dresses and stuff. I really got serious after the 1991 Three Rivers Arts Festival. This juror from Philadelphia he saw my work here. He said, Oh my goodness...! He made me realize that I really had something good going. Since then--1991--from then on I said if he thinks it's good, I'm not going to do anything else but my work. From then I've become really involved.

bc: Was the place where you went to school for this, was it right outside of your village?

AP: Yes, I had to walk—let me think--about a mile every day. Where I lived it was like a suburb. The nuns and my sewing teacher they were in town.

bc: Were the teachers nuns?

AP: Some of them were; but, when I was about 15, I went only to the sewing school. They [the nuns] taught me as much as they could and then I went to sewing school after that.

bc: They taught you technique: it was conventional and traditional?

AP: Right, but [also] the value and the beauty of embroidery. This is embroidery...details and coloring...design actually. There's a lot of design in there too. Oh yes the nuns really got me started.

bc: How long had the school been there?

AP: My town is 2,000 years old. It's a very old town. There's so much history in that town!

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bc: When you were growing up, what was the main industry in your town?

AP: Wine, olives, chestnuts.

bc: It was a rural economy?

AP: Oh yes.

bc: When did you last visit?

AP: 1987.

bc: How had it changed?

AP: Oh a lot. A lot. Oh my God! I couldn't believe—where I worked: now there were roads. [Things have changed for the better] although...the young people...there's something missing of...caring for the old people.... They wanted to be Americans so bad. Amazing. (And we want to be Italians, maybe.)

bc: How has Pittsburgh changed since you've been here?

AP: I would say it's coming along the way it's "supposed to." Why is there tax all the time? Because we need the money. Why do the roads have potholes? Because of the snow and the salt.

The people, they're trying. I think everybody's trying. Everything's changing and you have to go along with that—a little bit. Like the style of clothes—same thing. I still think it's a good city though. I like to live here.

bc: Let me just say that I was not expecting to see all the things you've shown me. Also, I'm impressed that you've given away a lot of your work and that you tend not to sell your work.

AP: [I want that] my name should be known more. The Guild, they know me there; but they're not looking for the same thing I'm looking for. They cannot provide me what I'm looking for. What I'm looking for is some curator from a very nice museum—like Carnegie Museum.... To me, I think my work belongs there. In my heart I just feel it belongs there.