



## From Russia With Love Natasha Foucault

Necessity is, indeed, often the mother of invention.

In 1983, when silk painter Natasha Foucault was a twenty-something, there were simply no art supplies to be had in the Soviet Union, unless one had a coveted Artists' Union card or one's father was an advisor to a Party leader. Natasha had neither.

So when she wanted to make her first piece of wearable art, she begged a piece of silk from a theatrical costume designer she knew, and made the top of the dress from a fisherman's net.

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by Jeanne-Michele Salander

Inspired by her first visit outside the Soviet Union, she painted the windows from the Gothic Cathedral of Saint Vitus in Prague onto the silk.

Natasha majored in etching at Moscow's most prestigious art school and minored in architecture. After an illness which compromised her liver, she could no longer work in the media of etching and ceramics which she so loved. Further exposure to toxic substances would probably have killed her. She turned to painting on silk, and like so many of us, was instantly hooked.



Natasha's first show of pieces in Holland was unexpectedly successful. It was then that she knew she could have a financially viable career as a silk artist. She returned to Moscow, and with the help of family and friends, began to exhibit wherever possible – in movie theater lobbies, art school corridors and friends' apartments.

She wanted to push the medium of silk painting to get the same effects she achieved with etching. Because she was driven to create these effects, her work transcends the usual limitations of the gutta resist technique. Her fine art paintings on silk are known around the world, and have received several awards at SPIN festivals. She has also achieved the SPIN MSP® (Master Silk Painter) designation. Her rigorous training as a young art student is manifested in her pieces, which depict finely detailed buildings, landscapes, portraits, reflections, and still lifes.

While still in school, Natasha voraciously devoured every book on art that she could find – biographies of artists like Kandinsky, Chagall, and Miro. Their free-spirited lifestyles in the West inspired her, during a time when these modern artists' paintings were banned in Russia and could only be seen in tattered reproductions in the hidden, clandestine apartments of underground artists.



She often paints her wearables "in the style of" these artists, adapting from their work decorative elements that are given new life with their placement on a cape or poncho top. This is less "imitation" and more "homage." When she paints a design element from Miro or Kandinsky, she is celebrating their lives and work, and the way they kept her alive emotionally and artistically in a Soviet world bound by rigid academic art categories.

Natasha has lived in America for over 20 years now. She is inspired by nature and uses natural elements, such as fish, jellyfish, autumn leaves, grape harvests, bamboo, orchids, anthurium, and calla lilies in her designs.

Yet another source of inspiration for Natasha is scenes from her travels. Venetian buildings, streets in Riga, or the onion-shaped domes of Russian cathedrals often grace her art. When painting these scenes on a wearable piece, she keeps it fairly simple, painting just a front or back panel. She does not want the design to overshadow the wearer.

Natasha believes that every woman has her own special beauty, whether she is rail thin, model perfect, or rounded

and plump like a Rubens nude. The simple shapes with which she works – ruanas (a type of poncho), capes, scarves – can be worn numerous ways, and almost every woman who has ever put on one of her garments says she feels transformed.

She uses Red Label dyes from Jacquard for most of her work, because the color palette is most similar to what she would have used doing watercolors in her native Moscow studio, and a painterly effect can be achieved. She uses black gutta extensively for her wearables and puts in fine details with a marker pen.

One of her painting frames is vintage wood, with hundreds of little upside-down nails. Another is made of PVC piping with hooks. These frames occupy most of the space in her jewel-box attic studio overlooking the San Francisco Bay.

Painting the large capes is a physical challenge as well as an artistic one. It takes a severe toll on her back, and she keeps in shape by running every day up and down the narrow, hilly streets of her Glen Park neighborhood.

Natasha does several fashion shows a year to promote her wearable pieces. Shell Dance Orchid Gardens has provided a beautiful fashion show venue for several years. The soft lighting in the greenhouses and the backdrop of stunning orchids worked to enhance the beauty of the garments.

In December of 2009, Natasha rocked a themed set with zebra motifs on silk, adding zebra leggings and fierce makeup for the sheer fun of it. This led to the idea of doing a fashion show with more production values in a bigger venue.

So, in November 2010, Natasha and I envisioned a fundraiser for the bird habitats of the Louisiana Coast after the Gulf Oil Spill. The Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto provided a state of the art theater space with its dramatic glass-walled lobby. We chose bird images for several garments, including a traditional Japanese kimono. Natasha painted an egret rising from the marshlands at dusk, and I constructed the kimono using John Marshall's book "Make Your Own Japanese Clothes."

Fuego y Seda (Fire and Silk), a Flamenco dance troupe from San Francisco, presented a dance sequence wearing Natasha's pieces, swirling the silks sensuously and striking Flamenco poses. They then became the models for the fashion show, along with Natasha's loyal Russian girlfriends. The event drew



120 attendees, and the silent auction and raffle made \$1000 for the Audubon's Gulf Coast Initiative.

Natasha sells her wearable art pieces in galleries around the country. Although the terrible economy has taken its toll on Natasha's income as it has almost every silk artist she knows, she is a devotee to the medium, and it is unlikely she would ever turn to any other. "If I kept painting through a marriage to a crazy Frenchman, a life-threatening illness, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a little thing like the worst recession since the Great Depression is not going to stop me," quips Natasha with her typically Russian black humor.

Like many of us in the silk painting world, the flow of dye from the brush onto silk and the movement of the color is a turn-on that, for Natasha Foucault, is brand new every single time she dips brush into dye pot. Her career of painting on silk has spanned twenty-seven years, and promises to continue as long as silkworms keep munching on mulberry leaves.



*You may already be familiar with Natasha's hair-raising, sometimes laugh out loud, and often heartbreakingly poignant tales of her life in "Silk Diary, An Artist's Journey from Moscow to Mendocino," co-authored with Jeanne-Michele Salander and available through Amazon.com. Search Youtube: "Natasha Foucault Jan Wahl Silk Diary Interview" to see an interview with Natasha and Jeanne-Michele.*

*In addition to being a great friend and business partner to Natasha, Jeanne-Michele Salander is a writer and fiber artist. She studied Russian language and history at Antioch College, and has sold her silk painted creations at local galleries and shows. She lives in San Jose with her husband, Chris, with whom she leads a habitat restoration project at Ulistac Natural Area in Santa Clara. She has worked at Thai Silks for 34 years and is the assistant manager.*

*Natasha makes a great model for own creations.*

