

# Artist creates luxurious scarves in rich hues, whimsical patterns

By CATHERINE FITZPATRICK  
cfitzpatrick@journalsentinel.com  
Photos - Mary Jo Walicki

Last Updated: Dec. 18, 2002

The fabric is silk from the Far East.

The dyes are measured grain by grain.

The patterns are water-wing swimmers, alchemy charts, hand-shadow dogs, passages from love letters written a century ago.

The colors are luminescent.

A Grotta & Co. scarf created by Milwaukee textile designer Laura Goldstein is more than a pretty accessory. It is a keepsake.

"I wanted to create something luxurious," said Goldstein, 46, whose studio in the Milwaukee Enterprise Center North is anything but.

A washing machine drones in the corner. Clumps of cloth soak in pails on the spotless floor. Snipped magazine ads, swatches of fabric, bits of trim, wallpaper scraps, spare buttons, marbled envelope liners - anything inspirational - stick to bulletin boards, walls, water pipes and filing cabinets.

From a bank of tall windows, though, sunlight falls on panels of gloriously colored fabric suspended from clotheslines, giving the spare studio the ambience of laundry day in some desert kingdom.

The panels vary from pale ballet pink to deep Chinese red, from cobalt blue to a citron green so delightfully shocking it could have been born in a power plant.



*Laura Goldstein shows off some of her scarf designs in her Grotta & Co. Studio.*

Grotta & Co. scarves sell for hundreds of dollars at some of the most exclusive department stores and boutiques in the country.

Old Jacob Grotta, Goldstein's great-grandfather, would be proud.

## Grotta history

In 1890, back when the streets of lower Manhattan rumbled with horse-drawn wagons, Jacob Grotta began manufacturing ladies' collars and cuffs under the label Grotta & Co. He sold them to mainline department stores of the era.

"When I was about 13, my sister and I found a shoe box filled with old Grotta & Co. logos, invoices, letters," Goldstein said. "I was absolutely transfixed by them."

Eventually Jacob's son, Joseph, took over the firm. Joseph Grotta is credited with introducing the dickey, which back then was made of linen, lace or silk and embellished with embroidery or specialty trim.

Joseph died in 1960, and the firm remained dormant for almost four decades. But all the while a family passion for fabric, color and pattern was kept alive by his granddaughter. As a child growing up in New York and New Jersey, Goldstein was always making things.

"When I was around 7 years old, I knit a navy and baby blue scarf for my father. It was horrible! He would leave the house every day wearing it, but it wasn't until much later that I learned it was in his glove compartment by the time he reached the city."

The family moved to Milwaukee when Goldstein was in high school. Her father, Leonard, is a former chairman and chief executive officer of Miller Brewing Co. Her mother, Diana, taught at Maple Dale-Indian Hill School District. By her teen years, Goldstein was



*Laura Goldstein spreads a dropcloth at the Grotta & Co. studio where she creates her beautiful scarves.*

making her own looms in her bedroom, weaving wall hangings and macrame plant holders.

"It was very '60s," she said, laughing.

## Worldly inspiration

Her grandmother took her to Paris, where they visited a famous tapestry studio on the outskirts of the city. Later, as a career woman, Goldstein traveled to weaving villages in Thailand, to a textile symposium in India, to Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Indonesia.

After earning a master of fine arts degree in fibers, Goldstein was determined to re-launch Grotta & Co. From the beginning she had a vision:

“I wanted to create magic,” she said. “I wanted to create things that people would want to pass on to their daughters.”

An artist and motivated businesswoman, she learned by trial and error. Initially, she made one-of-a-kind scarves, mixing each scarf’s dye bath from scratch. Now she works in batches



*Lauren James, a Grotta & Co. Assistant, stirs fabric as it sits in dye baths at the studio.*

Every month, Goldstein buys 100 yards of silk charmeuse. Like a blank canvas, it arrives white. The transformation of the cloth begins with weeks of repeated dyeing to create her signature rich hues and deep patinas.

First, she cuts the fabric into oversize strips and runs them through the washing machine twice to remove any sizing.



*Laura Goldstein squeegees pigment on to fabric. She creates luxurious scarves through a painstaking process that includes hand-dyeing, silk-screening and as many as 30 cycles in a washing machine.*

Next she and her assistant mix the powdered dyes. Their recipes are tested and adjusted many times. “If you get a background color that’s really gorgeous but it looks terrible with skin, you’ve got a lemon,” Goldstein said.

## Exacting process

This phase of the process is exacting work. If the background of a scarf is to be quite pale, a single drop of dye in a tub of warm water might suffice.

The wet silk is sunk into the tub and then rotated by hand so the color saturates evenly.

For darker tones, the silk remains in the dye bath three days. Then it goes through the washing machine a half dozen times to rinse. Then it is dried on a line.

If the color isn’t deep enough, all that is repeated.

After the dyeing is perfect, the silk is washed by machine as many as 30 times, until the water runs crystal clear.

Next, the panels are pinned taut to a long padded table, and the fun begins.

Goldstein silk-screens layers of pattern onto the panels: dragonflies and crickets, barbed wire and badminton players, chubby flowers and spidery script from old family letters.

“I love lifting the screen and seeing the imagery on the colored silk,” she said. “I’m completely unaware of the clock, or the weather, or where I have to be next.”

Tumbling the panels in a commercial-grade dryer permanently sets the pigment designs.

A seamstress sews the fronts to the backs by machine and presses the seams. Tags tied to each scarf provide a bit of company history.



## Whimsical themes

Twice a year, Goldstein adds new images and colors to the collection and retires others. Current patterns include sophisticated takes on whimsical themes: a cowgirl, butterflies and bumblebees, a map of Cape Cod - all rendered on background colors that live up to their names: aubergine, cocoa, moss, tangerine, steel gray.

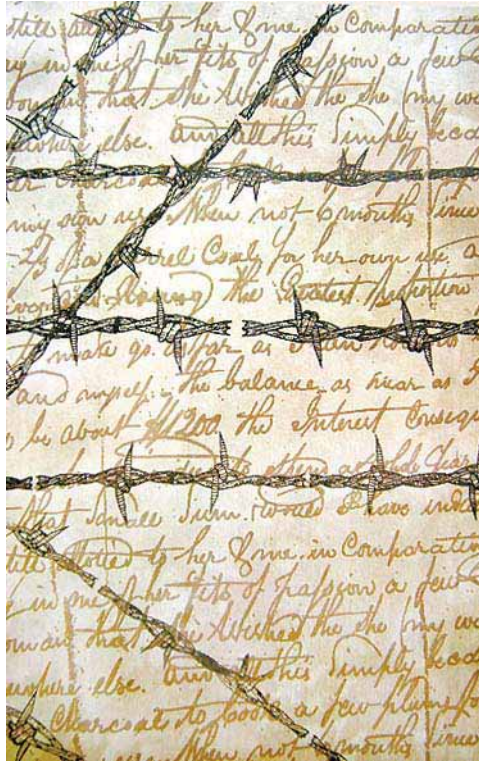
The silk charmeuse scarves are two layers thick, with different patterns and colors on each side. A slim neck scarf retails for \$110 to \$125. A cape-like wrap sells for \$250 to \$275. Table runners, plain or with tassels, are \$150 to \$275.

Nieman Marcus was Goldstein's first big account. Henri Bendel followed soon.

Today, the scarves are sold in about 50 stores and boutiques across the country.

One of them is Cry Baby Ranch, an upscale shop in the historic district of Denver that inspired Goldstein to create a cowgirl and barbed wire motif.

"It's been quite the success story," said Roxanne Thurman, owner of Cry Baby Ranch. "She came in to my shop as a customer . . . and it's been nothing but blue skies since."



*A barbed-wire motif is among the patterns Goldstein uses on her scarves.*

Judy Wolf, a retired art teacher who lives in Big Bend, bought a crimson and steel gray Grotta scarf recently - her first - and promptly wore it to a holiday tea.

"It was like wearing a work of art," she said.

The scarves can be found locally at the Milwaukee Art Museum gift shop and Miss Groove boutique on Brady St. Table runners are carried at George Watts & Son in downtown Milwaukee and Percy's in Mequon.

This story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Dec. 19, 2002