



# Laurie Jacobi designs:

## Capturing the Nordic Spirit

*A Laurie Jacobi design is far more than simply apparel; it is the culmination of a journey of self-discovery. Woven into every garment is a profound connection to the natural and spiritual world, the traditions of the indigenous peoples of Scandinavia, the call to live with purpose, the comfort of natural fibers and the wisdom of following the heart and spirit.*

To appreciate a Laurie Jacobi design is to appreciate that which endures.

Laurie Jacobi designs the textiles that her business partner, Mary Jane Miller, transforms into sublime coats, jackets, skirts, hats, and more that wear beautifully season after season.

Their work is deeply rooted in their Scandinavian heritage. Laurie's mother was born in Sweden and immigrated to Chicago as a young girl. Mary Jane's grandparents were Minnesota's pioneer Scandinavians. Both Laurie and Mary Jane now call Minnesota home and appreciate the strong ties to their families' heritage and values there.

"The Scandinavians have a respect for simplicity, for beautiful, handmade clothing and needlework that not all cultures have," explains Laurie.

Mary Jane learned how to sew at age 12 and recalls growing up wearing clothes made exclusively from her Norwegian grandmother, who was a seamstress. "It was out of necessity. Quality clothes were very expensive," she explains. She distinctly remembers the pride of wearing clothing no one else had. "Wearing something so precious made me feel very special. My goal is to impart that same feeling with every piece of clothing Laurie and I create."

It's no wonder that when Laurie and Mary Jane attend Scandinavian festivals (Laurie even went to north-

ern Sweden's legendary Jokkmokk Winter Market) their work receives a rapturous response.

"Traveling with Laurie to the market was like traveling with a rock star," says Jan Michaletz, Chair of the Board of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, who joined Laurie on a trip to the event, which was established by the Saami, the indigenous people of Scandinavia, more than 400 years ago. "Everyone knew Laurie's and Mary Jane's work. When people see their creations, they are in awe – they capture the spirit of Scandinavia without being costume-y. It's a unique representation of modern Sweden. People love it."

Mary Jane recalls an incident at Norsk Høstfest, a national Scandinavian festival in Minot, ND that features guests from across Scandinavia. When a performer from Tromsø, Norway spied a Birch Bark Legend coat on a mannequin, "she almost fainted," smiles Laurie. The coat's back was adorned with a simple design of Saami-inspired silver and gold ribbon. "She hugged the coat and said she had to have it, but didn't have enough cash to buy it, so she collected the rest from her fellow performers. We were deeply honored by her response."

"There's an authenticity to what we create that touches people," notes Laurie. "It's so much more than just fashion. There's a mystical, spiritual element that speaks to a certain kind of person. Not the kind of person who says, 'Oh, that's cute, but do you have it in purple?' It's

*“With every cut into the textile, I am seeking to honor my ancestors and honor those who will ultimately wear the garment,” continues Mary Jane. “I feel as if I’m taking care of people, wrapping them in a warm, cozy blanket.”*

the kind of person like one of our clients - when her Pine Needle coat was delivered, she had to put it on immediately and sit outside and be in nature for a while. Our clothing speaks to spirit.”

There’s a good reason for that – their clothing emerges from a spiritual journey.

You see, Laurie wasn’t always a textile designer; she had a highly successful career as a graphic designer in Minneapolis. But after being diagnosed twice with skin cancer and suspecting that stress triggered her illness, she left her career and retreated to the north woods of Minnesota. There, she lived in an abandoned ski resort and sustained herself by making jewelry out of porcupine quills, birch bark and Japanese paper.

Laurie relished the comforting presence of towering pines and birch. “I felt like they were telling me everything was going to be okay,” she confides.

The trees were right.

In no time, her jewelry became sought after and people started commissioning larger pieces. Then the president of a woolen mill invited Laurie to design blankets for a series focusing on the traditions of the Woodland tribes. “I based it on the stories I had learned from the Native American culture. I was near the Leech Lake Indian Reservation and was touched by their stories of nature – the stories of the trees, bears, wolves and eagles were so moving. It felt so real living amongst it.”

In 2000, Laurie returned to Minneapolis. “I saw the cement and cars and didn’t feel comfortable doing Native American collections anymore,” she confesses. So she began developing her Viking Collection of blankets in honor of the thousand-year anniversary of the Vikings’ arrival in America.

“Because I’ve always been a graphic designer by trade, I feel compelled to communicate, not just decorate. I want my blankets to have meaning behind them, I want people to be moved by a particular story and feel the power of it.”

The Viking Collection features titles such as “Odin’s Ravens” and “Frigga’s Clouds.” Each piece carries a tra-

ditional Scandinavian legend behind it; they’re inspired by such items as ancient Viking jewelry and silverwork, runes and burial stones.

“It was time for me to explore my own heritage and traditions,” explains Laurie. “When I travel to Sweden, I feel a visceral connection to the land and the culture and the people. It’s almost as if I grew up there; like a kind of genetic memory.

“Witnessing the Jokkmokk Market was especially powerful. When I saw performances of women dancing to Saami drumming, with hides and furs and icicles and antlers in their hair, it felt so otherworldly. Very much like the Native American culture that inspired me on my journey. I felt as if I came full circle from the woods of Northern Minnesota.”

Mary Jane, who worked as a production artist in design firms with Laurie, felt that connection, too. When she saw Laurie’s blankets, which are woven from wool at the Faribault and Pendleton Woolen Mills, she saw opportunity, and began sewing. Mary Jane playfully calls Laurie the ‘yin’ to her ‘yang.’ Laurie offers the imagination, Mary Jane the details. While people can choose from several basic designs, each garment is custom tailored for the perfect fit and usually takes several weeks to complete. Mary Jane reluctantly admits she is obsessive about perfection. That’s one of the reasons she is delighted to work with Laurie.

“In the years I’ve sewn prior to Laurie’s textiles, I was never happy with the fabric, so I never wholeheartedly pursued my craft,” she confesses. “Laurie’s textiles are my inspiration. They speak to me. Their patterns suggest the kind of garment they eventually want to become; my purpose is to show them off to their best advantage.

“With every cut into the textile, I am seeking to honor my ancestors and honor those who will ultimately wear the garment,” continues Mary Jane. “I feel as if I’m taking care of people, wrapping them in a warm, cozy blanket.”

It’s no wonder that Laurie Jacobi Designs have a cult-like following spanning the globe. Owners of the designs include celebrities, the wives of Scandinavian



dignitaries, and people who have a deep appreciation for all things Scandinavian. This includes Marit Kringstad, owner of Nordic Home Interiors in Minneapolis, who not only sells Laurie’s blankets and rugs, she gave her mother an Odin’s Ravens jacket and her father an Odin’s Ravens vest to wear for their 50th wedding anniversary celebration.

“They wore them with their traditional white shirts and looked wonderful,” recalls Marit. “It was the perfect bridge between the past and present. I love Laurie Jacobi Designs for the exceptional style, quality and attention to detail. They truly give me a connection to my homeland.” ■■

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For more info see: [www.lauriejacobi.com](http://www.lauriejacobi.com)

*(Above) Part of the Viking Collection on the cutting board. The Viking collection features titles such as “Odin’s Ravens” and “Frigga’s Clouds.” Inspired by ancient Viking jewelry and silverwork, runes and burial stones, each piece carries a traditional Scandinavian legend behind it. / (Previous page) Lauri Jacobi in her own design – a dress inspired by the Nordic birch.*