



Judy Kensley McKie

Interview by Jonathan Binzen

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Gallery NAGA
67 Newbury Street
Boston, Massachusetts
02116

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A Conversation with Judy Kensley McKie

Jonathan Binzen

Over the past 30 years, working with no formal training in her craft, Judy Kensley McKie has produced one of the richest and most significant bodies of work in contemporary furniture. Her furniture has an immediacy, power and playfulness that captivates children and adults, crowds and critics. McKie's genius for animal sculpture is grafted to an unbending commitment to comfort and function. All of her enviable gifts and success notwithstanding, she is admired by her peers as much for her character as for her furniture. This June, the Furniture Society presented her with its award for lifetime achievement. I interviewed her last winter in her shop near Boston.

What drew you into furnituremaking?

When I first started making furniture it was because we didn't have any. I had studied painting at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) but I found myself, instead of painting, finding little projects around the house—like shelves for the bathroom—that needed to be done. Then, because we couldn't afford furniture, I made a coffee table, a couch, a kitchen table—things that we needed.

I discovered I wasn't comfortable with making things that you just put on the wall and looked at. Whereas if it was something you used, I felt like it was worth the time it took to make it. And I realized that that was what I loved doing.

In the beginning I had no tools. I'd go to the lumberyard and ask "What do you have that's about that wide by about that thick by maybe five or six feet long? And cheap. And I want to see it." So they would lead me to the pile of fir. And I knew all the fir was warped, so I'd make them go through the whole pile. Nobody wanted to wait on me—I'd see them all running when I'd come in there.

Eventually I'd get three straight boards and have them cut to size. And then I'd bring them home and I'd use my father's drillpress. It was the only tool I had access to then, so I made everything with dowels. I could even make a couch that way. Pretty soon friends would come over and say, "Oh. Can you make one of those for me?" And then my husband, Todd, got me a sabersaw...as a Christmas present. He knew he had a good thing going—the house

was being furnished practically for free.

Where did you first learn how to use tools?

My father was the one who taught me. He liked to build things, and was always doing projects around the house. He always wanted an assistant, and my brother and sister weren't the least bit interested. But he could always suck me into helping on a project. And he loved to show me how to do something.

Did you start making furniture to sell right out of school?

No. After Todd and I got out of art school, we did various things to try and make a living while we were also painting. I worked in a sandal shop for a while. And one year I taught art in a private Episcopal school for girls—I was the only teacher who wasn't a nun.

At one point Todd and I were thinking we needed to find something we could do that we could sell. So we started making cloth wall hangings and showing them in little galleries here and there. It was a very impractical idea. But eventually they actually caught on. People started buying them and we were getting commissions.

We did a big one for a school. Then the promoters of Woodstock heard about us and commissioned twelve big banners—one for each sign of the Zodiac. They were all hung up at the festival. But it was so rainy that within about ten minutes they got torn down and made into tents.

Anyway, the banners were starting to sell, and we suddenly said to ourselves, "Oh, my God! Wait a minute. This isn't what we wanted to be doing, this is a business!" And so we just stopped.

So how did you go from doing woodworking projects at home to working full-time in a shop?

Early on, along with the drillpress in my father's garage, I started using tablesaws in other people's basements. Then somebody told me about a shop in Roxbury where they let people come in on Saturdays and use the machinery.

There was one trained woodworker in the shop, but the rest were learning woodworking from books and by

trial-and-error and sharing their knowledge. Mostly they were Harvard and MIT graduates who had decided to do something alternative, who wanted to work with their hands. They weren't coming from any woodworking experience.

But it was a very well-equipped shop. I started working there, and I learned things bit by bit as I needed to know them. It was so much fun that I kept on doing it. For me, going into furnituremaking wasn't a conscious decision. It just evolved.

This was New Hamburger Cabinetworks?

Yes. It was a true co-op, a very socialist system. We shared responsibility for everything; we would have weekend-long meetings and talk about how we should work and what the social context of what we were doing should be. I didn't have the really strong political bent that everybody else did—I just wanted to be making things and this was a place to do it. But that was part of what it was all about, and some of that feeling rubbed off on me.

The attitude there was, "We are going to build furniture for the people, we're going to simplify everything, put things together with screws and bolts so they don't have to be expensive and anybody can afford them." For years I did kitchen cabinets and bookshelves and anything that came along.

Everybody pooled their income and shared their jobs, too. So there was always work. Of course, if you made \$3 an hour on a job, by the time we wage-shared it was about \$1 an hour. But you could live for nothing in those days, and everybody was having a very good time.

By the mid-1970s Boston University had started its Program in Artisanry, which provided rigorous training in furnituremaking technique. You knew people who went there—what impact did that have on you?

Our shop was almost the opposite context from a fine woodworking school.

Although in the beginning learning how to make things in wood provided me with an enormous amount of satisfaction, I've never been a really fine woodworker.

I'm proficient, but my obsession is not with woodworking technique. I don't think my work was ever about perfection—by any stretch. I love the process, but for me, building is just one aspect of the whole thing.

When I started making animal forms I had to learn how to carve, and that was a long, slow learning process. For some reason, instead of going out and taking a carving class, I just bought some tools and started hacking away. I learned carving just by experimenting, which is what I have always liked to do.

This may sound stupid, but I don't want to know too much technically, because then I'll build differently. I still consider myself a hacker when it comes to carving—I don't really know how to carve. But I can always get what I want, using a variety of tools. I'll use rasps and carving tools and sandpaper, a big rotary sander and a chainsaw—whatever I need to get it there. And I like that.

What was the catalyst that took you from the unadorned furniture of your first years to the animal-form furniture you began to make in the mid-70s?

After about five years or so of making very straightforward furniture, I started feeling like I wanted to bring it to life. I had gotten a little bored with the process. And I decided that if I was going to continue to do it, I had to reintroduce the aesthetic element—to try and find a way to make the work exciting and fun.

Everything I had made was straight lines and flat boards, and I thought, you know, maybe just a curve could make a difference. And I couldn't believe how hard it was to draw a graceful curve—that was a challenge. And one thing led to the other.

It seems like a long way from a simple curve to a couch in the shape of a leopard. Where did the animal imagery come from?

I remember I would sit in the living room and look at our own furniture—which was all very straightforward—look at it for a long time the way you might look at clouds in the sky. And as I looked I'd start to turn the armrests into animals. Or I would see that a table had a stance that was like a four-legged creature. And I would think, well that would be one way of bringing this stuff to life. I started

looking carefully at a lot of animal forms. Looking at a lot of primitive art that incorporated animal imagery. The honesty and aliveness in primitive forms always appealed to me, so I wanted to get something of that into the work.

That's when I started drawing a lot again. And this time my drawing was really purposeful. I had a reason for doing it, because I wanted to bring the furniture to life.

You have said you were particularly attracted to African tools. Was it because of the combination of compelling imagery with utility?

Yes. That's exactly what appealed to me. And that's exactly what I try to do in my work. I love the idea that you can make something that is completely functional, something that has a use as practical as a kitchen table or chair, and then enhance it and make it beautiful and make it sculptural, make it a whole other thing on top of the piece of furniture.

Making something that was pure sculpture felt like it had no purpose. But if I could make something that was totally useful, then I could satisfy my practical need to make a useful object, and then decorate it in such a way that it was sculpture and furniture at the same time. Just as an African tool is a gorgeous thing to look at, and yet it has a real purpose in existing. That combination is what always interested me.

If I make a chair, it has got to be a really comfortable chair. Despite the fact that I want it to be beautiful to look at—to be a bird, for instance—the angle of the back, the angle of the seat, the height of the seat all have to be exactly right so you can sit in it comfortably for a long time. The function is really important to me. I could never go that next step—you know, it's a chair but you're not supposed to sit in it. It's a joke on a chair and it's a piece of art. That doesn't interest me.

Did you find sources of inspiration closer to home than Africa?

One of the first furniture forms that I was drawn to was Pennsylvania Dutch. I loved the simplicity and the straightforwardness in all that furniture—the beautiful balance and the proportions. Shaker furniture was another big influence, because that's simple in the same way. But I loved how Pennsylvania Dutch furnishings were decorated,

and I loved that certain pieces, like hope chests, were made especially for somebody, a keepsake that was personal.

Was it difficult to find a market for your work when you began incorporating animal forms?

Actually, I was incredibly lucky. When I had made my first few pieces, I happened to come across a copy of American Craft magazine, which I'd never seen before. In the back I saw an advertisement for an upcoming show at the Craft Museum called New Handmade Furniture. I didn't know anything about the furniture field at that point. I saw this and I said, "New Handmade Furniture—that's what I do. Maybe I'll send them some slides." So I did, and the show's curator, Paul Smith, came up to see my work.

I had them in a Christmas store—you know, those yearly things?—and they were the first sculptural things that I had made. Paul Smith put them all into the show. Then the show travelled around the country for two years and got a lot of press, and suddenly I had people who were really interested in these things. It was a little like magic.

Elements Gallery—which I'd also never heard of—offered me a one-person show in New York. Before that I had no way of selling these things—I was just making them. I didn't think I'd ever sell them, and I didn't really even care at that point. I just was compelled to make them, and I figured, "Well, if I have to I can bring them home." And then suddenly there was a marketplace. I got catapulted into this world that I didn't know anything about. It was bizarre. And it was great. Because then I got to do exactly what I wanted to do.

The Elements show did really well, and I took that money, and said to myself, "okay, I'll use that to make enough work to do another show." And I've been doing that ever since. It has allowed me to do this for the rest of my life without having to think about doing other things. And without having to do a lot of commissions.

So you've intentionally done very few commissions?

Yes. I've always felt that commissions keep you in one place. They're always based on something you've done before. And if you repeat a piece and put another one out there and it leads to another commission, then you're still making

the same piece that you made three years ago. And then people will say, "Oh, I love that thing you did that was in that show"—which was now five years ago—"...can you make me one of those?" And you get stuck back in the 60s forever. You never get to move on or experiment, because you're so busy.

At first, you made all your work in wood, but for the last fifteen years or so you've been making pieces in everything from cast bronze to cast resin as well as wood. What governs the choice of material?

I'll design something—I'll draw it, and I might feel as though it wouldn't be right in wood. For example, I designed a polar bear bench. Now what would be the ideal material for a polar bear? What would feel cold, what would have a little bit of—you know, you find marble that has a little bit of sparkle in it, it looks like it's covered with snow. And that's what I thought this should be if I could find a way to do it that was affordable. Otherwise, cement would have been better than wood for that bear.

What are some of your favorite alternatives to wood?

I have done a lot with cast bronze, which is appropriate for my work because it has an aged quality to it. In wood I'm always trying to build in a quality of age. I want it to look like it's been around forever. I'm always trying to rough it up. I don't like to use bright colors and high-gloss finishes that make things look shiny and new. If I could get them to look like they've been dug up, I would.

You used iron nails on a recent desk, not as joinery but as adornment.

The idea there was to make something very delicate and finely crafted and then whack nails into it. Not like Garry Bennett, but to use for decoration. I used old cut nails, because they're sort of rough and ready. A combination of those and tacks. I wanted the lines of nails to be loose. So I did a small freehand drawing and blew it up to full scale and used that to guide the nailing. Even though it looks like they were just sort of whacked in, they were carefully placed so they would be irregular in the right way.

In a field that is notoriously difficult to prosper in, you've had an extraordinary run of critical and commercial success. Do you see any changes coming in furnituremaking?

It's true, I've been able to sell work in my shows—but I don't see that as a possibility forever. Furniture is a fashion industry—it has a lifespan. Almost any style in the history of furniture has an average lifespan of about 30 years. There was Art Deco, and then everybody reacted against that—“Agh! Enough!” And in came “less is more.” Everything got pared down until everybody was bored with that. That's when the new decorativeness in furniture started to happen. And now it's almost like Art Deco again—furniture started to get more and more decorative, until at this point even I start to think “Oh my god, enough!” There's just so much decoration of all kinds, and I think people are going to yearn for a quieter moment, and that furniture will change again.

Any idea which way it might go?

I think industrial design and designing on the computer will affect what people make. Now students are thinking about designing things for production on some level, made efficiently enough that there is a marketplace for them. I think that is the future, because these days it's very hard to make a living in handmade furniture, and I think this marketplace can't sustain itself a whole lot longer. A lot of galleries are closing, and not as many people are buying.

So what does that make you think? If the 30-year rule is true, how do you react?

I'll just keep doing what I do. I don't know how my work will change; I've never known how it would change. But it's certainly not going to change based on what I think is about to happen in the marketplace.

A long time ago somebody asked me if I wanted to design for industry. I didn't at the time. Now I think, maybe in retirement. When I can't do it myself anymore and I can only draw, then maybe that's the time to think about that. For now, I get too much pleasure out of making things.

Jonathan Binzen writes on furniture and interiors and is the co-author, with Kevin P. Rodel, of Arts and Crafts Furniture, a history that traces the international scope of the movement.



Swan Cabinet
2006
carved limewood
76x62x15¹/₂"



Dancing Wolves Cabinet
2005
carved and painted mahogany
50^{1/2}x19x5^{1/4}"

Dog and Cat Chair
2006
cast bronze
35x17x24"





Wagging Dog Chair
2006
carved mahogany
37x18x26"



Bird Settee
2005
cast bronze
36x60x28"



Dragon Stool/Table
2006
carved Indiana limestone
19x21x21"



Spider Table
2006
steel, glass
16x38x38"



Moose Rack
2006
cast bronze
20x35x6"



Ivory Bench
2003
cast epoxy resin, mohair
37x65x24"



Hippo Bench
2006
carved Champlain black marble
20x72x22"



Dove Tray
 2006
 carved and painted obeche
 13x21^{1/2}x1^{1/2}"



Alligator Tray
 2006
 carved and painted obeche
 13^{1/2}x20^{3/4}x1"



Crocodile Tray
 2006
 carved and painted obeche
 10^{1/4}x16x1^{1/2}"



Butterfly Tray
 2006
 carved and painted obeche
 13^{1/2}x20x1^{1/2}"



Pelican Tray
2006
carved and painted obeche
10^{1/2} x 16 x 1^{1/2}"



Gecko Tray
2006
carved and painted obeche
13^{3/4} x 18^{3/4} x 1^{1/2}"



Fish Tray
2006
carved and painted obeche
10^{1/4} x 16 x 1^{1/2}"



Bird Tray
2006
carved and painted obeche
10^{1/4} x 16^{1/4} x 1^{1/2}"



Helping Hands Bookends
2006
cast bronze
7^{1/2}x4^{1/2}x4"

Treasure

Arthur Dion

In 2005, two groups with highly trained and deep appreciation of furniture honored Judy Kensley McKie's career.

The James Renwick Alliance, supporters of the national collection of decorative arts at the Smithsonian Institution, gave her its Master of the Medium Award.

Her peers in the Furniture Society, furniture makers throughout the country, presented to her its Award of Distinction, also a recognition of great achievement over time.

If our society designated national treasures, Judy would be one. Admiration of her work is universal among furniture makers, collectors, curators, and dealers and within the audience of enthusiasts who encounter her marvels in museums and galleries, in both fine arts and craft contexts.

She's at the top of her game, as this exhibition shows. She somehow continues to capture the vivacity of living beings in objects whose designs have the striking simplicity and crispness of the natural world and whose material execution has the refinement and utility of exquisite furniture.

There is nothing to do at this point but to celebrate her work and to salute her gifts.

We are enormously fortunate to have shown her work for the past twenty years and to be doing so again now in a collaboration with Judy so fresh and energetic that it still feels like a beginning.

Arthur Dion is enjoying his twenty-fifth year as director of Gallery NAGA, his eighth with associate director Meg White.

Judy Kensley McKie

Born 1944 Boston MA

Education

Rhode Island School of Design
Providence RI 1966
BFA, Painting

One Person Exhibitions

Gallery NAGA Boston MA 2006
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
2004
Gallery NAGA Boston MA 2002
The McTeigue & McClelland Jewelers
Great Barrington MA 2001
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
2000
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1997
Gallery NAGA Boston MA 1995
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1994
The Albuquerque Museum
Albuquerque NM 1993
Helander Gallery New York NY
1992
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1991
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1989
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1987
Eve Mannes Gallery Atlanta GA
1987
Elements Gallery New York NY
1984

Selected Group Exhibitions

Museum of Fine Arts Boston MA
2004
*The Maker's Hand: American Studio
Furniture, 1940-1990*

American Craft Museum
New York NY 2001
*Objects for Use: Handmade by
Design*
Leo Kaplan Modern Gallery
New York NY 2001
Women in Furniture
Bard College New York NY 2001
*Women Designers in the USA
1900-2000*
The Albuquerque Museum
Albuquerque NM 2001
Hounds in Leash
American Craft Museum
New York NY 2000
Defining Craft
DeCordova Museum and
Sculpture Park Lincoln MA 2000
*Celebrating Contemporary Art
in New England: Recent
Acquisitions*
Rose Art Museum Brandeis University
Waltham MA 2000
Visual Memoirs
MH de Young Museum
San Francisco CA 1999
*The Art of Craft: Works from the
Saxe Collection*
Yale University Art Gallery
New Haven CT 1999
Please Be Seated
Museum of Fine Arts
Boston MA 1999
Drawn to Design
Norton Museum of Art
Palm Beach FL 1998
Animal as Muse
Barry Friedman Ltd.
New York NY 1998
Harvard Club Boston MA 1998
The Flagler Museum
Palm Beach FL 1995
Please Be Seated
Museum of Art Rhode Island School
of Design Providence RI 1995
*Contemporary Decorative Arts
from the Permanent Collection*
Albuquerque Museum
Albuquerque MA 1994
Selections from the Collection

The Sybaris Gallery
Royal Oak MI 1993
Visions Reflected
Gwinnet Fine Arts Center
Atlanta GA 1993
Sculpture for the Garden
The Grassi Museum
Leipzig Germany 1992
Craft Today USA
Eve Mannes Gallery
Atlanta GA 1991
Artists Design Furniture
Museum für Kunsthandwerk
Frankfurt Germany 1990
Crafts Today USA
Craft and Folk Art Museum
Los Angeles CA 1990
Art that Works
Rose Art Museum Brandeis University
Waltham MA 1990
*Todd McKie and Judy Kensley
McKie*
Museum of Fine Arts
Boston MA 1989
New American Furniture
Joanne Rapp Gallery
Scottsdale AZ 1989
Collaborations
Museum of Art Rhode Island School
of Design Providence RI 1988
*Rhode Island Collects: 1900 to
Now*
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery
New York NY 1988
*Pioneer & Pioneering 20th
Century Women Furniture
Designers & Furniture Designers/
Makers*
Gimpel/Weitzenhoffer Gallery
New York NY 1988
*Bennett Bean, Lynn Last, Mark
Lindquist, Judy Kensley McKie,
Janet Prip, John Prip*
Musée des Arts Décoratifs
Paris France 1988
Craft Today, USA
Museum of Applied Arts
Helsinki Finland 1988
Craft Today, USA

United States Information Agency
Washington DC 1986
Design in America
American Craft Museum
New York NY 1986
Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical
Norton Gallery of Art
West Palm Beach FL 1986
Artist Designed Furniture
Gallery NAGA Boston MA 1985
*Elegant Wit: Contemporary New
England Furniture*
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Renwick Gallery Washington DC
1985
*Material Evidence: New Color
Techniques in Handmade
Furniture*
Esther Saks Gallery Chicago IL 1985
*A Renaissance in Furniture as Art:
Master Woodworkers*
American Craft Museum
New York NY 1984
Art for the Table
Pittsburgh Center for the Arts
Pittsburgh PA 1984
Artiture: Furniture of the 80's
Harcus Gallery Boston MA 1984
Ornamentalism
Pritam & Eames East Hampton NY
1984
*The Boston Influence in Furniture
Design*
Clark Gallery Lincoln MA 1983
Furniture Invitational
Columbia Museums of Art and
Science Columbia SC 1983
Wood and Fiber
The Hudson River Museum
Yonkers NY 1983
*Ornamentalism: The New
Decorativeness in Architecture and
Design*
American Craft Museum
New York NY 1982
Approaches to Collecting
Fuller Museum of Art
Brockton MA 1981
Woodforms
Addison Gallery of American Art
Phillips Academy Andover MA

1981
*Judy Kensley McKie: Furniture/
Todd McKie: Painting*
Museum of Fine Arts
Boston MA 1979
New Acquisitions
American Craft Museum
New York NY 1979
New Handmade Furniture
Rose Art Museum Brandeis
University Waltham MA 1979
Three-Dimensional Possibilities

Public Collections
Addison Gallery of American Art
Andover MA
The Albuquerque Museum
Albuquerque NM
American Craft Museum
New York NY
ARC Union
Paris, France
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture
Park Lincoln MA
Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco
San Francisco CA
Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation
Los Angeles CA
Fuller Craft Museum Brockton MA
LongHouse Foundation
East Hampton NY
Museum of Art Rhode Island School
of Design Providence RI
Museum of Fine Arts
Boston MA
New Britain Museum of American Art
Hartford CT
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Philadelphia PA
Rose Art Museum Brandeis
University Waltham MA
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Renwick Gallery Washington DC
Toledo Museum of Art
Toledo OH
Vice President's Residence
Washington DC
Yale University Art Gallery New
Haven CT

Honors and Awards

The Furniture Society Award of
Distinction 2005
The James Renwick Alliance
Master of the Medium Award,
Furniture 2005
Fellow of the American Craft Council
1998
Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation
Award 1989
Certificate of Design Excellence
Award 1986
National Endowment for the Arts
Craftsman's Fellowship 1982
Massachusetts Artists Foundation
Fellowship 1980
National Endowment for the Arts
Craftsman's Fellowship 1979
Rhode Island School of Art European
Honors Program Rome Italy 1966

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and Looking Glasses*, Yale University
Press, New Haven CT, 1992
Marjorie Elliott Berlin, *Design
Through Discovery*, Harcourt
Brace Jovanovich, 1994
Patricia Conway, *The Art of Everyday*,
Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.,
1990
Patricia Conway and Robert
Jensen, *Ornamentalism, The New
Decorativeness in Architecture and
Design*, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.,
1983
Denise Domergue, *Furniture by
Artists*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.,
New York, 1984
Gene A. Miller, *Art in Focus*,
Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, Mission
Hills CA, 1994
Seth Stem, *Designing Furniture*,
Taunton Press, Newton CT, 1989
The Year of American Craft, Harry
N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1992

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- Carl Belz, *McKie: Todd McKie and Judy Kensley McKie*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham MA, 1990
- Patricia Conway, *Judy Kensley McKie*, Pritam and Eames Gallery, East Hampton NY, 1997
- Edward S. Cooke, Jr., *New American Furniture*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston MA, 1989
- Arthur C. Danto, *Like a gift for someone you love: The furniture art of Judy Kensley McKie*, Gallery NAGA, Boston MA, 2002
- Jonathan L. Fairbanks, *Judy Kensley McKie*, Gallery NAGA/ Clark Gallery, Boston MA/ Lincoln MA, 1995
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- Pat Kirkham, *Women Designers in the USA 1900-2000*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001
- Jack Lenor Larsen, *The Furniture Art of Judy Kensley McKie*, Pritam & Eames, East Hampton New York, 1994
- Kari M. Main, *Please Be Seated*, Yale University Art Gallery New Haven CT, 1999
- David Sipress, *Judy Kensley McKie: Furniture/Todd McKie: Painting*, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover MA, 1981
- Paul J. Smith, *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, Winfield & Nicholson, New York, 1986
- Paul Smith, *Objects for Use: Handmade by Design*, Harry Abrams, Inc., New York, 2001

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And last, but not least, this show is dedicated to my husband Todd for his continuous encouragement, support, inspiration, and love.

Judy Kensley McKie