SARA PENN’S KNOBKERRY
AN ORAL HISTORY SOURCEBOOK
SVETLANA KITTO
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FOREWORD

A figure like Sara Penn and a store like Knobkerry offer a distinct entry point to histories of art and histories of how we live. The accounts in Sara Penn’s Knobkerry: An Oral History Sourcebook cast Penn as an artist, unparalleled and influential designer, pioneering Black businesswoman, exacting connoisseur, and generous mentor. To read these oral history interviews alongside the appendix of images is to understand Knobkerry’s aesthetic as a pivotal harbinger of the future. Penn’s vision leapt beyond the constricting and exclusionary conditions of postwar American identity to describe a much larger world of social practice, art, texture, pattern, and music, especially for herself and her peers at a time when a new global culture was beginning to pass through New York.

We are grateful to Svetlana Kitto, who conceived and developed this project with great care and attention to Sara Penn’s life and legacy, and to all of Penn’s colleagues and friends who participated in Kitto’s oral history interviews. Thank you to Lucy Flint, managing editor of this publication, whose tireless work has been crucial in balancing the sharp recollections and murkier impressions that constitute any history. SculptureCenter and New York Consolidated are honored and humbled to play a small role in supporting this project in the hopes that Penn’s legacy becomes more legible and present in our minds today.

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INTRODUCTION

SVETLANA KITTO

The story of Knoberry is the story of the late Sara Penn (1927–2020), a Black artist-designer-curator-entrepreneur whose monumental yet under-known impact on the cultural landscape of downtown New York is the subject of this book. Penn opened the first location of Knoberry in 1965, establishing it as one of the first stores in the United States to sell ethnographic art, objects, and clothing from all over the world. Across its multiple locations over the years—the last iteration closed at the end of the millennium—Knoberry was a brick-and-mortar fixture of the downtown scene, a favorite among an ever-changing group of Village artists, musicians, dancers, actors, and designers up to its last breath.

This volume calls on oral history’s unique power to resuscitate places from the past in order to bring us a little closer to the Knoberry universe. In my interviews with Sara Penn and some of her closest friends and colleagues (the transcriptions condensed and edited here for clarity and readability), I sought to build up a portrait of Penn voice by voice, story by story, memory by memory. My interview with Penn herself is the first and lengthiest. We are extremely fortunate that she was able to participate in this oral history before her death, allowing her to be the first and foremost authority on her own life in this volume. The account next turns to the recollections of people who were close to Penn or her project, or both, whose memories and analysis give us some idea of Knoberry’s bearing on histories of art, fashion, music, and New York. Her influence and reach is also visible in a clientele more likely known to a general audience: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louise Bourgeois, Don Cherry, Omette Coleman, Mia Farrow, David Hammons, Jimi Hendrix, Lena Horne, Mick Jagger, Janis Joplin, Woodie King, Eartha Kitt, Marcia Marcus, Louise Nevelson, Larry Rivers, Sonny and Cher, Sonny Rollins, Ntozake Shange, Ming Smith, Yves Saint Laurent, André Leon Talley, and Leon Thomas were all fans, friends, and/or customers at one time in the long life of Knoberry.

Just as Sara Penn was more than a shopkeeper, Knoberry was more than a shop; I’ve heard it described as a gallery, museum, atelier, café, cultural center, salon, and sanctuary. In many ways, the depth of the cultural work that Penn enacted and the breadth of Knoberry’s influence defy description—you just had to be there. It is hard to overstress the pioneering significance of a Black woman owning and operating her own shop in the center of New York’s Lower East Side in the mid-1960s. With Knoberry, Penn created an international context for a thriving scene of radical artists and thinkers—a place where people could meet, talk, and reinvent themselves. Throughout Knoberry’s tenure, Penn’s iconic garments and eclectically designed windows introduced a groundbreaking aesthetic on the Lower East Side.

Rigorously developed, her bold aesthetic kept pace with the moment’s political and social transformation, sensitizing and radicalizing a generation of American artists to a global, hyper-spiritual perspective. A refrain in the interviews is that Penn’s globalization reflected a desire to go beyond the limitations of the enframed Eurocentric purview. In the words of Penn’s longtime friend Danny Dawson: “We weren’t interested in being American. Still aren’t. An enduring conflict.”

Knoberry opened in the mid-1960s on Seventh Street between Second and Third Avenues. Over the course of thirty years, it moved from St. Mark’s Place (and possibly other spots in the area) to Spring Street in SoHo to a location in Pasadena, California, and, finally, to West Broadway in TriBeCa, this last operation closing in the late 1990s. The store began as a collaboration with designers Fumi Schmidt and Olive Wong—who would go on to work independently—and initially focused on jewelry, accessories, and outer garments: ghara and salwar pants from India, leather pendants crocheted in the back of the store, custom-made cholis, “gypsy” blouses made of Chinese silk and skirts made of Pakistani fabric. (Penn’s contributions to popular fashion were often described as “gypsy” at the time, a sign of the white mainstream press’s efforts to brand her garments as part of an exotic strain in youth culture, seen today as a marker of the racial and ethnic insensitivity that persisted when Penn’s work was first received.) “Prices run from about $6 for a plain dashiki to $250 for a coat of elaborately embroidered dowry cloth,” reported the Christian Science Monitor in a 1968 story about Knoberry and pan-African fashion trends titled “African Dress, Natural Hair.” Because the items she carried were world-unique, celebrity musicians flocked to Penn’s store—they never had to worry about seeing their favorite garment on someone else. At the later iterations of the store, on Spring Street and West Broadway, furniture and objects became increasingly prominent, including Moroccan kilim rugs, West African tribal masks, “Indonesian monk baskets and wooden harps . . . woven ikat robes, ceremonial chains from Africa, wooden Buddhas,” as reported by André Leon Talley in a 1977 Women’s Wear Daily story on “the precious items found in [Penn’s] boutique called Knoberry Third World Art and Design.” The TriBeCa store, where the artist David Hammons self-curated a show in 1995, was the largest, displaying bigger items—Penn’s visionary multicultural emporium on a magnified scale. The poet David Henderson describes that location’s enduring power in “The African Burial Ground Called TriBeCa,” which he performed at the Def Poetry Jam in 2001: “Sara Penn’s ‘Knoberry’ on Franklin and West Broadway / Black woman humble in a museum disguised as a shop / among the rare treasures of Africa, Asia, South America / offering healings for free from the powers of antiquity.”

I first learned of Sara Penn during an interview I conducted with the artist Ken Tisa for a catalogue accompanying the opening exhibition at Gordon Robichaux, Ken Tisa: Objects/Time/Offerings. Tisa shared with me his personal discovery of this novel store on St. Mark’s Place in the 1970s and how Penn went on to become one of his best friends and most important teachers. We—Sam Gordon, Jacob Robichaux, and I)—were very excited by these stories, as we’d never heard of Knoberry before
and wanted to know more. In the spring of 2017, Tisa took me to meet Penn at her last residence on Thirteenth Street, where she showed me her scrapbook and told me stories about her early life that I collected using an audio recorder.

Penn was born and raised in Pittsburgh, and spent summers on her grandmother’s farm in Alabama. “I realize,” she once said, “that I reflect my great-grandma, Sadie Lee in Pleasant Valley, Alabama, who followed Booker T. Washington’s idea of skilled training for newly freed slaves. She taught quilting and sewing. She opened a training school that grew to have over two hundred students.” Like her mother before her, Sara Penn trained as a social worker, earning a graduate degree from Atlanta University. In the 1950s, Penn traveled throughout Europe, living in Paris and Amsterdam for a spell. Back in New York, she worked as a social worker at a place called Manhattan Hill, hanging out with her boyfriend, the painter Wolf Kahn, at the Cedar Bar with artists like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Joan Mitchell. In the mornings she would apprentice at Phyllis Jewelry, a silver store on Seventh Street. Penn found a home among a diverse group of artisans there, including Art Smith, a Black silversmith, and Barbara Shaum, who had a popular sandal store next door to McSorley’s Bar. Penn opened the first location of Knobkerry between Shaum’s business and McSorley’s.

Penn first encountered the word “knobkerry” in a short story by George Bernard Shaw, “The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God,” when she was still a social worker working with youth. The allegorical satire, published in 1932, follows a South African child who escapes a mission, with nothing but her knobkerrie, a Zulu fighting stick. “Anytime she encounters anyone who tries to tell her who God is, she just hits them with the stick and keeps going in her personal search.” Penn conceived of the store with a fight in mind: “I thought, if anyone tells us what fashion is we’re just going to hit them with our stick, our store. We’ll discover our own fashion,” she said. People who knew Sara Penn well describe Knobkerry as a political site, a liberatory portal into worlds and ways of seeing beyond the United States. “I think black designers, like black musicians, should dig into their origins for [their] inspirations. It would help to signpost our current quest for identity and bring something healthily different to Western fashion,” she told the Washington Post in 1969.

When I interviewed Ken Tisa for this project in his SoHo loft, he showed me a real-life knobkerrie that Penn had given him, not the fighting kind but “a ritual knobkerrie, which the chief would carry.” For Tisa, it symbolized a passing-down of knowledge. Penn, he felt, had taught him so much, perhaps even how to be an artist. And now he was telling me the story of Penn to illustrate the idea of the artist as the keeper of time: objects, stories, art, histories. I have read that Penn, Fumi Schmidt, and Olive Wong also thought of the knobkerrie as a symbolic link to various cultures and identities. In my oral history interview with Penn before she died, she refreshed her memory by referring to a scrapbook, an incredible visual archive of magazine and newspaper clippings, fabric swatches, photographs, drawings, postcards, event flyers, Polaroids—some of which are being documented for the first time in this book. After the interview, she gave me the scrapbook to use as I wrote about her and Knobkerry. From the outset, I wanted this to be an oral history project, to look to the people who occupied her scrapbook and memories, who were there and could attest to her legacy, who loved Penn and were changed by her.

It was always my thinking that in place of a large physical archive, Sara Penn and Knobkerry left behind a set of disciples, friends, and intimates who adored her to the end of her life. When I embarked on these interviews, starting four years ago with my initial conversation with Penn, all I had was her scrapbook and some possible contacts. With each person I met, the list of connections and communities that emanated from Penn grew exponentially. Everyone wanted to help, everyone was invested in preserving her legacy. I rushed to keep up by searching out every name that emerged and connecting with as many people as I could. Taken together, the idiosyncratic assortment of archival materials gathered—Sara’s scrapbook and a stuffed envelope from her good friend Renoir Darret—have a dreamlike quality well suited to the memories presented here. There are many more people to interview, materials to collect, clippings to collate, and scholarship to pursue. This is only one configuration of Penn’s enduring legacy, as Knobkerry’s reach was so wide and variegated. It is my hope that this project will be a jumping-off point for many more imaginings.

2 White Penn, like George Bernard Shaw, used the spelling “knobkerry.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary prefers “knobkerrie.”
This interview was conducted in March 2017 in the lobby of The Markle, the women-only residence in the Village where Sara Penn spent the last decade of her life.1 During the conversation, Penn used photographs and clippings in a scrapbook as an aide-mémoire. Her longtime friend Ken Tisa participated in the first part of the interview.

Svetlana Kitto: Sara, are you ready to start?
Sara Penn: Je suis prêtée.

Ken Tisa: What year?

SK: Did you know your grandmother?
SP: Sure. Every summer we would go to her farm. She had a big farm and my brother would go out with the farmhands who worked for her and gather goods.

SK: What was it like going down to Alabama from Pittsburgh?

SP: That was like vacation. We all got in our car and drove. I remember how different it was. My grandmother had this big farm with corn and tomatoes and all that. And she had chickens. She would go out to the back where the chickens were, and she’d say, “Chickie, chickie,” and then she’d grab one by the neck and twist it around. My grandfather was there but he wasn’t very active. He must have just watched everything. It was fun. I loved it. You knew you were getting away from Pittsburgh and going to the country. It was nice.

SK: What else about your mother?

SP: My mother learned from my grandfather how to perform. Her favorite thing was reciting James Weldon Johnson’s “Creation.” Very famous Black poet. My mother would perform that at teas. We had Sunday afternoon teas at different homes with programs—we would play the piano and somebody else would do something else. They were community gatherings. The poem “Creation” was very popular and my mother and grandmother knew it backwards and forwards.

SK: Did you learn it?

SP: My grandmother. I didn’t learn it. I can’t remember because I didn’t do the creating.

We went to church every week. During the Depression, as I said, we were very poor, but you knew you had the fundamentals. We went to a Baptist church because we didn’t need transportation to get there. We could walk the five or six blocks. So we went to it until everybody was well employed. And then we went to the Methodist church—my mother and my father were both Methodists. But at the Baptist church, we used to go to Sunday school, and between Sunday school and the regular service we’d go across to the street to the YMCA and buy candy before we went back.

They had an orchestra in that church. There was always a lot of music and cultural activities going on. My girlfriend and I had to go to interpretive dancing. That was modern dance we went to at the YMCA during the week, and then we had tap dancing classes. You had all of these things that make a girl become a fabulous woman.

SK: What about your dad?

SP: My dad was busy. He had a home improvement
business, and my mother said, “Get a card and call it interior decoration.” They did wallpaper cleaning with sponges, something people don’t do anymore. They’d refinishing floors, paint woodwork, and all that. That was his business.

KT: It’s called contracting now.

SP: Contracting. Yeah, that’s what it was. He was a contractor.

SK: What was the house you lived in like?

SP: It was nice. There were about twelve houses on our street. Everyone eventually owned their own home. And they were all Black. At the top of the hill, cement hill, was cement Street. It wasn’t really a hill. There was a family there, called the Kelly family, who were different because they were white. But on our street there were all Black families.

SK: Your parents ended up owning a home, then?

SP: As soon as you got your foot in the bank, that was the thing—you had to own your own home. I should have kept that in mind.

SK: What part of town was it in?

SP: It was in Homewood. It was on the edge of Homewood and Wilkinsburg. Wilkinsburg was mostly white and Homewood was predominantly Black, and we were on the street that divided them. Our street was only two blocks long. We used to go to Wilkinsburg on a Saturday morning after we did our cleaning in the house, and we’d go to the movies for ten cents. We would get a five-cent box of pretzel sticks.

KT: It was good for kids. You’d walk to school. And then we got to junior high school. When I say we, I’m talking about my girlfriend who lived next door to me. We rode the streetcar and we never got into fights or anything like that. Good kids.

SK: Tell me more about your friend.

SP: She was smarter than me. As a matter of fact, she was the valedictorian of the high school. And then she went to Fisk University and I went to Spelman. In September we would take the train, the Pennsylvania Railroad, from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. And in Cincinnati we’d change to the Jim Crow train, which went south.

KT: It was fun because between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati we just played and talked. Our parents made us lunches with fried chicken and biscuits. And when we got on the train in Cincinnati we opened them up and had a picnic.

SK: You say that in Cincinnati you would transfer to the Jim Crow train. At what age did you start being aware of Jim Crow?

SP: Seventeen. But we weren’t civil rights workers. That’s just the way things were, and we made the best of it.

SK: How was race talked about in your house?

SP: Can’t tell you.

SK: You can’t remember?

SP: Yeah, I remember. I can’t tell you. My mother used to curse white people out [laughs].

SK: Please tell me.

SP: She’d get mad at the insurance man because he was white. She’d get mad at the man who owned the grocery store, he was white. She said they were all cheating us.

SK: She was probably right, wasn’t she?

SP: Yeah, they’re still doing it. We didn’t have any white friends, but every once in a while you’d hear the word “nigger.” If somebody was our enemy, we would call them “white trash” or “crackers.”

SK: Or “honky’s”?

SP: Yeah, “honkies,” the people who were from Eastern Europe, from Hungary [laughs].

KT: I don’t think that’s why they were called honkies.

SP: Yes, it was.

SK: You’re talking about people in your school?

SP: The school was mainly white, and the teachers were all white. The teachers appreciated you. We were in the school orchestra and stuff like that. There was a small percentage of Black students scattered around, I guess maybe five percent. It was primarily white. And in a sense, sort of positive. All that other shit, you didn’t really spend that much time on. Like being hostile or even fighting for your inalienable rights.

I went to Spelman because a friend of my mother was a member of a Black women’s sorority, and the wife of a Black councilman in Pittsburgh who was a Spelman graduate belonged to that same sorority. So my mother felt that was a place I should go to get some culture. So I went to Spelman.

SK: Who instilled this goal in your mom?

SP: Grandma. My grandmother.

SK: She was interested in it too?

SP: Yeah. My grandmother was part American Indian. She was a friend of Booker T. Washington. All of them had something going on in their bones. I was the only, you know, slouch.

SK: Did she tell you about being friends with Booker T. Washington?

SP: No, we didn’t talk about it. It was just heard. All we talked about was contemporary pride in yourself. Don’t marry a musician [laughs].

SK: Can you tell me about going to Spelman?

SP: My mother took me to Spelman. We went on a train. We both entered the portals of Spelman with no stockings on—we were bare-legged. The woman looked at me. “You can’t go in. You’ve got to wear stockings.” My mother had to go out buy me stockings.

SK: Was that a difference between the North and the South?

SP: No, that was just Spelman. Spelman was very, very strict—very strict rules. If you had a male visitor, he was only allowed to come into this one room if he signed up and sat there with you while the chaperone sat in the same room with you.

Spelman was in what was called the “university complex.” You had Spelman for girls, Morehouse for men—boys. Morris Brown, Clark College, and Atlanta University were coed. Spelman and Morehouse were restricted.

SK: Heading into Spelman, what did you love?

SP: Freedom. Freedom from my family, from my mother. My mother was so strict.

SK: What was she strict about?

SP: She wanted me to be an ideal thing, and I wasn’t ideal. My mother’s skin is lighter, much lighter than mine. She was a nice-looking woman, I wasn’t. So she was never satisfied with me. She bought me clothes and she used to go to thrift shops and buy me designer clothing for Spelman. But she wanted me to be perfect or at least be as best as I could with my ugly-ass face.

SK: She said that to you?

SP: No, she didn’t say that. She just looked at me that way.

SK: What were your interests at Spelman?

SP: I just went to get a bachelor’s degree. I didn’t specialize. I participated in the cultural program, and music, but I just wanted to get my degree. When I got my bachelor’s I decided I didn’t want to go back to Pittsburgh, and I persuaded my mother to let me go to Atlanta University, where I studied social work. I was enthralled with Atlanta because I wouldn’t have to be a prisoner at Spelman. I had kind of a nice time in Atlanta. Martin Luther King, Jr., and I were in the same religion class.

SK: Really? Do you remember him well?

SP: Yeah, I remember him. We weren’t like this [linking her forefingers], but I remember him.

In Atlanta I had a good friend named Nancy Coleman. We got together later on. She was from Baltimore but she went to New York, and when I got out of Atlanta University I got a job in New York. I shared her roommate. I stayed in New York for about three or four years after I graduated. I met this girl Phyllis, who was a silversmith in the Village, on West Fourth Street, and started working for her and learning how to make silver.

That’s when I met my first real boyfriend, Wolf Khan. He was the arts director at the community center where I was working.

SK: Was that the Manhattan Hill place?

SP: Yeah, I think so.

SK: How did you get into silversmithing—what drew you to it?

SP: I don’t know how I met Phyllis, but I did. Sometimes I just storm into a territory and become a part of it. I certainly had to be down there where her store was. I liked it there because she had her store and then there was a Black silversmith called Art Smith. He was fabulous.

SK: Were there a lot of Black-owned businesses?

SP: No.

SK: Just artisans?

SP: Yeah. Art was Black. His boyfriend was white. Phyllis was Jewish. And next to her was Allen Block. There were a lot of artisans on West Fourth Street.

SP: I worked at Phyllis’s store I met Wolf. We used to come downtown from uptown every night to a place called the Cedar Bar. That’s where Francis Kline and Willem de Kooning and other big-time artists—Joan Mitchell and all those people—were. We’d be there until late in the evening. In the morning, I’d work at the silver store. It was called Phyllis Jewelry. Then I’d go to my social work job and then come back.

SK: Before we finish that, what was it like when you and Wolf would hang out at the Cedar Bar with Kline and de Kooning?

SP: I was impressed.

SK: Because you were so young—twenty-two or something.

SP: I remember a party we had once. I had an apartment on Eleventh Street or someplace, and we invited all these people. We covered one wall with brown wrapping paper, and they all autographed it. I wish I had that now. It was a nice life. I’m glad that I did all those things when I was young, because I’d be regretting it right now if I hadn’t.

Wolf got tired of me and went to Mexico. He got married.

SK: Was Wolf an American guy?

SP: Yeah. He was a student of Hans Hofmann.

SK: A student of Hans Hofmann?

SP: Most of those people were Hofmann’s students. During the summer when I was going with Wolf, he rented a shack on the dunes in Provincetown. He lived there and
SK: What did you have?
SP: Too much rum. I had never had rum before. They put me in a room where the doctors questioned me. One doctor would question me and then he would leave and another doctor would come in and question me. And then they all came in and said, “You can go home now.” They took me out in the hall where Adolf was waiting for me. He said, “What are they laughing about?” They all came running into the hall. They were hysterical, laughing at me.

I decided at that point I wasn’t going to die in Paris, I was going back home. I came back to Pittsburgh and got a job at a social agency on the North Side. My mother helped me buy a car. One night I was driving home from work—I lived on the West Side. There’s a jazz club called the Crawford Grill right in the center of the African American area of Pittsburgh. I thought I’d stop in and hear some music. I was so brave, doing all that stuff by myself. The night before, I had received an Ornette Coleman record from a book club I belonged to that sent records out for advertising or as gifts or something. When I walked into the nightclub, who was playing but Ornette Coleman. I went up to him and said, “I got your record in the mail yesterday.” He said, “Really?” I said, “Yeah,” and invited him to go to the Highland Park Museum the next day if he wanted to. I knew he did. We became very good friends. When I returned to New York, he was playing at the Five Spot Café, which was around Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue. I went in to see him and then I went to his loft afterwards while he was there.

SK: What’s this picture [looking through Sara’s binder of archival materials]?
SP: A photograph somebody took in my store when I first opened on Seventh Street. And this is the New York Times, with the kind of Indian clothing I was selling. Do you know Bill Cunningham?
SK: Yeah.
SP: Well, he took the first photographs of my store when he was still working in Chicago for the Chicago Tribune. Actually, I got a photograph from him the other day, before he died this last month or so, and he wrote a note on the back of it saying how much he enjoyed meeting me back in the 90s. This is one of the kids who was working for Calvin Klein in the ’80s. I can’t remember who he is now. I got Calvin Klein to write a letter for me when I wanted to work at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

SK: Did you?
SP: Yeah, I worked there. I can’t remember if I worked there as a volunteer or got paid [laughs].

SK: Who are these people?
SP: This is Woodie King and this is Seret [Scott]. She worked for me, and she was in movies. What is that?

SK: A letter from you to Linda O’Keefe at Metropolitan Home: “I am outraged that my business did not receive a single credit in ‘making a grand and graceful gesture’ published in the March/April issue of Metropolitan Home. The red and yellow ikat textile which you borrowed appears in two photos with no mention of Sara Penn/ Knobbery; yet every other contributor receives credit. My outrage is the fact that a similar oversight occurred last year with New York Magazine in which Corky Pollen photographed my goods and gave credit to two other retailers in the city. I am sorry to have to suspect racism, but I see no other reason for the oversight, particularly as you have always given me the same kind of treatment as the others which is a positive asset to both photos. If I sound paranoid it is only because I have been a pioneer in my field and watched others walk away with my ideas and gain acceptance and recognition. I had to let you know how I feel because I have passed the stage of silent acquiescence.” Did she write you back?

SP: Hell, no.

SK: Did that happen a lot?

SP: No. People gave me credit. There were times, though. This is the Esquire cover, Harper’s Bazaar cover, Saturday Evening Post cover, Home Furnishings Daily with an article, Christian Science Monitor with an article, Vogue.

SK: This is where they would use stuff from the store in editorials. How did that get started?

SP: It was while I was a social worker, working for Mobilization for Youth, and I wasn’t happy with what was going on in social work. Barbara Shaum was a leather crafter with a shop on Seventh Street and she told me about a shop near hers.

SK: Where did you live at the time?

SP: I can’t remember, but I moved into the back of the shop.

SK: It was on Seventh Street?

SP: Yeah, two doors from McSorley’s.

SK: Was it is cheap to rent down there at the time?

SP: Yeah, I started my store with three thousand dollars, and that included inventory, rent, utilities—everything. I started with my two friends, Olive [Wong] and Fumi [Schmidt]. I lived in the back until I was making more money. I forget the name of that store on Eighth Street. I don’t know if it’s still there.

They had two stores on Eighth Street and told me I could have one of them. It was next door to Abbie Hoffman. I kept Seventh Street as my showroom and living quarters.

SK: Did you just start collecting?

SP: John Gregg had an import store on Sixth Street and was walking by and saw a couple of things we had in the window. One was a dress that Olive made. We both knew that we would be interested in Olive if we started traveling. I think he started bringing things in from China when it was first opening up as a communist country that everybody loved then. He was a very good source of textiles and goods. He moved up to Andes, a city in upstate New York, and he named his store after his daughter Paisley. He still has a beautiful store up there now—I looked on Google and found out a little more about it. It was my primary source of merchandise. On what, I had no idea. He was always interested in textiles and art, but I hadn’t been, so he helped me. That’s when Angela Taylor from the New York Times wrote an article. Things just boomeranged from there.

When John Gregg came back from India, I started looking around in New York for a store that was selling Indian textiles and Indian merchandise.

SK: Because of John?

SP: I think of John as the main influence. Indian Nepal was one of the stores that sold Indian clothing, and then it just grew. At that time they still had craft shows, textile shows. I would go to the shows and if I saw something I liked I’d make contact with those dealers. Through different dealers and shows I began to build up my inventory. I had three or four women—Olive had good design techniques and Fumi’s was an excellent seamstress. They both made things for the store.

SK: So you’d get the textiles and they would make clothing out of them?

SP: Yeah.

SK: Was your input on design?

SP: Vaguely, but they did most of the designing. I liked patchwork, and that’s where most of my influence was. Olive’s design was much more sophisticated and Fumi’s was very detailed. The combination of all this plus clothing was already made in other countries, like India or wherever else, built up. Our eyes were good at choosing interesting things.

SK: You would scout different sources and materials?

SP: Yeah, I would go to the shows and get stuff. Then a lot of people, a lot of dealers, came to the store bringing jewelry and costumes. That New York Times Magazine article helped.

SK: And the dress the woman was wearing was made by Olive?

SP: Yes. It was inspired by a French designer named Grès—Alix Grès.

SK: Was everything one of a kind?

SP: Yeah, mostly with cholis and things like that. They were always one of a kind because they were made by Indian women. Each one was different. I didn’t know there was such a variety of stuff. As a matter of fact, John Gregg, who I haven’t heard from for over fifty-seven years, sent me a package just the other day. It’s a choli I had for my friend. And then we were interested in traveling, I think. He started bringing things in from China when it was first opening up as a communist country that everybody loved then. He was a very good source of
SK: Do you see Fumi?
SP: Yeah, but she's in Hawaii right now. She went to see her brother who is in the hospital. They have a house there, so she's taking care of it. I don't know if she's going to come back. Her son-in-law is a guitarist and he travels a lot around the world—classical guitar—and her daughter plays in a female quartet. And they have grandchildren. Her granddaughter is living in her place on Fourteenth Street.

SK: So you opened the store on Seventh Street and then you opened another one on St. Mark's, but you kept the Seventh Street store as your workplace and for a while your living quarters.
SP: I'm like a nomad—I moved everywhere. I've been in five or six different places in the Village.

SK: What was it like in that neighborhood at the time?
SP: Ukrainian. The store was across from a Ukrainian school and there's a Ukrainian church there. Our landlord and most of the tenants in my building were Ukrainian, except my friends the Plenda sisters. One of the sisters [Carol Plenda] was married to the painter Bob Thompson, who is dead now. They had a store on Sixth Street. It was like a little community. Nice times.

SK: When did you start doing your own collecting and traveling?
SP: I think it was when I took the store on Spring Street in SoHo. I believe that's when I took my first trip. Now, where the hell did I go?

SK: Did the store start off doing very well? Was it a success monetarily?
SP: Oh, yeah, the store always did well.
SK: Were you the main owner of it?
SP: Yeah.
SK: Did Olive and Fumi drift away a bit after the St. Mark's store?
SP: No. Sometimes if they made something we'd sell it in the store and they'd get paid for it. And then Fumi opened her own store.
SK: Most of what was being sold in Knoberry on St. Mark's was textiles, right?
SP: Textiles and costumes. We did one thing for... who's that singer? That loud singer. She's dead now. White girl, Janis [Joplin], yeah. And Jimi Hendrix. And then some of the other people in that whole group of performers.

SK: They used to come to the store and buy things?
SP: Yeah, because St. Mark's was the street with the Electric Circus and Kristina Gerby's store. She was married to Jules Olitski. And then there was Jackie Lewis, who had opened Grand Hotel around the corner. Jackie gave up that business and opened a spa in the Bahamas or some place [Jackie's on the Reef, Jamaica]. Trash and Vauduelle had an extra store on St. Mark's Place that was an African store. There was an African American partner in that store—what's his name? He's dead now. He was the one who got the idea that I should have their shop when they moved to the other one on St. Mark's. Everybody was friends. It was a close neighborhood.

SK: What were some other stores?
SP: One sold Japanese stuff. Leekan Designs were Asian and North African dealers. Oh, that's when I was in SoHo. Jacques Carcanagues and Leekan Designs. They opened down around Spring and Broadway. They were good friends, too. And then I had a couple of Japanese dealers I very close to. One was called Noriko. I know Noriko finally moved out to Long Island. Was she in Oaks Bluff? I'm not quite sure. Anyway, she opened a Japanese store out there. I have some of her stuff. And Mrs. Tara, Jessica Tara, used to bring me Japanese textiles—indigos. She moved to California. I'm not sure if she is living now or not.

SK: When you had the store on Eighth Street, what was going on in your personal life? Who were you seeing, what you were doing?
SP: I was really involved in the store. Running it, making stuff, traveling—I was a good time. And doing shows. I made a trip to Africa. I went to Senegal and then Ghana and Nigeria, a couple of other African countries. I collected textiles and art.
SK: Do you have any memories of those first trips?
SP: They treated me like a queen. When I left Senegal to go to Nigeria, I didn't have a hotel reservation. They saw it was an American and a Black single woman and they got me booked in a hotel that cost a fortune. Then I went to Northern Lagos, and at that time the African Games were going on. Who's the famous African athlete? Anyway, his brother wanted a textile designer and we became friendly and we went around collecting African objects—that was in 1978. I was always making patchwork clothing. I made a cost back in 1980 that I wear now. That's my sole winter coat. I can't believe it.

SK: And I had a show of David [Hammons]. I met him when I was living on Spring Street and had storage, I think. He came into the store and just started putting stuff together. Making little art objects and installations. It was a wonderful, beautiful show. A couple of people wrote about it. We didn't even send invitations or anything.

SK: How did you meet Ken [Tisa]?
SP: He just came into the store and we hit it off. He came in to ask me if I needed somebody to work there, something like that.
SK: He says that you taught him a lot.
SP: Well, he likes to pay compliments to people. He taught me a lot.

SK: What did he teach you?
SP: Art and looking—general art education. We hung out a lot together. You know Details magazine? At that time it was owned by—I forget her name [perhaps Annie Flanders]. She lived on the corner of Spring and West Broadway and we were all friends and used to party together.
SK: She founded Details magazine?
SP: Yeah. She sold that magazine, probably for a lot of money.
SK: So, as soon as you opened the store, it started making money?
SP: When I opened the store, I was still working. When it got to be too much, I gave up my job to start working there.
SK: Your social work job?
SP: Yeah. Off and on during my career I would be in social work.
SK: After you had this store on Eighth Street, you opened up the store in SoHo?
SP: On Seventh Street.
SK: Why did you move to SoHo?
SP: That's where it was happening. I remember sitting on the doorstep of a restaurant across the street, called Station something. I knew the couple who owned it. We'd have little magazines? At that time the streets down there, and I used to stop in and see them. They told me that the store on Spring Street was occupied by a couple of East Indian guys who felt they weren't doing the kind of business they should. So I met them, negotiated with them, and I took that store. That was at 154 Spring Street. Next door to the Spring Street Bar, which was very popular.
SK: The store was on St. Mark's still doing well?
SP: Yeah, I guess so.
SK: You just wanted to move neighborhoods?
SP: I can't remember why I left it, but it wasn't a bad thing.
SK: Have you been to St. Mark's lately? It's so different.
SP: No, I don't go anywhere anymore. I don't even go down to Spring Street or TriBeCa. I go to the corner here—Sixth Avenue. I just stopped traveling. I didn't realize how old I was until Ken and I sat down to figure it out. I thought, Oh, I've had it!
SK: When was the last time you worked?
SP: At my store in TriBeCa. I met that guy I was married to for seven days—years. I wish I had only been married for seven days.
SK: How long were you married?
SP: It was a couple of years. Afterwards, I had a breakdown and went to California. I came back and moved out of there. I left wonderful things in there, wonderful furniture and everything else.

SK: Society. Becoming more color-conscious.
SK: You think it was more color-conscious than when
SP: When I was growing up, it wasn't so much in the open. If you said "Ku Klux Klan" when I was young, that was something way back over there.
SK: You're saying that it started when you were in the East Village?

1 The John and Mary R. Markle Memorial residence, dedicated in 1930 under the auspices of the Salvation Army, is located at 123 West Thirteenth Street in Manhattan.
CHARLES DANIEL DAWSON

Charles Daniel “Danny” Dawson is a photographer, curator, arts administrator, consultant, filmmaker, and scholar based in New York. He is an early member of the Kamonoinge Workshop.

Svetlana Kitko: How did you first hear about Knobkerri?

Charles Daniel Dawson: A friend took me there—Jimmie Mannas. He was at NYU’s Graduate Institute of Film and Television the year before I attended. It was 1967. The school was around the corner from Sara’s shop. She was on St. Mark’s Place and the school was around the block on East Seventh Street. In fact, Jimmie introduced me to both the film school and to Sara.

The shop turned out to be a de facto cultural center because artists came by and felt so comfortable. So many musicians and visual artists came by. And also, the shop was really attractive. It was a beautiful shop. I met a lot of musicians there, like Ornette Coleman and the singer Leon Thomas. This whole school of creative people.

SK: What were your first impressions of the shop? Was there anything else like it at that time?

CDD: Knobkerri was for me an international wonderland. The store was unique—she was kind of philosophically eclectic. She would just collect whatever she thought was a beautiful piece. She didn’t care what culture it came from. So it would be African, Indonesian, Chinese, whatever. She didn’t have a lot of Northern European stuff, because a lot of shops around the area did.

SK: Like Ukrainian, right?

CDD: Exactly. There were Ukrainian shops that did that, so she didn’t have to, but she might have something European there because it was beautiful and represented a folksy roots tradition that the area had. But I think she was always around the corner. All the Black players were around, and her prices were ridiculous. There were some sacred objects, too. Her taste was so good. At times, she had jewelry designers like Vincent Wilson working there. I bought one of his pieces. She used to sell jewelry by Art Smith, a pioneering Black designer.

SK: That’s what everyone says—that her taste was so good. It wasn’t just an inventory of foreign or exotic materials. It was a curated store.

CDD: Whatever she had, it was the ideal of that thing. If it was an Indian silver bracelet, it would be the best of Indian silver. If it was an amber necklace, it would be the best of that.

SK: What about patchwork?

CDD: She was one of the first to do patchwork. She’d take fabrics from Africa and from India that were really extraordinary and have them printed for the African market out that were considered African prints. Some of it was actually made with an African sensibility, using African designs, but a lot came out of Indian ideas about what African design should be. She would cut the fabric, put it together, sew it up into squares, about five-inch squares, and she would make patchwork clothing with them. There is a picture by Dawoud Bey of me wearing a scarf that was one of those things.

She would make coats and shirts and things like that. She was a lot of sensibility in Senegal, with the Muridah, a group of Muslim followers of mystic saints in Senegal—the main one is Sheikh Amadou Bamba. Sheik Bamba had a disciple, Sheikh Ibrahim Fall, who also had groups of people from Senegal who were musicians and artists, and their practice was: “Work and make music.” One of their standard outfits was patchwork clothes, so you’d see that. They were musicians and artists. It would become a kind of ritual dress for them. It was showing an aesthetic of poverty but instead the idea that they weren’t bound by standard conventions of dress.

SK: Also, at least from our perspective, it’s sustainable.

CDD: There were a few designers around. There was one woman who used to be married to the painter Bob Thompson. She had a shop around the corner.

SK: Carol Plenda. And Andrea Aranow?

CDD: Yeah. And Fumi [Schmidt].

SK: There is the origin story of Sara going from being a social worker to doing the store and being an artist herself. Who shaped Sara, would you say?

CDD: She came from a family that appreciated museums and hanging out in art circles. Also, that area was alive with art, particularly African American artists. First of all, you had all the jazz musicians in the world living there. Then you had theater groups: Negro Ensemble was around the corner. All the Black players were around, and every Black painter was living on the Lower East Side most of the time. They all knew Sara, and they all came by the shop.

SK: She influenced so many of the people around her, but the same can be said of her.

CDD: I agree. Just to think of seeing Ornette in Chinese silk—Ornette is really original, but that combination of ideas, of visual ideas in terms of clothes and fabric, that’s Sara’s gift. She brought it to town. She was in a standard collegiate 1960s suit with a skinny tie. When I first saw him, he was wearing a big overcoat and a hat without a brim. Well, a little bit of a brim, but it wasn’t shaped or creased in any way. He looked like a hermit or something. A kind of a stylized hermit. But later he wore phoenaxies embroidered into Chinese silk. That sensibility comes out of Sara.

SK: Right.
SK: Did you know Van Der Zee?

SK: Did you know Van Der Zee?

SK: You’re the first one who’s mentioned that name to me.

SK: Is she alive?

SK: I think she lives in Brooklyn, but I can’t find her contact information.

SK: There was another guy I used to see at Sara’s shop all the time, too. He was a close friend who died a few years ago. His name was Jerrey Barr. He was an architect and would design futuristic space stations. They’re totally non-functional but they are incredibly beautiful work—Afro-Futurism before the term was invented.

SK: One thing I’ve been asking people is to describe Sara’s worldview. Was she politically minded?

SK: She was politically minded the way African Americans are sarcastically reminded of this country and this culture. But she was also an internationalist. The same way she looked at culture at large, she looked at material culture, and she got ideas from it all. That Indonesian fabric could be next to an African fabric; that African sculpture could be next to an instrument from another part of the world, like an Aboriginal instrument. She would take things from there. Anything that was uniquely—I don’t want to say native—but a strong thing from a culture. Most of the time it was Third World cultures, though there’d be things from Europe that you would see there sometimes. It had to be beautiful.

SK: Something that I’ve wondered about in terms of our current context is how much of the conversation with other cultures has changed. Ideas around cultural appropriation. Sara had all these women, including a lot of white women who were very enthusiastic, like Elena, around her. Elena would wear Mexican garb that she got from the villages.  

SK: Elena made a living importing and selling Mexican jewelry and Mexican clothing.

SK: I think it’s interesting that in the ‘60s and ‘70s the idea of wearing stuff from another culture would be transgressive.

SK: In the ‘60s, it wasn’t seen as transgressive, it was seen as innovative, even informative.

SK: I mean transgressive in relation to the square, mainstream culture.

SK: Well, yeah. Still, that was not transgressive but insightful. Sara’s seeing beauty in another culture, but not appropriating it. It was seeing a parallel beauty that she could incorporate into something she did. She was matching beauty with beauty when she put fabrics from different cultures together.

The shop was like that. Too, there was everything from all over the world, but it didn’t clash because the unifying factor was her sensibility and the quality of the things of beauty.

SK: What about the people who ended up wearing it?

SK: Did she care?

SK: Well, so many of the things were made for her friends. There was also a kind of hierarchy, where some of the people who worked in the store made fun of the rich white women who bought the objects.

SK: I’ve wondered about that.

SK: Well, first of all, Joanne, Lois, and Seret [Scott] were beautiful. They would tie their hair with a beautiful fabric and everybody would come in and want to tie their hair like that. They were conscious of that, it was almost like they were talking to each other. Sara was really conscious of it, too. She enjoyed playing the game.

Joanne and Seret told me that Faye Dunaway came in there a few times. Everybody who was somebody in the art world who knew something about, not exoticism, but the fact that there are other methods or venues for finding things, knew about Sara’s shop. She was the pioneer. There was a place called Jacques Carcanages that’s down in SoHo now. They come directly out of Sara. They don’t exist without Sara setting that groundwork, seeing these things together.

SK: You’ve said that you think her impact was singular on the cultural life of New York.

SK: She normalized that kind of vision.

SK: Can you talk about that?

SK: The vision we see now, which has become so common because of more fluency in terms of travel, photography was art. She basically figured out what the pillows are sitting on. And you’re not what you’re sitting on when you sit down and talk to Sara. And then you’re sitting in one of those folding African chairs. They’re all right next to each other, a unique way of showing each individual material culture as beautiful. You get to look at them and see them and understand the sensibility.

Nothing clashed, because it all fit into her particular sensibility. There was such a high level of artistic knowledge and understanding of what art is. Only she would know that you could put a simple African chair next to a David Hammons. They’re not in conversation—they’re in conversation. You get to look at the things they’re having.

SK: Then and the theater people were a whole other thing.

SK: Right. Woode King was the don of African American theater. He was a major producer of African American plays since the ‘60s. He was a film producer and a playwright and an actor, and he was a good friend of Sara’s.

Everybody in theater was a friend of Sara’s. All those places, all the theaters around her were in there in a way. It was a sensibility you couldn’t do. If you’re hanging out with someone like David or Tyrone Mitchell or Charles Abramson and they have a shirt or a scarf and you say, Oh, where did you get that? They’d say, Oh, I got it at Sara’s. Everybody knew where that was.

SK: It’s interesting that stores, unlike museums or even galleries to some extent, are much more transient because they’re strictly based on commerce. It could have been a gallery, but it wasn’t.

SK: Well, galleries are just as transient as stores.

SK: I guess so. With a gallery, though, she could have made more money, right?

SK: She probably could have. Priced things properly.

SK: A lot of it, too, seems to be that she was just very generous.

SK: I know she was generous to me, but I don’t know if she was generous because we were friends.

SK: She was friends with everyone who came into the store.

SK: You’re damn right. But a lot of the people that she was closer to were treated differently. I know I was the beneficiary of that. I got a more reasonable price than her general prices.

SK: She did make a living. At one point, she made a lot of money.

SK: Once you got something from there, you didn’t get rid of it. It was like something your grandmother gave you
observed that most fashionable Africans wouldn’t be caught in their own backyards in most of the African-inspired dress being worn here. Their native robes are much finer, she said. Then she added with amusement that while many Africans are going Afro, many Africans are taking to Western dress during the day. They’re also doing their share of updating, such as slitting the sides of their long, narrow lapa skirts so they can hop on and off public transit cars. Several years ago, the African scene has its own, but it was taken over in the mid-1960s by African-influenced designers such as the Blacker Brothers, who were known for their vibrant, colorful designs.

Because Sara was an artist, she was more than happy to find a new way of fulfilling herself. “I don’t know how she started with Knoberry, though,” SK said.

SK: I have so much amazing stuff that Renoir [Daret] sent me. Let me show you some. This is Lauren Hutton in a choli. These are all Knoberry items and jewelry. This is a Saturday Evening Post from 1968. And this is from the Christian Science Monitor on June 7, 1968: “Today’s Afro-American is literally bringing his culture out of the closet. Men and women alike are wearing native African dress on the streets where they live. . . . They’re letting their hair ‘go natural,’ instead of straightening it. Women are abandoning red lipstick. Little ready-to-wear and custom shops are springing up across Manhattan and Brooklyn, from Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem to the East Fifties and into the East Village. One of the more firmly established, Sara Penn’s Knoberry shop on St. Marks Place, is a focal point.” Then they interview people.

CDD: Did they say who they interviewed?

SK: Yeah. Raymond Saunders was one.

CDD: Raymond Saunders is a famous painter. He teaches at Berkeley.

SK: And here’s the actor/model Bert Middleton quoted explaining why he started wearing African clothes: “I thought it better to identify with something closer to my own heritage than to wear a Nehru coat or Mao collar,” he told me.” And, a little later: “Small-framed Sara Penn had on Ethiopian pants and shirt in white monk’s cloth with an overskirt in batik print from Nigeria. She was about to change into Western clothes, and report to work at the Human Resources Administration, where she is a full-time social worker. She’s been handling two careers since she opened Knoberry on Seventh Street in 1965. So fast, she hasn’t felt like giving up her job. But since she moved the shop to St. Mark’s Place three months ago, she said, it really has ‘caught on. I’m hoping it will get to this place where I can do just this.’ . . . Knoberry already keeps designers Olive Thurman Wong, an Afro-American, and Yumi Schmidt, a young Japanese, busy full-time. Prices run from about six dollars for a plain dashiki to two hundred and fifty dollars for a coat of elaborately embroidered dashiki cloth.

It goes on: “Although most of the Afro-Americans in New York aren’t wearing African garb to work, except perhaps in Harlem, it’s been seen more and more on the streets of Manhattan. Natural hairstyles are getting to be commonplace. The new image, which took hold in black nationalist groups and spread across the ghettos, is picking up. . . . A visitor from Liberia and Nigeria

SK: Why do you think she stopped doing social work?

CDD: She was working at the Lower East Side Settlement House, and it was frustrating. Social work is bullshit in the United States, it’s like a patchwork of systemic problems. You realize that you can’t help your client because it’s a system structured to keep them where they are. It’s frustrating unless all you want is a paycheck.

Another time, Sonny Rollins came in the shop—–a big-time horn player. He came in and said that he wanted to get in touch with the jazz musician Don Cherry. Don had moved to Europe. Amsterdam I think, so Sonny Rollins wanted to leave his phone number for Sara to give to Don. He knew that Don Cherry would come in when he was back to the States. We’re obviously talking before Sara went to Europe. Sara was in the back of the shop, so Sonny gave me the number. This must’ve been Sixth Street, not St. Mark’s, because Sara worked in the back on Sixth. I walked back and called her, “Sara, there’s a phone number for Sonny Rollins wants to leave his phone number for Don Cherry,” I didn’t know either Sonny Rollins or Don Cherry at that time—I was such a ding-dong about all of it. Sara comes out and says, “Oh, hi, Sonny,” and they chat a bit.

SK: Yeah.

SERET SCOTT

Seret Scott is a theater director, playwright, and actor best known for her roles in the films Losing Ground and Pretty Baby, as well as many theatrical productions, including Nozake Shange’s first staging of For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf.

Svetlana Kito: When did you first go to Knoberry?

Seret Scott: In 1966, Sara’s first shop was on East Sixth Street, downtown from the entrance to Tisch School of Arts/NYU, where I was studying. I probably met Sara within the first month of being at the university. Every day I’d walk up to the shop window and just stare at the beautifully presented, elaborate compilation of fabric, textiles, clothing, pottery, wall hangings, jewelry . . . I couldn’t stop staring. Important items I’d never seen outside of a museum display were shimmering in the window of that small Lower East Side shop. On one occasion I saw Sara bustling around inside and I knocked on the door, thinking the shop was closed. Sara came to the door and I, with no real thought, said I was a model and would really like to model her clothing if she ever needed one.

She looked at me like Who is this kid and what is she ever talking about? and then she said, “Hmmm, come in.” I went in and was overwhelmed. Overwhelmed. In that small room was just every kind of beautiful fabric and textile from everywhere.

It wasn’t just clothing, there were wraps and blankets, odd musical instruments, and I don’t know what else. We talked. She asked what I was studying at university, where I was from, where I was living now, and then she told me to come back next week, and I did. Sara had started working for Sara within the first couple of months of moving to New York. There wasn’t a real schedule. I’d go there if I didn’t have late classes or rehearsals, and she’d tell me what she needed done in the shop that day. She had an eye for arranging anything—arranged displays, pretty much everything. Most people came in with the same sense of awe I felt, because no one had seen that kind of shop before. It attracted a certain type of person. Our customers were seasoned travelers, hippies, collectors, musicians, scholars, and housewives, and the items in the store had some kind of personal resonance for them.

SK: Yes.

Seret Scott: Was this the period of time when Jimi Hendrix would come into the store?

SS: Twice, I waited on him twice.

SK: Tell me about that.

SS: Well, I didn’t really wait on him. He came in with the two women he was living with (just saying). Sara had an ordinary wooden stool by the counter that for some reason attracted everybody. Jimi just sat there, with his iconic black hat pulled low, while the women shopped.

The women were like butterflies, picking things up. “Oh, I love this, I love that, I love this,” and would put it on the counter. There was a bit of rivalry—if one picked up a necklace, the other one would pick up earrings or something, and he just sat there. So I didn’t literally wait on him, but he was the one who paid for everything.

Another story . . . A guy, kind of lean and short with an unusual vibe, came into the shop one afternoon. I can’t remember which location of Knoberry it was. He looked around a while and then pulled some matchbooks out of his pocket. The matchbooks were those little folded cardboard things with you tear the match off. The inside of the matchbook was usually just plain brown cardboard. On the inside of his matchbooks, there were little watercolor paintings. He wanted to trade them for an article of clothing. Well, as a simple salesgirl, I couldn’t do that. I don’t remember if another salesgirl was there—–there only be one person—but I just couldn’t make that trade of a clothing item for tiny matchbook watercolors. Later I was to find out that it was [Jean-Michel Basquiat].

SK: Oh, my gosh!

SS: He didn’t have money and wanted to trade these little paintings of his. He wasn’t famous at that time, not known by his face anyway. I wasn’t able to do anything, but that’s who it was.

SK: That’s a great story!

SS: Ornette Coleman was a really important and well-known jazz musician at that time. He’d come in and sit on the stool, just sit and watch people come in. He would talk with us if nobody was in the shop.

Another time, Sonny Rollins came in the shop—a big-time horn player. He came in and said that he wanted to get in touch with the jazz musician Don Cherry. Don had moved to Europe. Amsterdam I think, so Sonny Rollins wanted to leave his phone number for Sara to give to Don. He knew that Don Cherry would come in when he was back to the States. We’re obviously talking before Sara went to Europe. Sara was in the back of the shop, so Sonny gave me the number. This must’ve been Sixth Street, not St. Mark’s, because Sara worked in the back on Sixth. I walked back and called her, “Sara, there’s a phone number for Sonny Rollins wants to leave his phone number for Don Cherry,” I didn’t know either Sonny Rollins or Don Cherry at that time—I was such a ding-dong about all of it. Sara comes out and says, “Oh, hi, Sonny,” and they chat a bit.

SK: Yeah.
SS: Then he leaves, and Sara turns to me and says, “What do you mean, ‘a guy here’ you? That was Sonny Rollins!”

Lena Horne came in and Eartha Kitt. Miles Davis didn’t come in while I was there, but he was parked outside once for some reason. This was on St. Mark’s. There were people who would book a layover if they were flying from California to Europe, they’d have a stopover in New York at JFK airport, get off that plane, get a cab, come straight to Knobkerry, and buy stuff. We’d save the item on an album cover. So many musicians, but remember when she moved to St. Mark’s, the shop was literally across the street from the Electric Circus. Those were mostly the Janis Joplin—type of folks.

SK: Did you work at the St. Mark’s store, as well?

SS: Yeah. I worked for Sara for years and years whenever I wasn’t working as an actress. She said, “Come on down,” and I worked in the SoHo shop also. Just everybody, I’m not kidding you, everybody came into Knobkerry.

SK: I heard Mick Jagger came in, Sonny and Cher came in. Mia Farrow shopped there. Fashion designers like Yves Saint Laurent and all these people. I heard that Yves Saint Laurent maybe stole ideas from Knobkerry.

SS: Everybody did. A lot of her ideas got stolen.

SK: Do you know any examples of that?

SS: It was a major magazine. I don’t think it was Vogue—she might have been Women’s Wear. Once when she opened the paper, it was basically her shop window that had been recreated in a studio and photographed. It wasn’t subtle—it’s just put it that way.

SK: She was so innovative in her displays and creations. I know she also made jewelry.

SS: If something was broken in the shop, like a necklace, she would take some of the parts and make earrings out of them. People would say, “Oh, these earrings are unusual!” Yeah, well, that’s because about twenty minutes ago they were a necklace.

SK: When you had something that was broken, you would get something that was broken and you would use it to make something new.

SS: Oh, yeah. I did Colored Girls on Broadway in 1976, and there was a bunch of us who used to go down to Knobkerry between a matinee and an evening performance as a group. She would’ve been at St. Mark’s at that time.

SK: Right.

SS: Whenever something happened that was major, I always made sure that I went down and told Sara. She did not like to go above Fourteenth Street. I’m not kidding you—she was a Lower East Side person.

SK: So, she might not go to a play of yours if it was above Fourteenth Street?

SS: Well, she probably wouldn’t anyway, if she felt she had to be in the shop. But I would tease her about it.

SK: How would you say the later shops, the Spring Street and West Broadway stores, were different in terms of inventory or objects?

SS: The Spring Street store, in my memory, attracted mostly visual artists—the windows would appeal to them. Sara would have some object from Asia or South America, large pottery or something with fabric draped on it. That would bring people in. As I recall, when she was on Spring Street, she had more stuff that people who worked and traded with her would make into some sort of interesting thing.

I remember when I’d be at the shop, especially the shop on St. Mark’s, guys would come in specifically to Knobkerry to show handmade items from some other country. They’d have bags of stuff to show, and we’d call Sara, tell her to come to the shop. They’d take the trade out display stuff. They didn’t show her stuff—it was always good quality or one-of-a-kind items. They and Sara would make a deal. Sometimes it would be that Sara would take something on commission, sometimes she just paid them straight out. Myself and whoever I was working with that day would sit there and think, I want that, but we wouldn’t say it aloud because we’d get in trouble with Sara, “The price went up because you said you like it!”

SK: I know that Knobkerry was speaking to a bohemian and hippie clientele, but it also seemed like a center of specifically African American cultural life, attracting all kinds of makers like artists, dancers, and musicians. I’m interested in what were some of Sara’s ideas behind the store in terms of say, Blackness and the way that she grew up. What was she trying to do that was different than white mainstream society at the time?

SS: Well, she had clothing from Africa. This was at a time, especially on the Lower East Side, when you rarely saw Blacks, even American Blacks. When I was at NYU, perhaps I’d see a day laborer, maybe a construction person, but mostly I didn’t see Blacks around. Sara didn’t import things, she got African art from people because people came to her. It was mainly collectors, and other artists, who were interested in items from Africa. At that time, it was hippie clothing and artifacts that got attention. The whole point of the hippie thing was to look like somebody else.

When she lost the last shop in New York, we were very concerned about what was going to happen to some of the clothing and works she had, since they were valuable pieces. Four or five of us stored things for Sara so that they wouldn’t just get taken. Right now, in my basement, I have African tops that you might call dashiks. I have large clay pots from Africa and, I think, Iran. Things like that that I don’t know what to anoint because I don’t know who trades in that kind of thing anymore.

Fabric and textiles, that was the world Sara lived in and found most comforting. I think that she wanted everybody to recognize the brilliance of a piece of fabric and the story that it could tell. It would lift you into another way of looking at things, looking at the world.

When I started working at Knobkerry, she changed my entire way of dressing. Everything I had on was Knobkerry, and if it wasn’t, it was from a secondhand shop and dressed up with things over it from Knobkerry. It was just everything. Knobkerry was an expression of the universe, it brought in everything and everybody to the shop . . . and into the objects of other places—the pottery, the artwork, the paintings, and definitely the clothing.

She had shoes the shepherds wore in Morocco. That was the kind of thing that interested me, and the fact that she didn’t let me, or any of us, get away with anything. Meaning that if you didn’t do it right, something would happen. She would say, “What do you mean, you didn’t such-and-such?” You’d feel it, and really want to be forgiven—“Oh, please forgive me, my queen.”

When Sara’s daughters were young, even my own mother would say to me, “Talk to Sara about that.” There were things she expected from us and I tried to deliver them.
Kahn. Did you know him?

Well, let’s get back to Knobbery. I’d like to hear about the opening of the store.

She knew she needed to do something other than social work. She suddenly decided she wanted to open a store. Of course she was good at nothing except fashion, but she’s a quick learner and she found the right location on Spring Street. It was a beautiful store. I think she had thought about it a lot, because Sara was not stupid.

What was it like?

Because she was perfect as a personality and in her taste in people, it was pretty successful from the beginning. St. Mark’s was the first store, and it was a big success because of her personality. It was a hangout place. I used to help her put stuff together because I always had good skills with my hands and with machines.

Sara wanted you to make things for her, right?

I used to make and mend clothes, since she couldn’t do it. The third person was Olive Wong. She was not much of a sewer either, but she had an incredible eye and impeccable taste. She was very refined. We’d talk about the most obscure activities, or she’d sew whole dresses or something—she’d say, “Sara, that’s the one to buy.” Sara was learning all the time and she had so much to do that I became the craftsperson and Olive the shopper. She used to go buying with me a lot. Sara was perfectly willing to go along with all of this. It was a happy collection of skills because I was available to hang out in the shop when she needed something pulled together.

Did you make clothes that were your designs, or was it always Sara’s designs?

It was never my designs. Olive made her own designs. Sara would find materials and say, “You think you can reproduce this?” I would say, “Yeah, I think we can.” It was like that. Sara used to love Indian cholis. We made a lot of those because they always sold and she could never find enough of them. That was easy.

Can you tell me what Sara’s concept was behind the store to begin with?

She didn’t want to do social work and she wanted a freewheeling store. There was always a salon in the back, never mind the customers. Sara was always the hostess, overseeing all the time and would get coffee or tea for people. And people did hang out. A lot of people did, women as well as guys.

So there was this inventory that you guys were designing and producing, but there was also inventory that she was buying from other people and selling, right?

She ran the business part of it, that was her baby. It was her investment, and she dealt with the finances. I don’t know that her skills were in that direction, but it was her store.

SK: Didn’t she also buy ethnographic materials from abroad?

FS: The store was unusual in that all of these peddlers swarmed there. She didn’t travel too much, though. She did go to Guatamala and Belize. She would go out of town to look for things, but basically some of the best came right into the store from people who were traveling all over the world and buying. They would bring it to her and she would love it, and she would buy it. That was something that went on in the back room all the time.

SK: Selling?

FS: Yeah. People would say, “Oh, go to Knobbery and show Sara this, she might be interested.” She had good instincts about what would go, because she knew what she wanted the personality of the store to be. She couldn’t have traveled enough to have found all those beautiful items, and it was a time when there were a lot of young people traveling around in India and Afghanistan and Pakistan. And she knew John Gregg. He loved to travel and he would always bring back wonderful items. She would buy it like crazy because he had beautiful taste and a feeling for the culture of the place. He loved doing it. He would say, “Oh, when we were in Kashmir, we saw this and we saw that.” He would bring it back and Sara would love it because John was such a great shopper.

SK: Were there other stores like Knobbery? Was she part of a trend, or did she start a trend of stores that sold all different kinds of materials?

FS: There wasn’t anything like that I know of—but of course my world was so small then.

I think the world was ready for all the exotic items that were suddenly available, and Sara was in the forefront of it. She made wonderful windows, and lots of guys from uptown came to check out her stores because they figured she knew something that nobody else knew. Fred Leighton tried to be like her, but he didn’t have that thing. She read all the fashion books and looked at a lot of pictures, and she’d say, “Oh, this looks fantastic.” And then John would appear with some choice material and she would say, “Oh my God, I can’t pass this up.” People were always making things available to her, and she never had to travel to all these places. The people that traveled were seeing stuff that hadn’t been seen before. And when they came back, always they knew that if they took it to Sara first, she had first dibs, she would buy it. She had such an eye.

SK: What kind of people came into the shop?

FS: Every kind of person you can think of—socialites, celebrities, and collectors. People like Lena Horne, for instance. Lena was always into clothing, and I made her some pieces. She was so charming that when she called me on the phone, I couldn’t believe I was talking to her—it was such a thrill. And she was so beautiful that whatever you made for her she loved. She’d say, “Oh, I went to this dinner party with my daughter and her husband (he’s like some famous director or something) and they love this dress that you made for me.” I said, “How fantastic.”

FS: I never met him, but I know he probably would have made her the best husband. He lived in France, and she was thinking of marrying him, but didn’t.

SK: Do you have other stories about clothes you made for people?

FS: In those days there was a big rock star name—Sara didn’t know if she could afford it. She bought some of my stuff. Knobbery was such a unique store that people went to it out of curiosity. It was very unusual, and Sara was eccentric enough that she endorsed things that were not ordinary. People were very excited by the store. They loved the merchandise and that it was always something they had never seen before.

SK: Are we talking about the ‘60s or the ‘70s?

FS: ‘60s.

Rie Schmidt: I think it’s more the ‘70s, because I remember going there when I was in college. I think she hired me very briefly at the St. Mark’s store during that period.

SK: It was sort of like a hub of cultural and social activity, right?

FS: Yes. She didn’t care if people didn’t buy. She didn’t care if they hung out either. I used to do what I had to do. I would have to go home and cook and take care of my family, so I observed some hours but not a strict schedule. It was a beautiful time for her because she was always in the moment. In many ways she was doing it because her mother would not have approved of this loose, nomadic, no-schedule, opened-end life. I think Sara probably spent the rest of her life trying to undo her mother. Her mother was very, very proper and very strict.

SK: Did you meet her mom?

FS: I met her mother more than once. She came to New York often to check on Sara. And Sara was fine with it because her mother never stayed. She lived in California. She wanted Sara to lead a certain kind of life and bought her that house in Pasadena. Sara blew that. She didn’t want that house.

SK: When you were at Knoberry on Spring Street, was the store making money?

FS: Of course paying the bills was important, but Sara never seemed to have any problems with that. She could pay the rent and she had a car and she had a certain lifestyle. She never seemed to be financially hard up for her. She was doing something right, and I think it was because she had the right merchandise in the right location at the right time. That Spring Street shop was completely most successful. It was very beautiful and very big, and Sara filled it with her personality.

I had a shop on Spring Street myself. That’s a funny story. Sara called to say that there was a guy named Fred who had a shop on Spring Street. She said, “Fred wants to get out of the business and his shop is for sale. Do you want to take it over?”

RS: It was for rent.

FS: I said, “Are you crazy?” I couldn’t even make the rent. But in two or three days, I had a shop on Spring
Street. She was so persuasive. That was a nice period when she had her shop and I had my shop. And we were different because I designed and made clothing from this wonderful material that she introduced me to. It was very inspiring for me to have some of the merchandise that she had because I was able to incorporate it into my development.

SK: Did you keep making clothes for her while you had your store, or did someone else?

FS: Not while I had my store, no. We were just a block apart, but her store was totally different than mine. Mine was a custom shop.

SK: A tailor shop.

FS: I did a lot of one-of-a-kind and I did a lot of custom work. Then I went to FIT for a while. My skills were very strong because I’d been making clothes since I was nine years old. I could whip around the machine like crazy, and for me it was a natural thing. I wanted to make beautiful, original clothing. We were in different areas, but Sara’s shop was certainly an inspiration for me. That’s when I got introduced to a lot of beautiful fabrics. Nobody had seen these kinds of fabrics and nobody had seen this kind of designing. When I went to FIT, the job counselor said, “You should never work for anybody on Seventh Avenue. You’ve got to always work for yourself.”

SK: And you didn’t because you were so good at it? You didn’t have to do what she told you, but you knew what you knew.

FS: I’m sure she would have been surprised by that. She would have said but because I knew that otherwise I would just be a little workhorse in the garment business. Freedom allows you to . . .

SK: To be creative.

FS: I could make colossal mistakes and nobody could say anything.

SK: Did you get a lot of African fabrics from Sara?

FS: Oh, yeah. But everything, not just African. It was from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, the lower part of Russia, the UK. I loved it because I’d never seen this kind of fabric before. I had all this beautiful Japanese, Korean and Chinese material.

I loved putting together things that were totally unrelated culturally, because it would be startling. I think that’s what people loved about it, that they couldn’t be jaded when they saw it. You have to be aesthetically balanced. If I had something so striking that it would overwhelm the garment, I made sure it was a wearable garment. It couldn’t look like a costume. It had to be a beautiful garment that enhanced the person who was wearing it. I think the reason people loved it was because it was all very wearable. You didn’t want to be considered some garish costume person. I sewed a lot of costumes in costume shops, and it bored me. I hated unsewing the clothing—it bothered me. Sara was definitely the influence on this kind of designing, which I couldn’t call far out but unique.

SK: Can you describe it more? Can you give me an example?

FS: Take what I call the obi jacket—I had some antique Japanese obis in the front, I had Indian silks at the side, and I had old sixteenth-century European embroidery on the top, and it was all toned down with black velvet. It was very black, but I couldn’t define it together, never mind talking about it. I never would have been able to say what you could accept me of is making anything that was difficult to wear or too costumey. That’s when the garment wears the wearer instead of the person wearing the garment. It had to be unusual, but not far out, ugly unusual. It had to be aesthetically right. That was built into.

SK: Something I wanted to ask you about. As a female African American entrepreneur at this time in New York, Sara must have experienced some bullshit and racism—was the store so multicultural that she was insulated from that?

FS: I don’t know too much about her growing-up years, but I have an idea because I knew her mother. I knew that the mother wanted her to be a proper Black debutante. Sara didn’t want it to be that way. It rebelled her if you ever needed of that. Basically, I guess that’s why we gravitated towards each other. I knew that she was a very private person and I knew that we could never be girly, girly lady friends who went to lunch a lot. We didn’t have the time and she wasn’t made that way and neither was I. So it was perfect the way we met and the way we developed a friendship. We were such individuals.

When she came to New York, she did exactly as she damn pleased. I don’t follow friends’ advice. When she did say something, “I’m finished with taking advice from people. I’m going to do my own thing, no matter how ill-advised it is.” And she did.

RS: Do you think it was hard for her being a Black woman running a business?

FS: No. I don’t think that bothered her too much. She wasn’t thin-skinned about being Black. I think she didn’t like certain things about herself because her mother probably told her that she wished Sara were more this way or more that way.

SK: Sara’s mother was very much in the church.

FS: Very much into the church, very much wanting to go on the streets, that much I knew. She was from that? Or was the store so multicultural that she was insulated from that?

FS: With Sara, there was no plan. She improvised. She had a place in her heart that she had to sell, which was great for her. They wanted it to buy. In fact, they couldn’t wait to buy it because of the quality, which was so mind-blowing. As I said, one thing is that Sara was just so wealthy. We had great respect for each other. We knew that there were certain areas you didn’t go into because it was not necessary. You never had to have long speeches about what was wrong with the relationship because she never had any problems. And I had a lot of that she didn’t have, and I think she recognized that. That was good. I remember when I sold my clothing to Bloomingdale’s for the first time, Sara was very excited. But I said, “Sara, they want me to make thirty of these. I can’t make thirty. I can make maybe eight.” She said that I should try, and I said, “You want me to go insane. I can’t make thirty of those dresses, because each one is different. I’m not going to do that.” I made as many as I could.

RS: Probably longer than that.

FS: With Sara, there was no plan. She improvised. She had in her heart that she was going to have that shop. She probably felt like she was suffocating, and that’s why she couldn’t stay there. She had the house and she could have been very comfortable in that house. But I think she basically hated it there.

SK: Did you see her much in the past ten years?

FS: We saw each other like old friends. When I was in Honolulu for a couple of stretches and I didn’t get in touch with her, she was really pissed. I explained that I was taking care of the family and the house and my brother.

RS: She used to come over, when she was in better physical shape, and bring my mother something from the place where she was living—maybe a bag of oranges that she didn’t want to eat.

FS: But then later, a couple of times she said, “Maybe we can go and have some tea.” Then I said, “Why go to tea? Come over here so we can have tea in my living room.” When she was in bad shape the last year, I told her, “Sara, I have an apartment and I want you to come and stay with me.” She said, “No way.”

SK: Why?

RS: She couldn’t. This is a two-flight walk-up. She said, “I could never do the stairs.”

FS: She just didn’t like the idea of being roommates. Because I would be like her mother.

RS: The last time I saw her, about four or five years ago, I had bought tickets for Hamilton for my daughter and her friends, and my mother and me. My daughter and her friend couldn’t come, so my husband came and we invited Sara.

FS: She loved it.

RS: The show was still in its first or second year. The last time I talked to her on the phone, which was a major accomplishment for me, I called her and asked that she keep me on all the latest. She loved Hamilton, it was so much fun. That’s first time I’ve been anywhere above Fourteenth Street in two years.”

FS: I’m so glad we gave her that last ticket. One of the last times I spoke to Sara, I said, “I better go and check you out in your room.” She said, “Oh, no, you can’t come up here.” She never wanted anyone there. When I told her she could come here to live, God, that was like the kiss of death. She would never. I understood completely. I said, “Okay, but you know, if you get so desperately sick of that place you’re in, you can come here.” She had a lot of friends, but whether they would come to her in her hour of need, who could know? I wasn’t going to let her go on the streets, that much I knew.

SK: But she didn’t want to go up your stairs.

FS: Yeah. I always met her halfway or downstairs. I didn’t want her to take the stairs because they were tough for her. She didn’t want any demands made on her condition. But that’s the way she was. Didn’t want any pity or solace of any kind. She was independent. And I respect that because I understand it so well. That’s exactly the way I am.
Kate Prendergast and Jane Barrell Yadav are the daughters of the painter Marcia Marcus, who became friends with Sara Penn when Penn first moved to New York. Both daughters conduct legacy work for their mother and other artists.

Jane Barrell Yadav: We went to school on Eleventh Street, across from where the music school is now. My mother was born in that building, and we went to school there. It was Downtown Community School. After school, she would pick us up and we would typically wander over to Eighth Street, where Knobbery was for a while. And then across the street, where [Mary Rafferty-Kanowitz] had the Queen of Diamonds. As you can imagine, that's full-on teenagers, hippies sleeping on the streets, that whole thing.

For Sara and for Mary, it was contentious. They couldn’t stand the crowds. There's that piece of being really tough businesswomen. Just putting up with a lot, having very unique product for the time. My dad got a blue corduroy beret, we were both big into hats. She would run lots of dresses. There is an early portrait that my mother did of Sara, that she may have traded for dresses and jewelry, or whatever. Could have been a possibility at that time.

The painting, I think, is 1966, and right in there is where Sara’s experimenting with clothes. She always loved clothes. I have, and Kate too, vivid memories of looking in the shop and seeing all the toys. Sara did more sewing when she went to the location on Seventh Street. She was always giving us little bits of material, the scraps, that we would take home and use to make clothes for Barbie dolls. I had a sewing machine, I was given one in 1969, so I was sewing a lot. She would encourage that, she was really into fashion.

I just remember that she laugh was just fantastic. She and my mother could joke with each other, I think they really met on the same level. It was always a treat.

To go into her shop was just a real treat.

Svetlana Kitto: When you say the shop, are you talking about the St. Mark’s shop or the Seventh Street shop, or both?

JBY: I remember the Eighth Street shop as being very bright and having more color, and maybe she was doing some sewing in the back but I don’t remember it from that time. I definitely remember that Seventh Street seemed to be more focused. In my memory, the back was pretty large, and her sewing machine would always be out with some project that she was working on or collaborating on. She was getting a lot of material from India—or, I don’t know where she was sourcing it. There were pins on the floor. I remember picking them up for her, that was a big deal.

SK: I think she lived in the back of that store for a while.

JBY: That’s probably why it had more of a homey feel, for hanging out. I know that she made me feel special, because once I drew a drawing of what looked like bell-bottoms, and she made a big deal about: “You predicted bell-bottoms!” Just going over there, she made us feel important, that we had something to contribute to the fashion world. It just always felt really fun.

SK: Do you have other memories of her?

JBY: It was the first place I saw a poison ring, which struck my childhood imagination.

SK: Oh, right, yeah.

JBY: The idea that there were people that would carry some kind of poison in their ring was like something out of a fairytale. As a child of six or seven, I was surprised to learn that people really poison each other, in fact that a way to facilitate this activity had been developed and was still being manufactured. To all say that Sara and her shop were full of magic indications that the world was a large and mysterious place full of things beyond what school, television, and the museums of New York (my primary sources of information) could show me. The shop itself deepened my concepts about the world.

JBY: It was the magic of the shop. We’re bringing home all this Indian material and my mother makes me a princess dress. But I can attest to the poison rings, because they are a thing in India. My sister-in-law (I married a man from India) has a poison ring that actually opens up. Quite the thing.

SK: Do you guys know Elena Solow? She used to work for Sara and was friends with her for a really long time. Forever.

SK: She babysat for us. That’s how we knew her.

SK: That makes sense. She was telling me that anyone who worked at the store had to know where everything came from. It wasn’t just moving stuff off the shelves, you had to know the story of where it came from, then also the meaning behind it.

JBY: Absolutely, there was definitely a seriousness when you were in. It was a thing. I remember going to the store over in SoHo, and how it was bigger and better. I think she had a beautiful crown when I walked in. It wasn’t just moving stuff off the shelves, she was really using that what she was doing. She had a real purpose to increase people’s understanding of ethnic culture.

KP: Are you aware of the mentions of her in New York Magazine from the late ‘60s and ‘70s? You probably found more than I did, but I found a few mentions for who she was dressing and how she was dressing them. She was influential. I tried to imagine when they were all young, in their twenties. Sara wasn’t from New York, right?

JBY: She was from Pittsburgh.

KP: The idea that they all met, these young women—ambitious, focused on putting a career together. I always thought about that time period. Not just them, but some of the other younger artists that all knew each other. They were so young, and they were women. And they achieved.

JBY: Yeah, and many of them were Black. It was very remarkable for the time.

KP: What is the definition of what she did? Our mother is a painter, that’s a clear profession. Sara’s a shopkeeper, fabric aficionado, object lover, and cultural interpreter.

JBY: I remember, especially on Seventh Street, that there was an intensity even though she was joking around. I remember this much, she said something to the effect of “I’m not quite sure what I’m doing, but I’m going to make it work. It’s going to be okay. I’m on the edge here, and I’m trying to make ends meet.” There was some kind of intensity going on. I’m ten, so I’m not sure, but it was along those lines. Or she’d be telling my mother, “Stop making such a big deal about that. Life is tough. It’s not easy.” That was something like that. She was just really tough, she went through a lot. And for the most part, she was pretty cheerful.

SK: I want to hear about the McSorley’s thing.

JBY: It was a big deal. My dad took me. Did you go, Jane, to McSorley’s, when it became allowable for women?

JBY: Yeah, I must have gone with Uncle Bill or something like that.

KP: Our dad and his brother, as it happens, came from the same place, which was England. And it was normal to go to a pub with your kids. I don’t know when they began allowing women in, I think it was the early ‘70s, when my mother’s father had died. But my grandmother and my father (and I don’t remember if he had a girlfriend) took us. We all sat at a table, five or six of us, and had beers and Limburger cheese. And very, very aware that this weird place had been the last holdout to ban women. And that the first ones they let in were Sara and another shopkeeper on the same street [Barbara Shuman]. So when you’re eleven or twelve, it made an impression, the idea that women weren’t allowed in. Now, I get it even more, that there are people who have memories of the beginning of the ‘80s when there were places a woman couldn’t walk into in pants, she could only wear dress shoes, then by the end of the ‘80s, there were coed dormitories. Women older than me have these compressed culture-shock moments.

JBY: Right. I went to Bennington College in Vermont. I was looking for a progressive liberal arts school that had strong arts programming, and dance was a very strong area at Bennington. In the end, I wound up doing joint work in anthropology. It’s probably one of those trips when you’d come from the woods of Vermont and wonder where everything was that I first ran into Knoberry on St. Mark’s. Everything in the shop was just absolutely amazing to me, as was Sara—very mysterious to me at the time. I’m not quite sure when I ran into her again, but while I was still in college I came to live in my boyfriend’s loft on Broome Street. I might have run into her again then, but I definitely did get out of school.

SK: The first object I can remember buying from the shop on Spring Street when I got out of college was a Sara Penn pillow. I took dance classes at Bleecker and Broadway, so if I didn’t have to run off from class to a job or something, I would just spend hours wandering down Spring Street to her store. There were many long hours spent over many years in that store.

SK: In the Spring Street store?

JBY: Yes. Spring Street, that was where Kenny worked.

SK: Oh, Ken Tisa.

JBY: He was there in the summertime because she spent the rest of her time in Mexico, in Zihuatanejo. He was there as a manager. It was relatively small, but you could see from whatever she put in the window what she was thinking about. From the moment you walked in, there was something to look at, and conversation was high. I was there talking with her, my eyes were darting all around the space. It was not just the kinds of things that she had, but their juxtaposition and placement. You might be looking at a very small object that was worth maybe fifty cents and right next to it was a timeless and valuable sculptural piece.

She had such an eye for textiles, such as fabric that probably came from Rajasthan in India. She was fearless in terms of cutting into something. I have a bag of fabric that she gave me; if I pull a piece out of it, it might be something that she cut. It would be a piece of fabric that she would probably have taken me a year to cut into, but she was fearless.
She made her bags out of cuttings and clippings and pieceings that she might have taken from velvet with Seminole patterns or patchwork. She’d combine that with a cutting from a suzani. It’s an amazing embroidery. I’d never be able to cut into a suzani.

SK: Out of reverence?

JRH: Reverence, and also the cost of the textile. If I had a suzani at an earlier stage in my life, it would be the one suzani that I had, so the thought of cutting into it would be next to impossible. Sara was absolutely fearless and as a result she created incredible combination pieces. She made jackets using Seminole patchwork and she’d often combine velvet with an interesting textile like a Rajasthani piece or a pillow from Mexico with all kinds of beads. The beads had a kind of random quality. It wasn’t as if she was saying, “I’m going to neatly stitch a row of blue beads.” It would be “I’m randomly picking magical—energy.” It was energy. It had to do with energy.

With the items that she placed on objects, like her bags, she was creating little talismans. It wasn’t just the objects that she made but the environment that she created. The face of the store.

SK: What was it like at the store?

JRH: Absolutely. Even though she wasn’t a dancer, she encouraged me to take risks. It was her spirit. That spirit filled me with the sense that Well, yeah, I can do this. Like taking an opportunity to go to Iran. This was in the mid-60s, I would say. Dawson, a great photographer who is a friend of mine.

SK: Did you ever travel together?

JRH: No, we never traveled together, but I have brought things to her that she would then put in her shop. She satirizing, do you think?

SK: Out in front.

JRH: Right. Also, she had a feeling that because she was Black, people would not respond to her as well, even though Renoir, Seret, other people at work were trusted. She was never worked at the shop on a regular basis, but from time to time if I was having a hard time. I was never really an employee.

SK: You got to be her friend.

JRH: I thought that that was the result, but just like any artist, she wasn’t making what she made to appeal to specific people. She’d just think, Oh, I’ll make pillows or I am doing beadwork right now. She wasn’t thinking, Oh, I’m making things for this. It was a bag full of beads and fabric and stuff like that that she gave me. It was one of the last things she gave me. She’d reach down into her treasure trove and say, “Oh, you should take these.” All my life, I juxtaposed things in similar ways.

For a period of time I made gowns. Kind of unusual gowns. Sara put them in her shop. They were similar in thinking to the way that Ken or Sara put different pieces together, but mine tended to use textiles that I could afford. I might not have an exquisite piece of embroidery all over the garment, but maybe would add a very small piece of embroidered. They were odd little items that artists might be drawn to. I’ve always made things like that and she was always great about taking them on.

SK: Would you say that she mentored you as well?

JRH: Yeah, in a different way, I’m sure that there were times, with all of us, that she felt protective of us.

SK: Sara’s Girls. Did you all dress in Knobby?

JRH: I bought chools. I mean, I have a dress from Indonesia, a tunic that I bought from the shop, that originally had been Seret’s. Seret returned it to the shop, and I wanted it. Clothing that’s around, but we all loved dressing in beautiful clothes.

Elena came in from Mexico with a huge collection of Mexican traditional blouses, not made for tourists. She went into the villages and bought skirts and other wonderful things. There were summers when we all looked like Frida Kahlro. Sara always had a beautiful necklace on. Or she’d make something and give it to me. I’m thinking of a necklace that only Sara could have made. The middle of it has a cameo with the face of a white woman, but the beads are all African and other random beads. Again, the juxtaposition in objects was her way of seeing the world.

SK: Can you describe what her way of seeing the world was?

JRH: There’s a certain kind of irony in it, and wit, and satire. And a sense of nothing being precious. Nothing being so sacred that it could not be—

SK: Changed.

JRH: Changed, recognized for its value in its own right. She was being a bit of a Black woman. But you know, I don’t think Sara fully trusted her own genius. She never really recognized or accepted the fact that she was making and doing significant things. I don’t think she fully owned that she was making all the rest of us, she was magnificent and so important.

Sara was genuinely supportive without saying anything in particular. Certainly, she was not judgmental of the folks that worked with her. On the other hand, she could say something that would be . . . I don’t recall ever being put down, but I know she did not take with people that she felt were foolish. She had no patience for that.

SK: When you were saying before that her worldview was witty and ironizing and satirizing, and that she was decidedly a Black woman, what do you mean? What was she satirizing, do you think?

JRH: I think the world as it thinks itself to be. I mean, what we’re talking about now, and the voicings of people out on the street [a reference to public protests regarding the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020]. The world thinks it’s white, it’s not white. If anyone understood that, it was Sara. Look at the world that she was bringing together. It was a world of cultures that were undervalued.

SK: Right. Yeah, she was bringing forth those under-recognized cultures and a statement that the world is not white and that idea very much needs to be challenged.

JRH: I don’t think that she was consciously saying, “This is what I’m doing, I’m sticking it to the man.” But she was sticking it to the man. She could hang out in the back room and pretend that she wasn’t the owner of the shop, I’ll make chools to sell in the shop, both because that’s what she felt like doing that day and because she thought that if somebody came in, they would not necessarily buy the most expensive object in this space from a Black person or a Black woman. But they might buy it from her. Sometimes I think she thought that way. A lot of soul-searching seems to be going on currently within the larger white community. Well, where were you? Where have you been? The rest of the world is quite aware that you’re not the only thing going on. And certainly Sara understood that, she could embrace the entire world.

I didn’t know anything about when she was young in the ’50s, but she traveled all over Europe and had French boyfriends and Spanish boyfriends, and she never got to see the world on her own terms. Without having talked to her about it, I know that what a lot of African Americans feel when they leave this country is that even though you’re living in worlds that colonize people there’s a lot less weight on your shoulders when you leave this country. You don’t have to hold your breath all the time.

SK: I’m really interested in getting at what the store, like the name, Knobby, means. It’s a South African walking stick, but I also read that during Apartheid it was used as a fighting stick.

JRH: Right.

SK: It’s obvious that there are political and social undertones to what she was doing with the store. It went far beyond being a place where you buy cool stuff.

JRH: For me, that’s the important thing, that it was a meeting place where folks that she liked or cared for went to sit. It wasn’t about buying something from Sara, Sara absolutely would not let me buy certain things. She just wouldn’t. She never let me buy one of her famous bags, and when I’d say, “Why? Why can’t I?” she’d say, “Because you can make your own.” That’s very powerful. Because that is a recognition of me, of what I have to give.

SK: Did she ever give you a bag?

JRH: Oh yes. I have one little bag that she gave me. In the bag is a Knobby label for me to sew on. More recently, I’d always say to her, “Why don’t we put your things online?” I’d get a Knobby bag once on eBay, and told her so, I was trying to say to her that her objects should be out there. But we weren’t able to get her then. I’m sorry I don’t have one of her incredible jackets. When you saw her, she was undoubtedly wearing a scarf or a shirt or something that she had made. Up until the end, she was Black and she was doing things. There were some names at that time right at a sample sale. I got her a pair and I got a pair. I see that she wore things that had been given to her or were from the shop right up until the very end.
Andrea Aranow opened her custom boutique, Dakota Transit, on St. Mark’s Place in 1968. She went on to become a collector, designer, and dealer of vintage textiles from around the world.

SK: When did you open your store, Dakota Transit?

AA: The store was open before that—my first job after college. It wasn’t supposed to be a business, but my boyfriend got tired of having two sewing machines living there along with me. There was an empty storefront and things were so cheap then in the East Village. He said, “Use that as a workplace and get your stuff out of here.” The storefront had a window, and one thing led to another. I hung something in the window and that started it. That was around ’68, ’69.

SK: What were you making?

AA: In college, I had been making suede clothes, which I then made at the shop, too. When I went to buy the skins from the jobbers (there were jobbers who mostly got stuff from the handbag and shoe trade), I saw that they had snake skins. So I bought some and started cutting them up for appliqué on the suede. It evolved from there. I started making full snake skin clothes, without suede.

SK: Did you study design, or maybe ethnography, in college?

AA: I studied cultural history. I don’t think my college taught ethnography. They didn’t even have much in the way of history. They had one Asian history class: “We’ll teach you everything about India, Japan, and China in one year.” It wasn’t a very long class.

My career was almost accidental, except that I really felt for travel and for textiles—those were the two guiding lights. I already had one kid when I started traveling, so that was a further enrichment for me. It was a special time in the East Village because the Fillmore East and other clubs were there. There was a lot of music. We thought we were really hot shit. Sara was around the corner, and other people, too. The rents were really cheap. There were a lot of little businesses, people trying out their own ideas. It was really fun.

SK: What was it like on St. Mark’s Place? Was it hipsters mostly?

AA: Yeah. Sara was on St. Mark’s and my shop was right around the corner on the East Ninth Street. The rents hadn’t changed so much since then. We made a few changes—we had a block association, we got money and planted trees that are now fifty years old. They look really great. We had a sense of community. We were young. We were experimental and we were downtown. Emphasis on downtown.

SK: Right.

AA: When I started getting publicity, it was kind of easy because I was making very showy clothes. Magazines like Harper’s Bazaar—they needed stuff. I didn’t figure this out till much later, but they needed editorial content. I wasn’t very good about following fashion trends, but they would tell me the shape of the garment. They gave me tips on what they might want to see in editorials. There was a shop down the block from me. Those girls were connected with the music business and knew Jimi Hendrix. They brought him by one day, and he saw this mass of snakeskins on the chair and said, “Well, suede clothes with applied snakeskin are okay, but I want an outfit that’s all snakeskin.” And it grew from there. Once those showy people came, the stuff was out in Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar. Then the ladies in the Sixties started coming from uptown. So it was a mix. The musicians had money, and some of them were great to work with.

The garments took a long time to make, because what we were coming from the Ninth Street, St. Mark’s area—wholesale shops didn’t have an initial meeting and then create the pattern for a garment piece. We would make it up in muslin and do all the fittings with the muslin. The technique was for me to create a patchwork collage and glue it to muslin and then sew them together with nylon thread. And then that whole thing would be constructed into the garment. We had to do it this way because most of the kinds of snakeskin I used had very little give. Anaconda was one of the more expensive ones. The size of the animal and the kind of tanning could determine how flexible it was. I used a lot of cobra. I liked the way they glazed the cobra with something so it was shiny, and I particularly liked the dark colors—it was a little bit different. I played quite a bit with cobras. It definitely had to be sewn onto a backing.

These people had a lot of money. It was very different in the ’60s. They were rich, my clients, but everybody had more spendable money in those days.

SK: You were spending less money on rent and debt, I imagine.

AA: I never heard anybody talk about school debt, and it was super-easy to get jobs in the ’60s. There were a lot of people like me, college graduates with flimsy career paths and we could easily pick up jobs—social work jobs, working in the library.

SK: Before we get to Knoberry, can you tell me about some of the people in the neighborhood and a little bit about other stores that you say were interesting?

AA: I wasn’t hanging around outside much—I heard about other stores in London and LA where my clients shopped. On my block, there was a ceramic shop, and I think another leather shop. It was practically the same way on the corner on the East Ninth last week and thought that things hadn’t changed much. Independent little businesses and personal projects.

SK: Personal, yeah.

AA: I loved that aspect of it. We had an open door, and people came in and talked. I’m sure not everybody who came in was a potential customer, but they all talked. They brought in ideas or they brought in stuff. One time, a guy came in with this pack of tanned frog skins. They were very beautiful. They were thin, but they were tanned so I could use some for appliqué. Another guy brought in baby kangaroo, skins from Australia, also tanned. Anybody could walk through the door with their ideas.

SK: How did you meet Sara?

AA: She must have come around when I opened—I don’t think I talked to her before then. There was an immediate affinity because we both loved textiles. I didn’t know yet that I was going to make a career traveling and gathering textiles. Sara didn’t do that, especially, but she had a network of people who brought her textiles when they were in Europe. She also had such an eye and such a mind. Right up till the end, a few months before, she was still checking up on me to see what I was wearing, asking me if I’d seen this or that in Vogue. I guess she got somebody to bring her fashion magazines. She had a pretty good network. But all the people in that building, at least a lot of them, liked her, even though she complained.

Every time we talked with Sara, we discovered some little treasure about her past. The time that she was in Europe sounded really amazing. She was skylarking around with this guy, a photographer. They must have been pretty tight—I think she said she stayed about five years in Europe. She was very good-looking then and fearless, and like so many Black Americans, she got a better general reception in Europe than here. I would have loved to see Sara in her prime, though to me Sara was always in her prime. Even when she was doddering, hardly able to stand up, she always put on her jewelry when she came down to meet me in the lobby.

SK: That’s what everyone says.

AA: When Sara had a shop on Spring Street, she had the most beautiful loft down the block. She had an eye for arranging stuff. It’s not like my approach, where stuff is mostly in cases and cabinets. She was very good at visual merchandising, as we call it now. That’s when we were seeing each other often. She’d come by, she’d bring people by; I’d go to see what she had, all these African items. I didn’t know anything about it, but it was great to see and touch.

SK: Was her store singular in that way, in the arrangement of multicultural, multiethnic things?

AA: It was singular because it was built around Sara and Sara’s tastes, but there were other people involved because part of this hippie thing was that we wanted to bring in exotic elements. Another friend of mine had a craft store and he also had good ties to African stuff. Jacques Cacarnagues was another of those craft guys.

SK: I’ve heard about him.

AA: During the SoHo years, we were pretty few down there. Sara’s wasn’t the only store, but she kept it pretty personal. Having somebody like her at the helm, and people like Kenny and a woman who worked with Sara for a long time—Fumi—made the store what it was. Fumi was a good friend, they were the same age, and I think they both felt like outsiders.

SK: In what way?

AA: Starting with not being white. Nobody said this to me, but I have a feeling that that was part of it. Fumi’s store was down there too for a long time. Sara’s framework, it’s always been open door. You can tell by all these people who feel close to her, influenced by her.

SK: Do you feel influenced by her?

AA: Oh yeah, she opened up so many things to me. “Go and see this shop.” I would have never known about it without her. When I went to David Hammons except that there was a party she took me to where I met him.

What do you think she was trying to do with Knoberry? What are some of the ideas behind the concept of the store, which seemed to be a place of not only but especially African American cultural life?

AA: She had this African hook. I think she was showing all of us New Yorkers that it existed since we hadn’t seen it before, but also putting it out in a way that made us want to integrate it with the other things we were wearing or living with within our homes, not like a separate kingdom. Sara was eclectic, she made a bit of this and a bit of that, put on a necklace from here and there, not to recreate the way it should have been worn in Peru or in Zaire or any place, but to make a mix.

AA: When Sara had a shop on Spring Street, she had the most beautiful loft down the block. She had an eye for arranging stuff. It’s not like my approach, where stuff is mostly in cases and cabinets. She was very good at visual merchandising, as we call it now. That’s when we were seeing each other often. She’d come by, she’d bring people by; I’d go to see what she had, all these African items. I didn’t know anything about it, but it was great to see and touch.
Ken Tisa is an artist who currently lives in New York. He is Professor Emeritus in the Painting Department at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

Ken Tisa

In the 1960s and ’70s, New York was one of the most extraordinary places the world has ever seen. The thing I remember so clearly, and only from my reading history, is maybe Berlin during the Weimar Republic. It was wild. New York was wild. Everything was new. New ideas were coming from all over. Because there was so cheap, artists from all over the world were coming to New York and living really comfortable lives on fifty dollars a week. Even then, we knew it was cheap. In any case, I was on St. Mark’s, which at that point was like Fifth Avenue of the cool and the hip. It was where you went. I remember Sara had a shop and I remember looking in the window and seeing all these kurtas in the window. There was one that was so beautiful—it was end with little tie-dyed things all over it, and it just called my name.

I would know anyone else doing that before her in New York?

KT: No, nobody did. She was the first. There were other dealers in ethnicographic art, like Trudy Seligman, who had an ethnic antique store that was the rival of any fantasy shop in the world. She had things that no one else had. She had really weird—shrunken heads—really great stuff. They knew each other, of course. They would back-and-forth buy.

What was different about what Sara was doing?

SK: She was doing mainly clothing. She was doing textiles and clothing.

Did she design the clothing or was it mostly imported?

SK: She started by importing everything, but then she began making clothes. She started making these incredible assemblages of bits and pieces of ethnic textiles, like patchwork. She became famous for her bags. Everybody wanted a Sara bag. Everything was just really good. They were perfect, very high quality, so there were always things a little off, which made her bags art as far as I was concerned. They weren’t perfect.

She also had people working for her who sewed, right?

SK: Yeah, but she did most of the sewing herself. She had the clothing of other people that also worked with ethnic textiles who were probably more exact in their sewing than she was. She worked with a woman named Solange, who must have been by now very much involved with Sara. And Sara always had men. She liked men, but she had really bad taste there.

What about Wolf Kahn?

WK: She was one of her good-taste lovers.

During her early years, she had some really cool guys. She was with Wolf for years. They went to Europe together. Then she met this French writer, who was actually pretty famous. She had some Italian lover who she adored. She did a lot of work with a group of artists who were living in Amsterdam. She had a Dutch lover. She had a lover in every country in Europe. But when she came back from Europe, that’s when she opened Knobbery. After she had been trained as a social worker. She came from a middle-class Black family from Pittsburgh, but she was very much involved with high African American culture was a lot of the clientele, but also a lot of artists.

What was the favorite story of working at Sara’s? I was behind the counter putting around, and this very cute guy walks in with an Afghan hat and a big Afghan coat and a bag. We start talking. I said, “I like your hat.” He said, “I like all this stuff. You want to see what I’m working people that I’ve been really good to. I really liked him. He had a very black, really cool, like a long cloth sewn with all different kinds of African American jewelry—very kind of Black hair was sewn into this cloth. I said, “Oh, my God, this is incredible. Can you show me one second? I want to get the owner of the store, she’s going to love this.” I told Sara, “You should meet this guy.” It was David Hammons, and we all started talking. He would come into Knobbery at the time. He’d always open his bag and he pulls the Sara. She became very close friends. Ntozake Shange became a very good friend of Sara’s and the store, and all the women from Colored Girls used to come there weekly. They were making money and spending it on earrings and jewelry and clothing and bags. Joanne Robinson also worked at the store. She became one of the directors of the Joyce Theater. She didn’t come to Knobbery, but the people that worked at Knobbery were all artists or dancers or writers. Nobody that worked there was doing something. Sara only liked being around creative people. She didn’t like being around ordinary people. It had to be cool. I never met anybody that loved artists like Sara did. She really understood the creative process and what it entails. I loved working there, because if I had to go to where I was working, I was immediately involved in the show, I won’t be back for two weeks.” No problem. There was always somebody in the wings that could cover for me. So it was a great job. I didn’t make much money, but it was fun, and you didn’t need a lot of money in those days.

Thinking of stories, I have one to tell you. Sara was in the store cleaning, she was sweeping up, and they were laying in. She went to Europe together. Then another store owned by an African American woman (Jackie Lewis), Tales of Hoffman, moved in. That was a very gorgeous clothing store, but more ethnic—very hip. I was working behind-the-scenes, and I knew Hoffman and the clientele was extremely cool. Sara had found the Craft Caravan store for Joe and Margaret on Knopfelmeier. When they were looking for a store, and the store up the street, Knobbery, Sara would buy from them, African stuff. So I started working for them. Then somebody that was working for Sara stopped working for her, and she said, “Would you like to start working for them?” I worked for Craft Caravan, and then she and Margaret, moved over to Knobbery, and I stayed with Sara for about maybe five, six years, until art stuff started happening and I didn’t need to work. But I worked for her in her SoHo store, and that was amazing.

Did you see more of that kind of thing happen to Sara? She read me something about things like that happening to her on an institutional level—her not getting credit or getting written out of her own story.
KT: There was a lot. Sara was the only Black person in SoHo practically, her and Jackie Lewis from Grand Hotel/Tales of Hoffman. There were very few Black people involved in commerce in terms of owning stores in really hip areas like SoHo and the East Village or West Village. You could count the number of people on one hand, and they all knew each other. Luckily, we were in SoHo and we were surrounded by artists, so you saw racism but you didn’t see it as extreme as if you were in another business, like if she had a clothing store in a mall or something. It was shocking when you did see it because it was so unexpected. Sara was very conscious, she was very political, extremely political.

SK: In what way?

KT: She was involved with the Black political movements of the time. Members of the Black intelligentsia would meet in her store as if it were a café or a coffee shop. Anytime you walked into that store, there was always somebody in there that was somebody.

SK: Right.

KT: The store was never ever empty. People would come in and hang out and chat and have conversations. There would be African stools, and people would just plunk themselves down on pillows. It was like a salon. I loved going to work because every day it was somebody new. Then I would look at the map for hip Europeans when they came to New York. It was one of the places you went to. So between all the Europeans, the African American artists and musicians, and American artists and musicians—white ones—it was a real potpourri of brilliant minds buying these cool things. Then of course the fashion aspect was big, because Sara had a lot of clientele in the fashion world. She even had a fashion show in the store, if I remember. André Leon Talley, he was a good friend of Sara’s. Again, I didn’t know who any of these people were at the time, so I wasn’t the least bit impressed. Talley used to bring a lot of people to the store. In one fashion show, before I knew who he was, he came late and I said, “I’m sorry, there’s no room.” He got all huffy, and Sara came in and said, “Find room.” I realized he was somebody I better find room for. I think he brought Yves Saint Laurent and a couple of other really big fashion people, and they would buy clothes from Sara for ideas for their collections. For a while, ethnographic clothing was extremely hip. It was in Vogue, it was cool to wear Indian cholis.

SK: The top worn beneath a sari?

KT: Yes. Cholis became a must-have item for all the models, so we were selling them like hotcakes. Each one was handmade: hand-sewn, hand-embroidered. The handwork on all this stuff was incredible.

SK: Are you saying stuff that Sara made or stuff that she got, or both?

KT: Stuff that she got and also stuff that she made. Sara would make her things out of scraps. If she got a choli and it was ripped, like an antique, she’d cut it up. I can’t believe it now when I look back, all that cloth she cut up. But there was so much of it, we didn’t think about it. Now, of course, you wouldn’t even consider cutting it up, because it’s antique, rare, beautiful embroidery.

SK: Why would you not consider it now, but you would then?

KT: Because I was twenty-three years old then and didn’t know value.

SK: But she did.

KT: She did, and she was making art, her art. She was able to do that. I wasn’t. I could never ever. I tried using some antique cloth in one of my pieces and couldn’t do it, just couldn’t do it. It was too beautiful and it took over my visual space. It became about that. But Sara was able to combine designs and patterns from across cultures. In one bag, she’d have Japanese, Chinese, African, Indian, and Latin American fabric. That’s why her bags and her jackets were so beautiful and so incredible. She couldn’t keep them in the store. They were expensive, her jackets sold for about two hundred dollars, which in those days was a lot of money. But everybody had to have one. She became the “it” place for a while. She was always this other place for musicians and artists, but of course they didn’t have the kind of money that the fashion world had.

Willi Smith was one of the first Black fashion designers that became corporate and big. His sister Sara was one of the first Black models to be on the cover of Vogue. I think she had an affair with the actor Robert De Niro. Sara was good friends with De Niro’s father. His father was an artist, and gay. Sara was a terrible businesswoman.

SK: I was going to say, what about all this money that she was making?

KT: She made so much money, and she gave it all away, essentially. If you needed money, you just went to Sara. Sara was the most generous person I’ve ever met. She was one of the reasons I committed to taking care of her in her last years, because she had given to so many people and she helped everybody.

She got fed up with New York at one point and decided to move to California. She opened a store in Pasadena. At first, she was really worried about it, but Knoberry in Pasadena, had no idea what they were looking at. It was the wrong place, it was the wrong group of people. So she came back to New York and found a store in TriBeCa and she made an apartment in the back of the store. It was sort of illegal, but she did it. That was a really neat store, but the problem was that there was no foot traffic. At that time, TriBeCa was the netherworld. There was nothing there. She’s not a restauranteuse of the style, for sure. She opened a store, no galleries. A lot of artists lived in lofts there, but not enough to make the store a success. She did okay, though.

SK: Was the rent cheap?

KT: Yeah, the rent was cheap. She survived. It wasn’t like the old Knoberry, but Artists Space was next door, so there were artists.

SK: Were they friends with the people at Artists Space?

KT: I don’t think so. At that point, she was older and winding down a bit. The store was small, it was packed, it was beautiful, but it wasn’t the same. New York wasn’t the same.

SK: What year are we talking about now?

KT: 1999. So then there was an interim where she had a tiny store right near Cooper Union, which she shared with Fumi. It was mostly clothing. Fumi had a rack, she had a rack and then a couple of showcases. She still had her followers, but I never achieved the fame that she had in the ’60s and ’70s, when she was the center of the group of Black intellectuals that revolved around her shop. Sara’s was not only a place to shop in but a place to hang out in and share ideas. She would put people’s posters up and promote different art events. It’s hard to describe, because there’s nothing like it—a commercial space that was also a cultural space. It was a very special place for people. Sara and I had a really, really special relationship. Sara loved me, I loved Sara. She could do no wrong, I could do no wrong. For me, it was perfection.

SK: It’s not complicated for you to talk about her.

KT: No.

SK: Was she cranky when you first met her?

KT: Never. She was the nicest person in the world.

SK: To other people besides you, I mean.

KT: No, she was always incredibly nice to people. She didn’t take shit, that’s the one thing she did take. If you made a racist remark, then it was, you were out.

SK: Do you have any examples of that, her not taking shit?

KT: I’ve seen her throw people out of the store, just tell them, “Get out.”

SK: People that made racist remarks?

KT: Not even racist remarks, but maybe they didn’t like something or said something snarky about something and she didn’t like it. “Get out. I don’t need your money.” She once grabbed something out of a woman’s hand—she was going to buy this very expensive coat, it was like five hundred dollars, that was a lot of money then. She’s never been one that’s entitled. “A couple restaurants said they don’t serve this to you.” The woman said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I’m not selling it to you. It’s not for sale.” The woman was one of these uptown privileged white ladies, and to have a Black server say that to her like this look of utter blankness. Like this could not be possible.

SK: Do you remember why she did that?

KT: It was something the woman said, she thought she was being cool and she made some kind of remark. It must have had a racial overtone, because Sara didn’t usually get that sort of shape unless it was racial. I do remember her following some woman around the store with a piece of incense because she didn’t like the way the woman smelled. I had to go into the back room because I couldn’t stop laughing. This woman was trying on clothes and I had to take Sara aside and say, “Sara, I’ll handle this. Just give me the incense.” “Nope, I have to make sure that woman doesn’t stink up my store.”

SK: The last thing I want to know is if you could talk about how she influenced you.

KT: That’s a good question, because she did influence me. I’ll be forever indebted to Sara for many things, one of them being what I learned from her. I consider Sara one of my teachers, from the very, very beginning, the first moment I walked into her shop. At the time I was young, in my twenties, and had decided that painting was too bourgeois, that it was elitist, some early-twenties political bullshit. I decided that I would only sew my paintings. I would only use things that I found on the street and I wouldn’t buy art supplies. Of course, that was bullshit, because I was buying thread and scissors. But I had this political agenda.

When I started working for Sara, I began to learn about all these different cultures and different textiles and what they meant, and how textile weaving could form as much of a narrative as a painting. You could tell stories through woven cloth. Sara’s work was always in a very special place for people. Sara and I had a really, really special relationship. Sara loved me, I loved Sara. She could do no wrong, I could do no wrong. For me, it was perfection.
Svetlana Kitto: How did you initially come into Knobby’s—what’s the story there?

David Hammons: Well, it was about the kind of clothes she made. Her clothes were universal. It was amazing to see the juxtaposition of things from different places, the quality of her stitching, and the poetic-ness in the clothes. And then watching people come buy from others, Africans and people from Turkey, who were selling their things, their fabric. So I was just drawn to the spirit of the store.

SK: I talked to Danny Dawson, who told me that you and Charles Abramson and Tyrone Mitchell would go around SoHo and visit Sara’s store and others that you liked.

DH: Her store was very tiny. It was like going to a candy store.

SK: Are you thinking of Spring Street when you say that?

DH: Yes. And then people told me she was on Ninth Street.

SK: She was on St. Mark’s at one point.

DH: Okay. That was before I came to New York in the early ’70s.

SK: In terms of going to the store and doing a show there, how did that come about?

DH: We were friends and I wanted to get her some notoriety. I figured if I had a show there it would give her some publicity and people coming into the store. That was my purpose. I was trying to use my clout, as they say.

SK: What do you mean?

DH: Using as much space as I could to do the show.

SK: When you put the show together, were people there? Was the store open?

DH: What I did was to make sure nobody knew about the exhibition, so it was word of mouth. I let it grow on its own instead of having an opening and all that.

SK: Had you done a show, at that point, in that way? Where it was sort of hidden in plain sight?

DH: No. I needed the environment to do it in. That was the perfect place to hide things and move things around. Improvisation.

SK: Also in terms of the materials that you chose to use for the show, like the masks that you made into a fountain . . .

DH: Yeah, that was mine. But most of the stuff was already there. I just shifted it around and went in the back to see what I could bring out to the front.

SK: You put a basketball in a vase, right?

DH: Yeah.

SK: And you turned a basketball into a rice bowl, I seem to remember.

DH: Right. Did you see the show?


DH: Well, you talk like you saw the show.

SK: I’ve seen lots of pictures of it and I’ve read a lot about it. I’ve been thinking about Sara and lots of things to do with Sara for a long time. I’ve seen documentation of the show and I’m interested in how, like you’re saying, the environment of her store would have changed how you make work.

DH: Things just needed to shift around. Anything to get the crowd there.

SK: Sometimes I would ask her to speak French and tell me stories about when she lived in Paris. One story she told me: “I used to see Jack Clemente [an Italian artist] walking home drunk every night in the rain.” That’s the one that I liked the most.

DH: That’s great.

SK: But there’s another one. I don’t think you can write this one. I asked, “When did you leave Paris?” She said, “When Maya Angelou came to Paris, that’s when I left.”

SK: That sounds like Sara. I only interviewed her once, but . . .

DH: I introduced her to my daughter and they became close friends. Carmen worked for a while bookkeeping, helping her organize her apartment, things like that. There were a lot of people who knew her at the flea market on Twenty-Fourth Street, Twenty-Fifth Street.

SK: I’ve heard that was the only time she went uptown.

DH: When I went to flea market, I’d say, “Anybody seen Sara?” “Oh, she just left.” I used to buy tickets for her whenever Ornette Coleman was in town. I made sure that she went to see Ornette Coleman.

SK: Why wouldn’t she have done that on her own?

DH: That’s Sara.

SK: She was friends with Ornette, right?

DH: Mm-hmm. I used to take clothes over to Knobby’s a lot to have them altered. If I bought a jacket or something and I wanted another pocket in it, I would take it over there and she would make a pocket or do my pants.

SK: Right. I know it was very much a hangout place as well. Was there business being done, but it was also a place to socialize.

DH: Excuse me, there was no business being done. When somebody wanted to buy something, she would run to the backroom. That’s why she had to have these other people selling the products.

SK: Why did she do that?

DH: Ask Sara.

SK: I wish I could.

DH: She wasn’t about the business. She was not a businesswoman. Most people came in there because it was a museum.

DH: When you put the show together, were people around a lot. Then she went over to, was it Eighth Street?

DH: Yes. She had a little shop there, and the shops start 9PNO)\[ZOLKPKZLSSZ[ɈHUK[OLYL^LYLU»[OLMYVU[OPUNZMYVT

DH: Some of them. I hope she got money from it, because that was the purpose, too.

SK: Do you remember any particular pieces that you had or saw for the first time there?

DH: So many Africans would come in with things to sell her that she might like. It was so unusual. There weren’t that many stores down there where Black people could go in and feel comfortable. That was a big part of it. But those kinds of places aren’t good for business. If you’re a business, you can’t have people hanging out. It wasn’t a barbershop.

DH: It got articles. It was in all the newspapers. SK: Right.

DH: She was an artist and hippie, and these kinds of things terrified most artists. They don’t know how to sell their products, so they have to have someone else to do it. That’s who she was.

SK: Right. But she did sell stuff and there was some—

DH: It wasn’t enough though to pay the rent. She was an artist, she was a seamstress. Creativity.

SK: Her philosophy behind Knobby’s is a really interesting thing that I’ve heard about, her worldview.

DH: I came in late compared to Danny and Ken [Tisa] and all those people. I came in around the edges, because she was over there on Broadway. She moved around a lot. Then she went over to, was it Eighth Street?

SK: Seventh Street.

DH: Yes. She had a little shop there, and the shops start getting smaller and smaller, but I don’t remember Sara selling anything herself. Somebody else had to do it.

SK: My understanding is that she did love to host. She wanted people to come to the store and hang out, she loved that.

DH: Right, but you don’t make money if people are just hanging out. People are afraid to come in when they see all these Black folks hanging out. I’m glad somebody’s giving her some attention. My purpose was to get the attention to the store.

SK: I haven’t heard it put that way. That she needed help at that point.

DH: You can’t do anything without advertisement. I was coming up on the scene and I said, “Let me just go over here and do this to bring the attention.”

SK: Did it have that effect, do you think?

DH: It got articles. In all the newspapers. And then people moved on. But that’s what I was doing.

SK: Did you sell the pieces you had?

DH: Some of them. I hope she got money from it, because that was the purpose, too.

SK: So the money for the pieces went back to the store?

DH: I hope so. After that, people would come in and they’d buy things, for a short period of time. But people used it like it was a museum. She should have charged them to come in.

SK: In another time and place, do you think it would’ve been a gallery?

DH: No, it would be what it was. That’s Sara. To me, it’s all about the quality of the material. She was able to make these amazing clothes. Looking at the stitches in the fabric—those kinds of things are just masterfully done.

SK: Do you remember any particular pieces that you had or saw for the first time there?

DH: So many Africans would come in with things to sell her that she might like. It was so unusual. There weren’t that many stores down there where Black people could go in and feel comfortable. That was a big part of it. But those kinds of places aren’t good for business. If you’re a business, you can’t have people hanging out. It wasn’t a barbershop.

DH: It did get a lot of press, though. Before you would have gone in, they were written up in all the newspapers—New York Times and New York Magazine and Esquire. They would make these cholis, Indian garments, that they would manufacture and sell. They would be used in fashion shoots. But the marketing didn’t connect. She’s doing all this work, it’s being used, but it’s not well known enough that it comes from her.

DH: Well, that’s part of the racism thing. And there’s nothing she could do about it, because she’s not a businesswoman. Romantic. I used to tell her, “What’s love got to do with this, Sara?” Sell these damn clothes.

SK: Wait. You used to tell her that?

DH: I did. People fall in love with their things and they don’t want to sell them.

SK: They don’t want people to buy them. 

SK: Hanging out. People are afraid to come in when they see all these Black folks hanging out. I’m glad somebody’s giving her some attention. My purpose was to get the attention to the store.
DH: I can see Sara saying that.
SK: Who else was working at the store when you went? Seret Scott? She was in Coloreds Girls and she was an actress. Or was it Joanne Hill, who was a dancer? Or Elena Solow, who was white?
DH: Which one was living in Mexico?
SK: Elena.
DH: Elena. Oh my goodness, they were like twins.
SK: What do you mean?
DH: She was always together with Ken, they were like disciples. Completely at awe in her presence, which was very beautiful to watch. And Danny. They gravitated to Sara for her energy. They saw her as a deity, which was very interesting to watch. And Danny. They gravitated to disciples. Completely at awe in her presence, which was

Svetlana Kitto: Could you talk about David Hammons's involvement with Sara Penn's shop?

Carol Thompson: Let me start with my first time meeting him, because it relates to his installation at the shop. I was working with the Center for African Art from '87 to '96—from the time it was in adjacent townhouses at Sixty-Eighth and Park to when it moved to SoHo, first to temporary offices above Dean and Deluca; the New Museum was downtown at that time, and the Guggenheim was at the end of the block in that “quick minute.”

I was at a show with a very dear friend of mine, who introduced me to David, who had just come from doing a residency in Rome. He said he had just come from his studio, where he was working on a series of works that incorporated water because he loved the gigantic fountains in Rome. He commented how hard it was to control water. I remember thinking how poetic that was.

The shop was filled with beautiful things from all different places. Lots of textiles and functional objects. I have a vague recollection of a little architectural structure, like a Japanese shrine, a little house that David put black-eyed peas inside on the floor.

At that time, David was going to a place in Chelsea—Chelsea Mini Storage. A lot of the African art traders would be going there to buy their things. Downstairs, it was almost like a market. A market with lots and lots of stalls of African art. It primarily had replicas made for the Western market, not museum-type things, although there were exceptions because some top collectors and dealers would go there. I had a drink together at the Bowery Bar. He was carrying a briefcase filled with little Dan masks, those small-scale masks that are referred to as passport masks. He put a white-faced Punu mask replica in the window of Sara's shop, often people think they're Japanese, since they have kind of an Asian aspect—they look a lot like noth masks—yet they are a hallmark of working. They represent the face of a particularly beautiful woman with a hairstyle that looks like a mohawk or other bivalve shell. They are sublime, sublime works of art.

SK: What else did he install at the shop?

CT: He put ostrich feathers all around the top of the replica of the Punu mask and adapted it to spout water. Going into the shop, it was a hide-and-seek game or treasure hunt. You just wandered around and then you spotted something and thought, Okay, that's David's work. He took a whole group of those little Dan passport masks and attached them to the wall with little wires so they looked like a waterfall cascading from the wall into space. I thought it was just so beautiful.

SK: How often did you visit Knobbery?

CT: It was a place to stop in and chat and look around. I would go there from time to time during the period that David's work was there, because it was always changing. He was constantly adding things here and there.

SK: What do you think drew David and Sara together?

CT: They both loved beautiful things from faraway places. David always loved textiles and she too loved textiles. She accommodated his playfulness.

SK: What was the work you said you loved the most?

CT: It's one he installed later, after he had already installed quite a few works. It was called Freudian Slip ([1989]). David described how growing up he was one of a lot of children in his family. I don't know if he was the only male, but I know he had a bunch of sisters, maybe five or six, or seven, somewhere in there. That piece is a beautiful old-fashioned woman's slip and it's a translucent pink color with a pleated skirt. And underneath he put a replica of a Gelede mask to make it look like a pregnant woman's stomach. One of my colleagues, Clyde Taylor, as an African and African diaspora cinema specialist who at the time was in Africanas, said it was the most erotic work he'd ever seen anywhere in the world. I thought it was the most extraordinary, beautiful thing, and such a moving tribute to the concept as turned into a contemporary work by an artist of David's stature. I thought it was brilliant.

SK: What work was first shown at Knobbery?

CT: Yeah, with the Punu mask and the little Dan passport masks. I was there with Sara when he was installing the waterfall work. I think the name is from the Rwandan genocide in some way, but I don't remember exactly. It reminded me, and I discussed this with him, of a work that it might even have been a reaction to, by Armand Arman, a famous twentieth-century French artist who used accumulation as a way of working. Arman work is illustrated in the 1984 MoMA Primitivism exhibition catalogue: a group of Dan passport masks are frozen inside plexiglass as a verbal ice cube. It seemed kind of awful to me to do something like that to those little Dan passport masks. In some ways, David's work frees them.

Svetlana Kitto: I'd like to hear how you met Sara and anything you want to share about your relationship.

Paulette Young: I knew her towards the end of Knobbery. One thing I remember speaking with Sara about was the idea of leaving the country of your birth, leaving the United States to come into your own and see yourself not just as a Black woman but as a creative woman. A woman who wants to contribute to art and culture, a woman who feels like she has something to bring to the table, without quite knowing what that is, from having that more appreciated outside of your own country, particularly being from Pennsylvania. She was Pittsburgh, I was Philadelphia, and what do they say—Alabama's in between. The two urban centers had a very strong African American and communal life. And although we had several generations apart, it was incredible to understand our shared histories, both daring to leave the States. I was just finishing up my degree at the time. I went to Ghana in '98 for the first time and then came back in 2000 to 2001.

When I was then writing my dissertation, I spent more time getting to know Sara. She was really excited about my experience. I thought she was being kind of motherly or auntly, but what it was, actually, is that she was saying, “I would’ve done something like that.” Coming into a foreign country as a Black woman in business is a little different than coming in as a Black student under the protection of your University, which gives you access. That’s why I studied anthropology and traveled as part of my project. I felt a little sheepish sometimes talking about my experiences, but she was very intrigued by them—how I dealt with the market women, how I wanted to follow design from its inception at the designer’s studio in Holland to what happens once that cloth got to Africa.

She talked to me a lot about the Silk Route, which I had not really paid much attention to, and the movement of textiles. And that’s what she and Eric [Robertson] have in common. The reason the three of us connected was that Eric was dealing in African textiles, and since I was interested in textiles I knew him. He told me about what Sara was doing with textiles from early on—Moroccon textiles. I had lived in Japan and done some textiles there, so we’d talk about the different ways of the Japanese approach textiles and how other cultures, India and other places like that, dealt with textiles. We talked

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Paulette Young, Ph.D., is a cultural anthropologist, curator, and independent scholar in the visual arts and artistic cultural practices of communities in Africa and the African Diaspora. Her research centers on the historical and contemporary roles of global dress, design, and style as an expressive artistic and cultural form. Young is Director of the Young Robertson Gallery in New York, which specializes in fine arts from Africa and the African Diaspora, focusing on traditional African fine art, textiles, and photography.

CAROL THOMPSON

PAULETTE YOUNG
A lot of shop, about styles and marketing your taste to other people. And having Black women in the crew on St. Mark’s with Jackie Lewis. Having these grand dames, as I call them, dictate stock, it was really phenomenal. I think a lot about Black Lives Matter and the push to give Black designers and Black culture their recognition. I wish Sara was here, because it’s such a special time.

SK: She seemed to be unique as an African American female entrepreneur at this time and also, like you said, supported by a really interesting multiracial community of women, of makers. In her own store, she had Olive Wong, a Black woman who helped her with the aesthetics of the store and buying. And then she had Fumi Schmidt, who was Hawaiian Japanese and did a lot of sewing work and designing. Sheri Scott, a woman who was in the first For Colored Girls production, worked at the first store. She said that at that time she didn’t see that many Black Americans in that milieu. It was very extraordinary to her.

PY: Definitely. I know that she and I talked about certain designers. I’m not going to say who, who started off on St. Mark’s and were able to get financing. They didn’t have to go through middlemen or take private loans. They were able to jump a couple of leapfrogs ahead and have a different set of opportunities. Just how does that impact your decision-making, what you can produce as a small business? You have to go through middlemen or take private loans. And if you do that, it means in the way you tweak it and make it their own is to name the cloth with proverbial expressions that make it local.

SK: She always had a giving spirit. In her older years, she said you? Do you feel like you’re giving back? And yes, she said something about the idea of outsourcing. Many cultures source designs, so why is it unusual for Africans to do that, to be comfortable with taking something and then tweaking it and making it their own? That’s what my thesis was, that they tweak it and make it their own is to name the cloth with proverbial expressions that make it local. So we talked about Ghana and going to the Cape coast, where I saw fishermen who had flags called Fante flags. We talked about them being sold in her shop, I talked with her about seeing the boats; the flags become three-dimensional versus seeing them in a two-dimensional form on a wall in a museum. At the time I didn’t know that she sold them. She talked about being drawn to them based on their graphics and visual appeal. One thing she taught me, just from talking with her, is that it isn’t enough to get something just because it’s interesting or what the flag looks like. They tweak it and make it their own is to name the colonial mentality. She said, “Listen, it’s also about what the client likes and not you convincing the client but showing the client that this is something useful, and also that it’s beautiful.”

SK: Right.

PY: Something else is craftsmanship, the idea of the artisan. She was the perfect woman to come to Africa because of her beauty and her attitude. And she was open to acquire. The Art of the Hand was one art form that we talked about. Eric had supplied her with some of them. We also talked about the idea of who dictates taste, the idea of being a tastemaker as a Black woman. She was interesting because she saw herself as a Black woman, but she also saw herself as a trailblazer as far as multiculturalism, globalization, go. People were like, “Globalization?” She’d just laugh. Sometimes you can be just a little early on something. If you stay the course, you can benefit from it.

SK: That’s interesting. In terms of your knowledge of the specifics of the textiles and the shop’s inventory, when you say you talked shop, what did you talk about?

PY: My research was in Ghana, so I was working with the Dutch wax prints. They’re the cloth that you see all the time that different designers use and most people think is African. Bold, colorful prints. Those cloths actually were marketed to Ghana in West Africa, on the Gold Coast. And in the 1700s, early designs were done by a Dutch company that had been operating in Indonesia, and copied what they saw there. When I was in Indonesia, I saw those cloths in a market and said, “What’s this African cloth doing here?” not knowing that what I was seeing was the Indonesian influence on African textiles. Sara and I talked about that story and the cultural connections. The Dutch wanted to automate their batik, to print it rather than do it by hand, and injected it there. It was rejected locally. Then, they came up with their own way to tap into the market. They had a trading relationship with Ghana, and marketed those textiles there. After Kente, it became a representation of womanhood in Ghana. I wanted to know why it is that something foreign would have such an impact.

PY: When I came into the store, I was like, “Whoa. Wow.” A beautiful space, beautifully curated. SoHo was marketed to Ghana in West Africa, on the Gold Coast. I went back to graduate school. It was kind of a shock. I was used to having Black women in the crew on St. Mark’s and the push to give Black designers and Black culture their recognition. I wish Sara was here, because it’s such a special time.

SK: Was Sara there?

PY: No, but there was somebody there and I remember them offering me wine. I remember thinking, “Well, it’s a Friday, so why not?” I asked, “Well, whose place is this?” They would tell me about her. I was struck by the beauty of the place. It was like entering a different zone because it was very hip but also common. It stimulated the senses because you turned one place and there was something interesting, and then another where there was something else. There was furniture there, and the textiles, and art. I culture thinks is interesting. We don’t want to get into back-sketching. He looked like I was interrupting him. And I’m like, “What? It’s a shop, right?” When I met Sara, the next time, she had on this beautiful robe that she came out with. Her hair was thick and billowing. She’d smile and tell me I was welcome. She knew I wasn’t going to buy anything, but she was really nice about it. I asked her once if she was afraid about the risk that was involved with going to places where you’ve never been, dealing in numbers with so many zeros on them, and talking about coming out with a space and an inventory. She said, “It’s kind of stressful, but you also get a rush from it, because you’re doing what you really want. It’s your passion and you feel so comfortable with it.” She was a real trailblazer.

SK: She was so brave.

PY: A real trailblazer, and not only in fashion—most people would expect you to be in a dress shop. For her role too, to do what she did. People tried to copy her. Some men take a lot of license with women. And white folks with Black folks, particularly in the arts, saying, “Well, no, you are supposed to be our support. Support us.” It came very naturally. I remember thinking to myself that they really should put her in a manual for nurturing and supporting us. Even clients would come in and get ideas from her. She would talk about that, but she was always discreet and wouldn’t name people. There were people who were clients that would come in to buy from her. Then she’d see that same sort of idea replicated in their own work. And they wouldn’t say, “Well, I was really influenced by her.” I think that would’ve meant a lot. I know it would’ve meant a lot.

SK: Related to what you said about her thinking about the client, something she did that I didn’t think about, but learned from people who worked at the store, is that if you bought anything from the store, you were required to know the origins of the object, where it came from, how it was made, what it was originally for. To impart that knowledge.
Svetlana Kitto: Paulette [Young] told me that you knew Sara for a long time. How did you meet?
Eric Robertson: One of the simplest ways of meeting her was to go to her store. At that time, in the 60’s, it was on St. Mark’s Place. I was one of her constant customers. She was there, and very interested in what she was interested in. I didn’t have a background in art, decoration, or anything like that, but I really liked her taste.

ER: At the time, I was a lawyer for medical groups who were interested in changing the way medicine, specifically preventative medicine, was distributed in the New York City area. Back in the 60’s, I was part of the northern civil rights movement.

SK: What was the work that you were doing at the time?
ER: I was doing immigration law work, which I find interesting—[laughs]—looking store there with many things from parts of the Third World, the way we called it at that time, especially Asia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and India. I had never seen a store like that before. I did a little research on the name, Knobkerry, which is a weapon in southern Africa. It’s a ball at the end of a stick. It was a very simple weapon, something that you could use to fend off carnivorous animals, lions especially, in protecting your goats or your sheep. So it was very useful, and of course it was useful man to man, against man.

I was intrigued by the store, which covered such wide areas of material culture. And I was also intrigued by the woman who never came to the front of the store where her people were working and waiting on people. Without going on too much, she was quite beautiful. I was struck by her, the way she was dressed, her manner. She was quiet, and I thought this must be the owner, but she didn’t come to the front of the store. Every time I would think of buying a gift for someone who had a taste for something exotic, I’d go to her store. More often than not, she was in the background, so at first I just observed her.

SK: What was the vibe in the store at that time?
ER: It was very busy. There were women who shopped there because they had unusual things from Asia. Besides clothes and adornments, she had art from different areas of the world, rugs from Afghanistan. This was in the mid-60s, when SoHo was just opening up, and no one else had that type of material there. I discovered that the pillows she had were mostly from Africa. I was struck by that because I had never seen pillows from Ghana or Morocco.

It turned out that she traveled to these places to buy, but she also cultivated other women who traveled, by themselves, and she bought from them. They would know what she wanted, and they started making sure I knew when things were coming, because I started buying things for myself. Rugs, for example.

ER: I had never seen flatsweave before, rugs from Afghanistan, tribal rugs, rugs from parts of India and from Iran. I was struck by that. At that time, lofts were becoming popular, and in the early 70’s I bought one, which I’m still residing in, on Twenty-Second Street. I wanted to furnish it, and of course you need to add more material. I went one step further, I started being friendly with her, talking with her, I said, “Maybe you have something to show me.” She was surprised that I was interested in the furniture.

She took me to her apartment, which was on Seventh Street, right behind St. Mark’s Place. It was very large—about an eight- or nine-room apartment—and she said, “Well, I’m thinking of doing something else as far as the decoration, so if you’re interested in stuff, you can buy anything you want.” I ended up the proud owner of deco furniture from the Philippines and stuff from Afghanistan, mostly rugs. There were small chairs, too, And most notably, a young prince’s bed that was in the form of a couch with arms.

My loft became pretty famous, which is one of the reasons I decided it was just too much. Rather than being a gallery, it looked like a play place for me. I didn’t want that. So I sold the furniture. Someone came in, an industrialist from northern Italy, a person of Jewish background, with a great sense of collecting.

They were so much in love with the furniture that I sold it. She took me to her apartment, which was on Twenty-Second Street. I wanted to furnish it, and of course you need to add more material. She was surprised that I was interested in the furniture.

ER: These things happen, and she didn’t believe in protecting herself the way she should have. She was, in many ways, a free spirit who was really enjoying her career as a precursor to the whole art world.

By that time I had quite a stock of unusual material in the gallery. I gave her things on consignment.

SK: You started selling stuff to her?
ER: Yeah, but with very liberal terms, very good prices. So people bought serious masterpiece stuff from her. It wasn’t just doing that to help Sara. You ended up doing that because she was an unusual person and very honest. If she said she’d take something at this price or that, that’s what she paid you for it. In dealings with a small shop like that, there’s always issues with money, but with her, you always got paid. Her honesty is probably one of the reasons people would always step forth to help her when she ran into some difficulty, like somebody screwing up the lease that she depended on. Part of it was that she was getting on in years, and she loved her creative artists who were loyal friends to her.

SK: Who are you thinking of—David Hammons?
ER: Yeah, and myself, of course, because she got some spectacular flags from Ghana, fighting flags, from me, and I once gave her three large costumes of the ancestors from West Africa. And of course she’d sell them, because they were so spectacular. By this time I was moving on to more important pieces of sculpture and dealing with some very important collectors worldwide, so I could afford to back her. She still had taste and an eye. As she got into her seventies, it became a little rough for her.

SK: Can I ask about other creative artists she knew?
ER: Part of the undiscovered magic of Black American culture is you had people who were part of the Harlem Renaissance. You would meet people who were main people, like Hale Woodruff, who she regularly conversed with, or Paul Robeson, who felt very comfortable with her.

SK: I didn’t know she knew Paul Robeson. Did she tell you about her life before she opened Knobkerry?
ER: Unfortunately, she was shy. That was a quality she retained until the end of her life. She was shy, and you would have to find out many things from friends of hers. She knew everyone, because one thing that she did was to go to every opening, I had the luck to buy all the catalogues that she owned. They were small catalogues, but about major artists, and she would buy the whole catalogue at the opening. That’s one of the difficulties of doing a history of Sara Penn: she was not an artist but a tastemaker.

SK: How did she discover all these materials and develop the fascination for textiles she had since the first store?
ER: She told me that on her first trip through Germany, with artists or other Germans, she learned a lot. Men loved her because she had a very wondrous quality to her and mostly funny. She didn’t mind, and a lot of doors opened to her.

She was also a critic. She would tell you, “This one has no . . . ,” and you realized she was sharp there, because she looked to what women did, women who dressed themselves in the material she would show them. She traveled and she enjoyed that. People were buying things from her all over the world, and she connected with all the important tastemakers.

She affected me profoundly, because I ended up becoming, according to many of the critics, the person who played an integral role in bringing awareness of African textile culture to America. I think of myself that way. Then we discovered that the sensibility of ancient African textiles was related to African American culture through African American quilts. We discovered through our research that there were female African American designers who were at the top of their profession, designing clothes for Mary Todd Lincoln, and that African American designers clothed the wives of some of the leaders of the Confederacy.

SK: You’re saying she was part of that lineage.
ER: At that time people saw themselves as connected. Ornamental culture and would actually go to these places or finance people to go to these places so they could buy whatever they found. One of Sara’s main suppliers was a former social worker from Pittsburgh, and I bought a number of rugs from her, because she knew that she needed to sell them, because she bought some material to go with the furniture. I can’t remember her name—it was a while ago. As I got to know Sara better, I saw how she worked. She would place her roundhouse, or her roundhouse expenses, you just gave her first dibs on material that you would buy. The main woman who was going to Pakistan

ERIC ROBERTSON
Eric Robertson is internationally known for his knowledge of traditional African art and Africa’s grand textile arts. He is an advisor to the Young Robertson Gallery, New York, which he founded.
and Afghanistan to buy tribal rugs became part of a secret society there among mostly men and people dealing with rugs by sharing her blood with people from the area. And it may sound very unusual, but there was also a white woman doing stuff.

SK: So you’re saying Sara would buy roundtrip tickets for people.

ER: To buy the stuff. She worked out a deal. And these women loved traveling by themselves. Until about the ‘70s or ‘80s, women could travel quite easily in all those areas, including Muslim countries, without any problem.

SK: This is so interesting. I’m kind of overwhelmed because I haven’t heard this stuff before. There’s just so much out there, and the more I talk to people, the more I understand. It’s just so remarkable that a store and a place and a person could be so important in a period of time, and then erased or disappeared.

ER: It didn’t really disappear, because Sara became more personal in who she dealt with. She was still selling, but she would give her stuff to people she trusted to sell for her in flea markets. We’re not talking small flea markets, but places where people would come down from Fifty-Seventh Street. They had no idea that this stuff was coming from Sara.

I want to add that she was very intelligent. Practically anything you talked about, she had very deep knowledge about it. She was a progressive, a humanist. And she made sure that if you wanted her opinion, you would get her opinion. She had an opinion on everything and she made sure that if you wanted her opinion, you would walk all the way down almost to Broadway. And she would get her opinion. She had an opinion on everything.

And she was still selling, more personal in who she dealt with. She was still selling, but she would go right down to that point and then erase or disappear.

The eastern United States. We can show the connections of Black people to those areas. And we can prove it.

SK: Yeah, that’s amazing. Is there anything else you want to share?

ER: One would have to really be dedicated to track down what Sara did and how she did it. I know that she could’ve been very affluent if she had held on to the large loft that she owned and lost. But that was not her. She was a romantic and she believed in sharing. Some people would consider that dumb, to lose all your money. She may have lost her money, but she remained Sara Penn. That was important to her.

SANA MUSASAMA

Sana Musasama is a ceramic and mixed-media artist based in New York. She is an educator and an activist dedicated to human rights causes, particularly the trafficking of women.

Svetlana Kitto: How did you meet Sara?

Sana Musasama: I wanted to be an artist and it wasn’t anything my parents understood, coming from the segregated South, with Jim Crow and redlining. Their idea of what their girls were going to do was to be social workers, teachers, or nurses, or join the military. That’s all they knew. But I was creative and they loved it. They gave me art lessons and sent me to art schools. But when I narrowed it down to a profession, it scared them desperately. They thought, She’s going to stop, she’s not going to survive. When I said that I was going to be an artist, they sat me down and said, “Sweetheart, if you were light-skinned Black, if you had a pointed nose, thin lips, and wavy hair, it would be a possibility. But having dark brown, kinky hair, African features, Mommy and Daddy don’t see that as a role for you.”

I was rebellious, and I screamed back, but they just didn’t know and they had no vision. So what I would do was to say in my mind, Greenwich Village is where artists live, and all I have to do is steal carfare out of their bags and go to Greenwich Village. I could be an artist. And that’s just what I did—one day I got my best friend at the corner and said, “I’m going to Greenwich Village to be an artist. You want to come?”

So we went to the Village and a world opened up. It was beatniks, hippies, the love thing. We were just walking around and saw Sara’s store.

SM: On St. Mark’s?

SK: It was definitely the East Village.

SM: It was probably St. Mark’s.

SK: She had two places. I went to one place and then something happened economically and then she was in a very narrow place. She often sat on the stoop.

SM: There was a shop on Seventh Street and then at 26 St. Mark’s, I think. Others were at 158 Spring Street and 211 West Broadway in TriBeCa. I don’t know if you want to know to those ones.

SM: I took the train and got off at Spring, and then I would walk all the way down almost to Broadway. And there was her little silvers of a shop. You went in narrow and it opened up into the world.

SK: What occurs to you when you think about the first time you went to Knobbery?

SM: First of all, I remember her kind of devilish smile, as if to say, What are you guys doing here? We had a mouthful of bubble gum. I think she just wondered what these kids were doing around there. She was sitting on the stoop and she had on unusual clothes and her hair was beautiful.

I remember her having a black line on top of her eyes that made her eyes really magical, like Egyptian. She was kind and she was sassy. She said, “Come on.” And we came on in, and it was a whole world of rugs and tapestries and the smell of incense. I was just at home with her, and she let us walk around. She explained where things came from in the world.

Then she sat down next to us and asked if my mother knew where I was. I said yes. She said, “I’m going to ask you again, does your mother know where you are?” I said no. She said, “You’re going to get home before dark.” So I looked around and looked around and then I picked up things, clothing that I loved. And I looked at prices and I knew I couldn’t buy anything. I had no money. I had fifteen cents to get there.

I wanted to share something really, really beautiful that was in her secondhand basket. Not secondhand, but things that didn’t sell so she had marked them down. She showed me something at really lovely and watched me put it on and look in the mirror. She heard me tell my friend Francine, “I’m an artist now.”

She wrapped it up and gave it to me. She said, “When you have some money, pay for it.” I still have that cup today.

After I had lost contact with her, I met a guy named Peter at one of my shows and he told me where she was.

SK: Was it Peter Stebbins?

SM: Yes. So I found that top in the house and wore it the day I went to the place she had in Manhattan. I asked to see the shop. I knew she wouldn’t know me by name, and I wondered if she’d even come down. I heard her say, “Tell her just a few minutes, just a few minutes.” As she came down, she was walking very slowly toward me. I stood up with the top on and she says, “I know you.” Just like that.

SK: That’s so sweet.

SM: We sat down and we talked for about forty-five minutes. She was obviously comfortable. She was in pain.

SK: Definitely.

SM: But when she wasn’t in discomfort, she could talk about anything in the world. Musicians, people that she loved, people that she couldn’t stand. She cursed, and she talked about the inner workings of people and “putting the asses,” she said, “I want to remain independent. I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m fine.” And we talked and we talked and we talked. One of the things that I remember strongest is that she said, “Well, you know something? I’m going to go back upstairs and take rest.”

I said, “Okay, I’m going to come back and see you.” And she says, “You do just that.” I said, “Can I bring you something?” She said, “Yes.” I brought her something, and I don’t need another object in my room upstairs. I have plants. And I said, “Well, I have something for you.” She says, “No, you keep that. I’m fine.”
What hit me so much about it that day is when we stood up to say goodbye. I hugged her, and she said, “You go.” I’ll never forget that. She said, “You go.” She wouldn’t go until I’d walked out of that lobby. I remember standing up and looking at her. And as I walked away, I kept turning back to look at her, and she waved with a beautiful smile, but she wouldn’t let me watch her walk away from me. She made me walk away from her. When I got outside, I kept looking back at the building, but the glass prevented me from really seeing her. She had a cane and something said to me, You’ll never see her again, Sara. You’ll never see her again. And then I said to myself that I was leaving for Cambodia. I said if I never see Sara again, that image of her standing up like a soldier and saying “You go” is what I wanted her to leave me with.

SK: That’s a beautiful story.

SM: I never saw her again. I went to Cambodia. I came back and she was gone.

SK: Wow. Is that the first time you’d seen her in all that time?

SM: Maybe twenty-five years.

SK: Hold on. So you went back to Knoberry?

SM: Sara kept moving, and I think by then she had an internal store in a private place like her loft or her home. She didn’t stay in places long because they were always gentrifying and changing. Landlords pulled back on leases and sold them to big fancy stores, like Apple.

The other thing is I was seventeen or eighteen when we met, and went on to college and then travel in Africa, and time went by. It could have been even thirty years.

SK: When you went to Knoberry, did you go to the store more than once?

SM: I did, because I went back to pay her the money. She said she had a lot of musicians in there playing music. Jazz. I think she didn’t feel that it was an appropriate place for my age. The jazz musicians that were there looked at me like I was a piece of meat, and Sara picked up on that and she took that money and guided me toward the door. She didn’t want me to be in there.

I think her store went into an apartment. Sometimes people gave her events or sales in her lofts, but all that’s kind of blurry for me.

SK: It seems like you have a worldview that is similar in terms of looking beyond the United States for information about life and the world. Do you think that she had an influence on you at all?

SM: I think she must have, because every object that she talked about came from a faraway place that I’d never heard of. This made me go home and get a globe. I looked at these places and would think, Wow, this is surrounded by water. How do you get there? I remember my mother saying, “You take an airplane, honey.” This was India and the Middle East. Sara had things—tapestries, beads, buttons, and shoes—from all over the world. She gave me the sense that the world was open to me to travel as an artist even though I couldn’t afford it. At the conclusion of my undergraduate degree, I felt so uneducated, so I said to myself, Sara, you’re going to travel around the world. You’re going to find places that Sara possibly lived in or went to. You’re going to do that. I started traveling around the world by myself and I did it on and off for ten years. I went to India, I went to China, I went to Vietnam. I spent a lot of time in Africa, then went to Israel. I then doubled back and went to some of these places to see them in another season. Mendiand is one place in the dry season and an entirely different place in the rainy season. And then I went to graduate school. After graduate school, I had to get a job and start paying for all this education that I should have gotten.

SK: I’m with you. Also, from what I understand, it would have been rare to see an African American woman owning a business in the midst of those shops.

SM: It wasn’t common at all. And it went against the grain of what my mother and father told me against the arts.

SK: Exactly.

SM: Sara was not as brown as me, but she was brown, and she looked Black and she had kinky hair like me. And she moved and traveled effortlessly, without fear. So it was in the back of my mind that one day I would see Sara’s world on the road.

SK: She had a mother who was very rigid and strict, a church kind of person, so Sara trained as a social worker. She was working as a social worker in New York and just didn’t want to do it. She always wanted to be a kind of artist and to be around artists, and she wanted to do something else. Her mom was always trying to keep her on the straight and narrow, and she didn’t succeed. Sara rebelled, too.

SM: When I was with her that day, she talked a lot about jazz musicians in and out of her life. She hinted at a very unhappy marriage to me, but she also spoke about jumping over the hurdles. It sounded like some of them were dishonest and maybe womanizers, but she pretty much jumped over it.

SK: She told me about living in Europe and traveling through Africa herself, being treated like a queen there. About having the experience of leaving the US as an African American woman and being treated so much better in Europe, too. Basically everywhere except here.

She had ideas around bringing other-worldliness not just to white America. She worked with women from all kinds of backgrounds, women of color, to try to bring in things that would disrupt this culture of whiteness. She really wanted to disrupt that. That was my understanding.

SM: She certainly did it in the way she adorned herself and how she moved around the world, for sure. The world was on her body;

SK: That’s beautiful.

SM: As a young Black girl, my eyes went everywhere looking at her. And she was so kind—she would pat the seat to tell you to sit down. But that day she got off the elevator, she walked very, very, very slowly toward me. When I stood up and she said, “I know you,” it touched me. Because I know it was over twenty-five years after we met. More than that, probably.

SK: More than that. If you’re saying you went there when you were seventeen, it was like forty years.

SM: I don’t know if in that time period I ever bumped into Sara at the loft parties where a lot of Black musicians were. I don’t remember now if Sara was in those clusters or not. But I do know a bunch of Black musician men, and her name always comes up. I went to a party a few years ago with a colleague who is probably Sara’s peer. These men that were there certainly in the eighty and above category, because one of them I know as my teacher and he made eighty-three.
SK: What was she like to work for when she was your boss?
ES: She was very nice.
SK: She was nice?
ES: Well, she never screamed at us or anything as long as we folded things and helped people. We were good because we all worked there different times. There was another girl, Cheryl, a young white girl who was sort of innocent. She was a kind of manager of the store on St. Mark's Place.
SK: Did you design some of the jewelry?
ES: No. I began selling my jewelry designs years later. Sometimes Sara put things together, but mostly she bought really fabulous stuff from Turkmenistan, Africa, from every place.
SK: Can you tell me about the differences between the locations of Sara's stores? Funi [Schmidt] said the most magical one was on St. Mark's.
ES: It was fabulous, but I liked the one on Seventh Street, too. That was her first one. Seventh Street between Second and Third.
SK: Can you tell me about it?
ES: It was a small store. There were other neat stores around. This other girl, Barbara Shaun, had one. She made sandals, hippie sandals. Sara lived on Sixth Street, upstairs, and people brought things by. She just had the most beautiful things and she knew how to display them. She knew about them and she bought what she wanted. Then she moved to St. Mark's Place. That was bigger and there were a lot of things going on in St. Mark's Place. Across the street, there was music. And all these fabulous stores. Abbie Hoffman lived in a building nearby. He was weird. He gave me the book Steal This Book that someone actually stole from me. There were interesting people. There aren't any bohemians anymore because they can't afford to live in New York. You would hear music all the time on the streets because musicians could live there, and dancers and actors.
SK: Knobberry attracted that type of bohemian?
ES: Yes, a lot of people. It was like an oasis. I didn't work there every day because I also worked part-time in the Peace and Freedom Movement. And then I would be in Mexico. Anyway, it was a different time. Now, you can't open a small business. It has to be the Gap or something because the rents are so disgusting.

ES: There weren't many ethnic stores then. There was one on Greenwich Avenue in the Village, where Sixth Avenue is and Greenwich Avenue slides up. Some lady had some ethnic things there but not like Sara, not like Sara's at all. No. Then, I guess, designers would come in and they started copying because Sara made these jackets and bags and those kinds of things.
SK: What other stories do you have about Sara?
ES: She was just an interesting person. And she helped so many people.
SK: Who did she help?
ES: Like people that used to come in and say, "Where can I buy wholesale?" And she would just tell them where to go. I said, "Sara, don't give them that information."
SK: It's bad for business. So, she wasn't a businesswoman in some ways?
ES: She was not that great at business because she was very generous. She helped musicians and she went to a lot of cultural Black events at museums and stuff. She would get dressed pretty. She always wore something beautiful, some kind of Balochistan, Quetta, or Ethiopian thing and a big necklace with big amber. She had fabulous taste.
SK: Do you think of her as an artist?
ES: Yes. It's an art to be able to put a store together and decorate the way she did. She had such a good eye. She picked out such great things. People she became friends with would bring her stuff from places like Afghanistan and Indonesia. For Christmas once she gave me a beautiful chair from the Sindh Desert and this beautiful coat I have.
SK: Were you one of Sara's Girls?
ES: I worked there.
SK: I know, but Joanne [Robinson Hill] said that you all were called Sara's Girls.
ES: I guess so.
SK: Can you tell me about meeting Janis Joplin?
ES: She was so nice, but she smelled like alcohol, and I'm not an alcohol person. She was so nice. Some people aren't nice, or they're creepy. She was nice, and so were the guys that were in Jimi Hendrix's band. Sara had a fabulous store in Tribeca, but it was too innovative for the neighborhood at the time. Eventually, the landlord wanted something else there. In the early 1950s, she spent nights in the West Village because her boyfriend before I knew her, the man she loved the most, was there.

SK: Were there other stores like Sara's, or was it really distinct?
ES: There weren't many ethnic stores then. There was one on Greenwich Avenue in the Village, where Sixth Avenue is and Greenwich Avenue slides up. Some lady had some ethnic things there but not like Sara, not like Sara's at all. No. Then, I guess, designers would come in and they started copying because Sara made these jackets and bags and those kinds of things.
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SK: Wolf Khan.
ES: She knew Robert De Niro's father. Louise Nevelson used to come in. Nevelson was her slave. She loved Sara. Let me read from a book that has a chapter about Sara [Joel Lodenharth, Radical Rags. Fashions of the Sixties, Abbeville Press, 1992]: "By 1965, when she opened her store, the hub of bohemia was shifting east. Once called the Lower East Side, New York's downtown Eastern European ghetto was fast being renamed the East Village. An avant-garde colony took root when artists began fleeing the spiraling rents and raucous crowds that had descended upon the West Village during the folk music craze of the early '60s. 'I'd been a social worker at Mobilization for Youth on the Lower East Side, working with drug-abusing teenage gangs,' Penn explains. 'I decided that I didn't want to continue.' Penn's store supplied a personal demand echoed by women across the city. 'I wanted to wear pants. I wanted all kinds of pants to be accessible.' Knoberry began as a source for softly draped Indian chair-door, guerrara, and chawal pantaloons.'
SK: Pantaloons. Keep reading!
ES: "The integrity of the civil rights crusader could, in the '60s, dovetail very easily with the intransigence of a champion of avant-garde regalia. 'At Settlement for Youth, we wanted to dramatize a little fable by George Bernard Shaw called The Adventures of a Black Girl in Her Search for God.' Shaw's parable exalts a child in South Africa who 'leaves a mission, takes off all her clothes, and just goes out with a knoberry.' I have a knoberry here.

SK: It's a stick.
ES: A real old one, with the ball on it. So, "Anytime she encounters anyone who tries to tell her who God is, she just hits them with this stick and keeps going in her personal search. Shifting from social work to retail, Penn retained the 'Knoberry' as a personal symbol. 'I thought, if anyone tells us what fashion is we're just going to hit them with our "stick"—our store. We'll discover our own fashion.'"

Whenever we sold something, we explained where it was from, about the people and their philosophies, all the history that we were never taught growing up in the US. Sara kept all these books and maps and we had to teach ourselves about places we'd never heard of. I remember trying to tell Jimi Hendrix's drummer once about where this tenting he wanted came from. I don't think he was real interested, but some people were.
SK: This is the first time I'm hearing that when you would sell something at the store you would have to explain its origins. That was her rule?
ES: We had to know. You couldn't just say, "Here, do you want this?" You had to say, "This is from Turkmenistan. It's in the middle of wherever it is over there."
IMAGES
COMMENCEMENT
EXERCISES

SPelman College

Sisters Chapel

June Sixth
Nineteen Hundred and Forty-Nine
Atlanta, Georgia

Kate L. Savery
Class of 1899
517 Madison St., Talladega, Ala.
Brooklyn, N.Y.
Order of Exercises

10:30 a. m.

1 Procession—March Celebree

2 Pange Lingua . . . . . . . . . . . Cesar Franck
   Spelman College Glee Club

3 Scripture Reading . Reverend William Holmes Borders, B.D., M.A., D.D.
   Minister of the West Street Baptist Church

4 Integrum Vitae . . . . . . . . . . . Hofer, 65-8 B.C.
   He who is upright, kind, and free from error,
   Needs not the aid of arms or neck to guard him;
   Safely he moves, a child to guilty terror,
   Strong in his virtue.
   What though his journey o'er the burning desert,
   Or climb the dreadful, dangerous mountains,
   Or taste the waters of the famed Hydaspes,
   God will attend him.

5 Prayer . . . . . . . . Reverend Arthur Van V. Gibson, A.B., R.D., D.D.
   Minister of the Murrahite Presbyterian Church

6 Spiritual . . . . . . . . Lord, Make Me More Holy
   "Like Jabez"

7 Address . . . . . . . . John Marshall, A.M.
   Associate Director for the Humanities, The Rockefeller Foundation

8 Hymn
   The Lord, in his righteousness, judge the people,
   The mountains and hills by his rule are secure;
   The men of all nations throughout all generations
   Shall honor him as long as the sun shall endure.
   His blessing he scatters like showers from the heavens,
   Like rain on the fields when the grass is new grown;
   His peace is descending, abundant, never ending;
   The needy and oppressed doth he count as his own.
   From sea unto sea shall he spread his dominion,
   From the end of the earth to the rivers that run;
   The islands of the ocean shall offer him devotion,
   All kings shall bow before him, all nations be one.

9 Presentation of Degrees

10 Spiritual . . . . . . . O Seek and Ye Shall Find

11 Now Thank We All Our God . . . . . . arr. by Mueller
   Spelman College Glee Club

12 Prayer and Benediction . . . . Rufus Early Clement, Ph.D.
   President of Atlanta University

13 Recessional—March Romaine . . . . . . . . . . . . . Commed
CANDIDATES FOR DEGREES

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Mary Willie Johnson
*Irene Moore Jones
Muriel Ruth Ketchum

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Lyda Ruth Larkins
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Marymae M. Morgan
Sara Elizabeth Penn
Parkie Mae Frances Perry
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Rosalie Ruth Slack
Theresa Smith
*Margaret Stokes
Emma Lewis Stone
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Dolores Irene Posey
Marjorie Armenta Ricks
*Vivian Almeda Settles
Ruby Eithel Singleton

**With high honors.
*With honors.
†Completed work in August, 1948.
Folklore fete
in Medieval city
Concarneau, France
Feb-57

Barry

San Fran

WEDDING

Sorority Tea Notes

MISS SARA E. PENN

Sara E. Penn
Set to Attend
Chicago Parley

Miss Sara E. Penn, director of Personal Services at the Neigh-
borhood Centers Assn. on Pitts-
burgh’s North Side, has been
selected by the agency to attend
the Training Center of the Na-
tional Federation of Settlements
at the Hull House Assn. in Chi-

cago, Nov. 13-19.

Professional people from all
over the country will be attend-

2011 Nimitz Pl, and the
late W. K. Penn, her main hobby
is designing and making unusual
costume jewelry which she does
beautifully.

The daughter of Mrs. Anne
Penn of 8011 Nimitz Pl, and the
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costume jewelry which she does
beautifully.
THURSDAY, AUGUST 1, 1963

Police sergeant pleads with demonstrators to "move on" from Rutgers Houses.

30 More Pickets Picked Up He...
**Living—and Shopping—Easy**

**In ‘East Village’ Boutiques**

By ANGELENA BESSEY

DON'T be too hasty about picking the eggshell-colored silk crepe dress with the eyelet trim. It may be only $3, but it is not the only $3 dress available at the J. Press store on Second Avenue and East 13th Street. For $11.50, you can buy a silk dress with a floral print, or for $3.95, a wool dress with a solid color. There are also $2.50 dresses available, and even $1.25 dresses if you look hard enough.

The East Village is a shopper's paradise, with a variety of boutiques to choose from. Some are located on Second Avenue, while others are situated on East 13th Street. Each boutique offers a unique selection of clothing, from casual wear to formal attire. Among the favorites are the J. Press store, where you can find both men's and women's clothing, and the Eileen Fisher boutique, which offers sustainable and ethical fashion.

Living In Easy

The looking in the East Village is easy, if not highly profitable. Shoppers usually do not spend much time browsing, as the stores are well-organized and the merchandise is displayed in an eye-catching manner. The shops are open until late, making it easy for shoppers to find what they are looking for. The stores are also located close to one another, making it convenient for shoppers to visit multiple boutiques.

The lower chiffon dress, inspired by Greta Garbo, is chic and stylish. Leila Neumann, a proprietor who was the shop's first customer, models a green one.

Above: St. Mark's Place is the main street of the East Village, London, at No. 35, a small shop where girls look for men's jackets, casual clothes and accessories.

Below: Cecil B. Lucas and H. Enders adjust a wind sock on top of the historic building of the renowned New York University.
SARA & FUMI WE LOVE YOU

DICK PRYNTO

The first place of banana cream pie is like a journey into the unknown — you wander from which planet, the ingredients for this recipe gathered.

Later, you try it again — filmed with the hope that once more you will be able to repeat that delicious and forbidden experience. Unfortunately, while it looks okay, the downturned edge seems a little drummed. You blame your palate — your taste maybe it's a little tired.

Retail attack to LBD's Riot Panel report runs the gamut —

Some of the financing proposals are "rather staggering" says Broadway-Hale's Edward Carter who doubts current Washington climate favors such heavy spending.

The third time you taste it, it's double-baked. But the worst thing is that it tastes exactly the same as it did the first time.

EXACTLY.

Suddenly you realize that as does everything that is presented and packaged. The taste never varies. The recipe is responsible for startle and the return is minimizing the ingredients in perfect down to the last pinch of flour. Everything is identical — like cars out of Detroit — like politician's clothes.

It's a battle that way. Smart economizer, Mrs. Willy wants — banana for day — banana for night, but what an identical result! Examine the same, on another trip a switch and changes.

Nov what's nude? This time it's Romeo and Juliet in the posters billing the London premiere of the Zeffirelli film — but for the committed performance where they'll meet the Queen, Olivia Hussey will wear an outfit albinine dress with train in the color of her new. And as ever and ever again the same honey — the same honey dress — the same honey dress — the same honey dress.

Accessed in the grey-green walls of a public service bakery.

CHICAGO YELL — STUPID.

Since people, I tell me, actually flee out. And there was a time when the fashion in Blake's were only weeks older than the original design. That's democracy — everybody gets to wear the same style of clothes — and to half with you if you don't.

But there were ones of 60's call them, the creative rebels, integrated with designers who were making the first film and designing and making their own clothes.

Control of Frank R. Bell, Jr., Inc., sold by Mrs. Jelliff. "Because I'm just tired of it."

Their designs are adaptations of style from Asia. Africa and South America.

Their success is due to their understanding that in the mind of every creative woman there's a romantic desire that cannot be filled by either Bond's or Blake's, and the knowledge that we are now living in a braver new world.

A few years ago we severely divided aesthetic, ethnic and ethnic clothing. Now we are making compromises, but hippies are ok," says Tom Hoving's daughter, as she discourses her favorite dresses ("Pants, but mother made me stop wearing them"); the problems of shopping, and her career plans.

You feel like an Indian Princess? Do we, baby — all it takes is clothes.

I can't jus in as authority on other women, nor the things they want, but something that makes a beautiful thing more beautiful, and encourages its individually triggers a faded eye. Being the model, the Radiolary, I thought... no model about the clothes so I did the girls inside them and that's not generally the way I use women.

Now that I've said God I can gift the banana cream pie baked and go back to girls again.
At the shop

Sara Pen's Knitwear Shop in the East Village is a chief source for African-influenced dress. Miss Pen's, Ethopian pants and shirt are topped by overskirt in batik print from Nigeria.

African dress, natural hair

By Patricia Diluna

New York

Today's African-American fashion is a definite departure from the fashionable days of Professor Wright and Mr. Talley.

WOMEN TODAY

It's me

Elegant Canadian handwriting

Elegant Canadian handwriting

Federation urges crime investigation

By Jacob Ash Smith

New York, N.Y. - The Federation urged a new investigation into the murder of a young woman in Detective's Square.

An open house tour of beautiful homes

by R.H. Stearns

to deal with sports appeal

80

81
THE GREAT COSTUME PUT-ON

For those who don't want to look like everybody else, who are hung up on the movies or dream about other times and places, there are lots of things to wear that are more fun than real clothes.

This page, clockwise from left: Off the fashion parade, this year's extravagada, Prestige Furs, is usually more in costume. "Lavagron," known for recycling fur, poster Larry Rivers, dons a beading cap with his evening clothes. "Kewendo," a graphic artist, adorned clothes from London, Japan, and New York thrift shops, and saved the Froshers in her art for a Sunday at Cotter Pig. When she's not right next, playwright Randy Dazler likes to wear her petticoats and outfits from Vogue-heirloom. Max's Trock HII always in the fashion unspoken, and his shirt was made from a curtain. Opposite page: Brains and heart still something to smile at of underneath singer.

Color photographs by Charles Moore, black and white photography by J.T. Simmons.
It may have started with the hippies in San Francisco or at Kentish Town in London, or with this young woman in New York donning Army & Navy store gear. One thing is sure—the entire revolution is spreading. The point is that it’s relatively cheap, and very satisfying to get yourself together. In times of image, it’s like an image of yourself is in your mind. It’s a kind of self-expression for both sexes, and it can be seen in New York at "An" department store, or in Saks at Central Park, and all over the East Village. The possibilities are endless. Fashion is no longer the East Village, and even now in normal stores, pants and books are all around us. Fashion has changed. In the past, fashion was a game, a stock of antiques, a kind of dress. In the East Village, the streets are all style. The people in St. Marks Place sell eccentric things like the Pukateen with their wide pants on our street. Shoes that used to provide ethnic minority groups with more or less authentic costumes are now being bought. As for accessories, rings, beads, and scarves can be bought almost anywhere, for either sex. Even wigs are now being made for men—a kind of natural hairstyle, sideburns, mustaches, and hats.

For the less adventurous, there are ready-made outfits—"suits" of every price level, both here and there. Victorian, Edwardian, Roman, and ethnic Indian, Greek, Russian, and Arabian are among others. Does it matter if the designers are inspired by the costume underneath? "Latest boy fashion revolution?" says Eugenia Sheppard, "what’s young and cheap and moves on and the price and size". It’s the fashion game lately that’s been unkind to clothes designed for the "rich hippies" whatever that means. Fashion, after all, has always been a game. There just seems no reason, any more, to play by any particular set of rules. —Eugenia Sheppard
This page, alone: Found in a tree in Central Park, a couple in an Elizabethan mood.

Right: Many members of the audience for Fillmore East rock concerts, like the performers, were in costume. Opposite page, from top: Semiotics in the Pyro Electric Spring Event, a benefit for George Plimpton’s literary quarterly, noted “Fillmore Empire.” Elektra Rockefeller wears a dress made in the 50s. Fashion writer Caroline Miliotis bought it as a costume on the East. Post-grid makeup, director of her, was a military uniform and lots of jewelry. Bottom: Costumes are numerous at Woodstock, the “70s” fashion of the moment. This costume was “70s-inspired makeup and hair-style.”

A Calendar of Events for This Week

Sunday

Chicago Tribune

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1975

FEMINIQUE

YOURS EACH MONDAY—FASHIONS FOR YOUR WEEK • YOUR HOME • YOUR JOB • YOUR LIFE

Studied in gypsy attire, the minishow wear Grecian-style gowns in front of the going looks of today... patterns on pattern, burlesque, and the pants costume. From left, a head scarf of striped or silk cloth tops an embroidered and jeweled tunic over a multicolored shirt and long skirt belted in mirrored embroidery. An embroidered silk blouse, worn backward, bare the midriff and back over a drape of Indian printed cotton. Indian cotton pants pair with a hand-embroidered and mirrored silk tank. Inside, femineque, discover the gypsy mood also in high fashion and jewelry. And to try your own version of gypsiness, please meet…

Weekday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Use of this Little John's for any purpose other than personal enjoyment is absolutely illegal. There are no payments and no exceptions. This is a property of the Little John's. The little John is a man's name and should be used with respect and dignity.

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Latent gypsies who care for a flush of mirrored fabrics and a gleam of gold may find fashion fulfillment within specialty shops along North State Street in Chicago. Sipping Chardonnay under a tasteful, well-placed chandelier, a typical shopper was introduced to Mr. Gregg, the designer who has created a special collection for the store. She was shown a series of gowns, each more stunning than the last. The first was a shimmering, gold-embroidered gown with a deep V-neckline and long train. The next was a floral-patterned dress in cheerful shades of pink and lilac. The final gown was a breathtaking white chiffon floor-length evening dress with delicate lace trim. The shopper was delighted with the collection and expressed her intent to purchase one of the gowns for an upcoming event.

"The Gypsy Look," as it's loosely described, has been one of summer's fashion leaders among the sophisticates. It began with the pouty, semi-abstract beauty found in the work of designer Jil Sander, who has incorporated gypsy elements into her latest creations. The look has been adopted by many leading designers, including Yves Saint Laurent, Louis Vuitton, and Stella McCartney, who have featured gypsy-inspired pieces in their spring collections. The gypsy look is characterized by flowing, embroidered fabrics, heavy jewelry, and a bohemian vibe. It has been embraced by the fashion industry, with celebrities such as Blake Lively and Kendall Jenner leading the trend. The gypsy look is a nod to the free-spirited and carefree attitude of the gypsy lifestyle, and it continues to be a popular choice among fashionistas.

Mr. Gregg started buying native crafts when he was in Pakistan last year because "I loved the fabric." Bright young things are snapping up the garments at Kodolinsky, 28 St., Marks Plaza in the East Village, because they are part of the fashion revolt against stereotyped "pattern" fashions, and because they adopt easily to the current pendulum for novelty when they are worn singly rather than in the many-layered Roumainian way.

The painstakingly tied-and-dyed fabrics, with their mysterious caste patterns, happen to be cotton grown and alluringly one-through. The craft, or back-yard museum the Paki- stani woman wraps up a shawl, wrap that under Western lenses, the shawls, made in semi-long lengths, translates here to a linneum.

Mr. Gregg really looked at Paki- stani crafts, also the psychic, said Mr. Gregg, a 35-year-old Cal- ifornian who, with his wife, Jon, recently started an in- dustry, business called Frieze. Frieze, the latest addition of the new and restless Asian-American artists, bore the label of the famous, and the Paki- stani women who work for Mr. Gregg is David Osborne,Digestion,herein, has no- name means canvas anyway, is in the Gregg's apart- ment, a high-rise, modern building on Chicago's North Side.

Mr. Gregg traveled to the village and was greeted by the women at the village market. "Having to deal with a self-centered woman," he said. "When it was partitioned from India, mostly Hindu, and Indian Muslims, partitioned into Paki- stan. Some time ago, in a village in Pakistan, Mr. Gregg saw a shawl that was made of a different pattern. You use an illustration of the fabric, "Look at this," he said, showing a black-and-white embroidery from a shawl that was made of a different pattern. "It comes from the land of the gypsy, and the people there are gypsy." The women were amazed by Mr. Gregg's passion for their craft and showed him various patterns and designs. Mr. Gregg was inspired by their creativity and began to incorporate their designs into his own work. He started a new line of clothing that was inspired by the gypsy look. He wanted to create a line of clothing that was unique and free-spirited, just like the gypsy lifestyle. The gypsy look is a nod to the free-spirited and carefree attitude of the gypsy lifestyle, and it continues to be a popular choice among fashionistas.

Pakistani fashions emerge from Xochicalco to the East Village. Dean Gregg's (left) Women's embroidered kurta, $80; Bonnor Depp's (right) skirt, $50; tops, pretty, shalwar pants of striped cotton ($30). $5 for the cotton pants to suit for an embroidered kurta.

The most gorgeous garment of all— an all-over embroidered kurta from a rich khadi cotton, which typ- ically features thick, intricate embroidery. Mr. Gregg is saving for a show to exhibit his work at the Brooklyn Museum in the fall.

 noticiasakeFromNib, a woman who works for Mr. Gregg, said, "It is in various types of skilled cotton (including a woman's shaw- nee with horns like window screens) and in one cane-colored and one black tie-up. Prices range from $10 to $30. "The gypsy is a free-spirited soul, said Mr. Gregg, who wanted to create a clothing line that was unique and free-spirited, just like the gypsy lifestyle. The gypsy look is a nod to the free-spirited and carefree attitude of the gypsy lifestyle, and it continues to be a popular choice among fashionistas.
“Chicks up front!”

How troublemakers use girls to pull down the cops. See page 86.
Third World Reflections

By Dorothy Le Sueur

Third World is designer Sarah Penno’s name for her “ethnic clothes” which feature patterns and fabrics from the Far East, Africa and South America. The costumes shown here were specifically inspired by Pakistan to complement the richly ornamented collection of Pakistani craftwork being presented by the Museum Shops of the Smithsonian Institution in the Arts and Industries Building through December 31.

Mostly one of a kind, the clothes were made in the workshops of Kandahar, Sarah Penno’s boutique in Greenwich Village. For modern women wary of sensible shortdresses or Plain Jane sweaters and skirts, here is the reasonably priced antidote to fashion boredom. Whether neatly cut or outright eccentric, the costumes have mysterious, feminine charm that machine-made garments understandably lack.

Syrians, Arabs, Moghuls, Tarrans, Anglo-Indians and natives from southern India contributed to the magical patina that accrued Paki- stani fashion pizzazz. The costume adaptations, presented along with authentic crafts which are far away from modern industry, as the Khyber Pass, will add imagination to Christmas shopping lists. From desert villages and mountain towns, John Greg collected the colorful crafts for the Museum Shops.

On the opposite page, CLAUDIA DE MONTE, standing, an art student at Catholic University, wears sheer cotton separates made of a delightful border print. Halter, partly covered with a shawl, is flattering and unexploiting. Skirt, prototype of nonconstructed clothing, is six yards of fabric wrapped to suit the individual, an ancient example of do-it-yourself. Necklace set with colored glass, $25. Gaily painted musical instrument, the Yakiri, $1.

RUBANA MOSCOSO, opposite page, seated, a frequent Potomac fashion assistant, wears modern twisted pajamas embellished with traditional embroidery. Bright yarns belt tied in her hair, $3.75. Rugs are $2.25 each. Background is made up of “Riffes,” hand applied quilts from the 3rd desert which are striking in contemporary interiors, $65 plus a tax with appliqued animals $300. Hanging windsocks, derived from India, are $50 each.

Cotton caftan, above worn by CLAUDIA DE MONTE, has interesting side smocking dotted with tiny beads. Rare silk necklaces from Kabulistan start at $35. Sandal fish-tail shoes, $11. Handwoven brass pot, $70. Rich purple velvet curtain, below, by RUBANA MOSCOSO, are adorned with mirror embellish- ment. Handwoven three-tiered pendant necklace from Baluchistan is secured with velvet ribbon. $45
From Poverty to High Fashion

By Jay Elliott

"I think it was the poverty program that propelled me into fashion," says fashion designer Miss Penn, whose clothes are currently on sale at the Smithsonian shops.

Kashkerey, Miss Penn's East Village shop, is in the same area of New York as the antipartheid coffee shop where she used to teach designing and crafts to teenagers.

"I was disappointed with the scope of the poverty program," said Miss Penn, "as after 15 years as a social worker, I decided to resign and make clothes for my own boutique." She searched for a location in Harlem, but found a low-cost shop in her neighborhood, on East Seventh Street. The shop had an apartment attached and she moved in.

At the time she opened her boutique, she was not yet established, and she moved in.

In September 1983, the shop opened, Kashkerey with a fashion show at the Village Vanguard. In the competitive world of New York fashion, Miss Penn's designs featured traditional fabrics and colors. She explained, "Traditional fabrics were woven by our ancestors' women, and not manufactured in mass production."

"The collection was a success," said Miss Penn, "and the shop began to take shape. We started to get orders from customers who were interested in our work."

Kashkerey has since opened several other boutiques, each one featuring traditional fabrics and designs. Miss Penn's clothing is now sold in stores throughout the United States and Europe.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to bring awareness to the importance of preserving our cultural heritage through fashion," said Miss Penn. "Each piece represents a piece of history, and I am proud to have a part in keeping our traditions alive."

Miss Penn's designs have been featured in several magazines and have won awards for their unique style and quality. She continues to work on new projects, always striving to create clothing that is both beautiful and meaningful to the wearer.

"I believe that fashion is a form of expression," said Miss Penn. "Each piece should tell a story, and I hope that my designs do just that."
Three Around the Third World

By Bertha Winkmann

Pantaloons—day and night.

Pantaloons are a whole new way to dress for the resort life. At Sona, the Golden One, 11 East Fifty-fifth Street, we found these airy rainbow-colored pantaloons with a tiny matching top (above left). About 45. Also, the softest-to-the-body, shaped, black silk gold-trimmed pullover with pantaloons (above right). About $95. Complete the look with this Berber necklace of amber and silver. About $65. At Inside Outlet, a super look for a man is this sheep patterned woollen shirt with Italian-style duryaadec (above background); shirt, about $30. At Madonna,

Madonna, at 304 East Fifty-third Street, understands the pantaloons message. They have great ones in lots of patterns and colors. Add their studded leather or brightly colored long wool streamer belts. Everything from Morocco. The shirt (opposite center) is to order from Madonna. The other shirts, in fantastic textures of Indian cotton, are from Sona, The Golden One. The shirt (opposite left) is about $20. The other shirt (opposite right) is about $27. Felt and arm bangles and all the rings are found at SONA, too. A great way to look on the might be long dresses while everyone else is skinny around in those little bikinIs. For instance, the embroidered (below left) from Inside Outlet, 956/2 Lexington Avenue. About 50. Or the most delicately textured sheer cotton (below center), wrapped and tied under the bosom with its own bright yellow petticoat. About 75. At Knickerley, 26 St. Mark's Place.
The Beautiful People turned out en masse for a champagne preview given by Lena Horne to kick off Oscar Brown Jr.'s new musical revue, Joy, now playing at the Intimate New Theatre on Manhattan's East Side. Of course, the most beautiful of all was Lena herself, who openly calls Oscar "great" and "wonderful." No less enthusiastic about the gifted composer-singer-actor's latest effort was the lovely Abbey Lincoln in her much together natural and fur pants. The show, which also features Brown's black and beautiful partner Jean Pace, along with Sivuca, an albino Brazilian who does fantastic things on the accordion, went over big to an audience that included the Sidney Lumets (Lena's daughter Gail), Egon von Furstenburg, Pilar Crespi, Baron Alexis Waldeck, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Betsy Palmer and Hair producer Michael Butler... Elsewhere on the theatrical scene, Al Freeman Jr. is deep in rehearsals for the big new musical Look To The Lilies, which will feature the nation's fastest-rising black actor opposite Shirley Booth. It's based on Lilies Of The Field, the movie that Sidney Poitier coped an Oscar for... Eagerly anticipated is the opening of Billy Noname, a black musical drama by brother Bill Mackey, with music and lyrics by Johnny Brandon... Another impressive contender for off-Broadway honors is Ebony, Meenie, Minie, Moe, an interracially conceived Afro-rock musical by Robert Schroeder with music by Bobby Banks and direction by Michael Whitaker... Some of the most imaginative of avant-garde blacks are operating thriving enterprises in the East Village, quiet as it's kept. Foremost among them is Sara Penn, whose Knobkerry or "Third World Boutique" is a pace-setter with its jewelry, sculpture etc.

—Phyl Garland
A PROSE COLLAGE OF THE CHANGING SPIRIT OF AMERICAN WOMANHOOD

A DIFFERENT WOMAN

BY

JANE HOWARD

"An important book...dignified, compassionate, often funny...compelling."

NEW YORK MAGAZINE

SELECTED BY 4 BOOK CLUBS
“A WITTY, POIGNANT
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT...
A PANORAMA OF
AMERICAN WOMANHOOD.”

Minneapolis Tribune
From New York to Tucson
to the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel,
former Life journalist Jane Howard crisscrossed
the nation talking to women—lawyers,
fisherwomen, housewives, grandmothers
women of all backgrounds—
and what emerges is a striking, intimate
view of female consciousness in an
era of inescapable change.

“A DIFFERENT
WOMAN
SAYS IT ALL...”

A book about women that—surprise—isn’t
ideological, rhetorical, or hortatory. In fact, it's
quite the opposite—personal, witty, and open.”

The Washington Post
“A book that amused, moved, enlightened and
captivated me throughout.”

Los Angeles Times
“A book that will fascinate both men and women.”

Greensboro N.C., News
“Jane Howard’s book is masterful.”

Susan Brownmiller
LEO BURNET T U.S.A.


Printed in U.S.A.

VIRGINIA SLIMS

Fashion: Kaddory

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Hazardous to Your Health.

YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Hazardous to Your Health.
NEW YORK — Authentic kilim rugs that your girlfriend wears for the fashionable fe
terest. These rugs are hand-woven by nomads in the North African desert, where they live in the hottest climate in the world. The colors are natural and the patterns are unique to each rug. A New York shop, called Luminous, specializes in these rugs.

The story of how the shop came to be called Luminous is just as interesting. One day, a customer walked in and asked for a rug that was not available in the shop. The store owner, a South African, knew of a rug that was being woven by nomads in the desert. She ordered it and waited for months. When it arrived, it was exactly what the customer was looking for.

The shop carries a wide range of rugs, from traditional kilims to modern designs. They have a great selection of colors and patterns, and the prices are very reasonable. I highly recommend Luminous for anyone looking for a unique and beautiful rug.

—ANDRE LEON TALLEY

Tracking Treasures

Raw handcrafted Turkaman pendants

A Turkaman necklace of wood and feathers

The interior of Knudsen

An Indian hotel room with theme decor which one serves in a motor

Garden
Opening Thursday, December 2, at the Gross-McCleaf Gallery, the joyous holiday showing of the

From New York, London, Philadelphia and California, the Philadelphia Gallery's inspired, uninhibited, unabashedly original artist-designers will be shown together exclusively in the holiday collection of the

THE PHILADELPHIA GALLERY

An exclusive collection of clothes and accessories. For women who see themselves differently. Quite differently.

At the Gross-McCleaf Gallery, 1713 Walnut St., Philadelphia, December 2 to December 18, from 10 AM to 6:30 PM (Wednesdays to 8:30 PM).

The New York Botanical Garden
Bronx, New York 10458
(212) 220-8780

December 26, 1978

Sarah Penn
Knollkerry
158 Spring Street
New York, NY 10012

Dear Ms. Penn:

The show is done, up and open; I hope you'll be able to see it. 'African Objects Woven From Plants' will run through April 1st, as agreed to by you in a phone conversation with me. Know that your cloth is protected from harm, in cases, and is fully covered by The New York Botanical Garden Insurance.

I will return your cloth to you after the show closes.

Thank you again, very much, for your generous loan.

Sincerely,

Susan Hartnett
Exhibit Coordinator

Ju
KNOBKERRY is proud to announce
the opening of a new gallery

PENN-ULMER
TEXTILE GALLERY
109 Spring Street
New York City 10012
(212) 925-3950

with an exhibition of

19th & 20th C. CHINESE
COSTUMES & TEXTILES

November 10 through December 31, 1979
Reception: November 10, 2-6 pm.

1980
Calvin Klein

7 May 1987

Ms. Kinshasha Conwill
The Studio Museum In Harlem
144 West 125th Street
New York, NY 10027

Dear Ms. Conwill:

RE: SARA E. PENN

I have known Ms. Penn for several years, and found her to be very knowledgeable with respect to the history and tradition behind fabrics.

She has always been most helpful, and has supplied us with resources which have given me inspiration for my fabric collections.

Ms. Penn is highly competent and I feel her unique skills will make her ideal for the position of Director of the Museum Shop at the Studio Museum In Harlem.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Calvin Klein

CK:hmf

Calvin Klein Ltd., 205 West 39th Street, New York, New York 10018, 212-736-9601, telex 234820 CKL US

THE BRIGHT STUFF!

Nyckelhorn,经纪人

132

133
The story of the basket is a complex one to weave, beginning, perhaps, about the time the infant Moses was found at the edge of the Nile inside a reed basket. All continents and cultures, native fibers (bamboo, twigs, grass, straw) have long been used to create vessels in which to store grain, cart milk, boil water, gather berries, and more; thus, the richly made baskets of the Philippines or the tightly woven willows of the American Indians. When it comes to form and function, a roadside find can be as desirable as a fine antique basket. Of course, what goes inside is always up for grabs. —produced by Ellen Breslow

ASPECTS OF STYLE

BASKETS


and Philippine made straw market basket. $145—Richard Peterson, "Tinamari Basket" Basket of red cypress from northwest U.S. (privately owned). For more information, see...
March 31, 1994

CURRENTS; Around the World in TriBeCa

By DELCIE LEHMANN

TRIBECA may be the hippest triangle south of Canal Street, but it’s sorely missing the kinds of art shops that make SoHo, north of Canal, a jammed weekend spot.

Stepping into this void is Sara Pena/Krookerry, an emporium that sells ethnic and brightly colored textiles, furniture, jewelry and clothing. Sara Pena, who opened her SoHo-like TriBeCa store in December, has been selling objects from Africa, Asia and the Americas since the 1980s, when she started in the East Village. "I moved to SoHo in the 70s, stayed until the 90s and am now here," she said.

Ms. Pena has been a Marco Polo, traversing hemispheres to dig up exotic, in one corner are rare, kimono, sarongs; in another, 18th-century Japanese cabinets. Elsewhere around the shop are textiles from places like Sierra Leone, Mali, China, Indonesia, Colombia and Mexico. On the wall are fighting flags (above), $2,500 to $3,000, from the Fanti people of Ghana.

A 19th-century Japanese futon cover colored with natural dye, about $1,500, can transform a futon couch into furniture worth showing off. The boutique, at 211 West Broadway (Franklin Street) is open Tuesday through Sunday, from noon to 7 P.M. (212) 923-1860.

David Hammons’ Secret Magic Show

By Arle Wialich

T

HE DAVID HAMMONS’ Secret Magic Show was the first major presentation of the artist to the public. The exhibition featured a range of works, including paintings, sculptures, and installations, that were intended to provoke thought and challenge the viewer’s perceptions.

Some works were created in response to social issues, while others explored abstract concepts. The show included a mix of new and old pieces, reflecting Hammons’不断发展的艺术生涯。

Hammons has always been interested in exploring themes of race, identity, and power. His work often uses humor and irony to address these topics, inviting viewers to reflect on their own biases and assumptions.

The Secret Magic Show was a pivotal moment in Hammons’ career, cementing his status as a leading figure in the contemporary art world. It continues to be celebrated for its innovative approach and thought-provoking content.
Message:

Dear Sara,

Please find enclosed the standard request for non-exclusive license that Walker requests with each new purchase. As I stated on the telephone, we are launching a new web site on Friday and are hoping to include a reproduction of David Hammons Flight Fantasy, as a highlight of the current permanent collection installation, on view until April 1999. Although we sent the form to Mr. Hammons in 1998 we have never received a response. It would be most appreciative if you forward this form to Mr. Hammons and ask that he respond as soon as possible by either signing and returning the form via fax or by sending the unsigned form back via fax, so that we are informed of his wishes. Again thank you for your assistance with this detail.

Sincerely,

Joseph King
Assistant Registrar
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Tel.: 612-375-7663
Fax.: 612-375-7618
SARA PENN KNOBKERRY AND MILOSATHERSTONE AFRICAN ARTS

GONA
MEDICINE CONTAINER CULTURE OF CHUKUNDA PEOPLE, MOZAMBIQUE

19 APRIL - 7 MAY, 1995
Opening Reception:
Wednesday, April 19, 6-9PM

KNOBKERRY 211 WEST BROADWAY NY NY 10013
At Franklin St. in Tribeca Tel-Fax 212-925-1865
Sew the old days for me, my fathers.
Sew them that I may wear them for the feast that is coming...

GEORGE AWONOR—WILLIAMS
Chamaian Poet

15 Textile and Costume Exhibition
including arts of:
Africa, Afghanistan, China, Japan
Indonesia, Pakistan, India and
Huichol Indians of Mexico

2 concerts presented at the show:
- Ornette Coleman
- Leon Thomas

SARA PENN KNOBKERRY
ERIC ROBERTSON AFRICAN ARTS
MILOS SIMOVIC AFRICAN ARTS

ANCESTRAL SPIRITS
Gona Medicine Containers from Mozambique
Egun Garments of Yoruba Societies

June 4 - 29, 1996
Reception, Saturday June 8, 6 - 9 pm

KNOBKERRY 211 WEST BROADWAY, NY, NY 10013
At Franklin Street in Tribeca  Tel-Fax 212-925-1865
Dear Linda,

I am outraged that my business did not receive a single credit in "Making a Grand and Graceful Gesture" published in the March/April issue of Metropolitan Home. The red and yellow Ikat textile which you borrowed appears in two photos with no mention of Sara Penn/Knoberry, yet every other contributor received credit. My outrage is based on the fact that a similar oversight occurred last year with N.Y. Mag. in which Corky Pollen photographed my goods and gave credit to two other retailers in the city.

I am sorry to have to suspect racism, but I see no other reason for the oversight, particularly since my fabric was a positive asset to both photos. If I sound paranoid it is only because I have been pioneer in my field and watched others walk away with my ideas and gain acceptance and recognition.

I had to let you know how I feel because I have passed the stage of silent acquiescence.

Sincerely,

Sara E. Penn
Manhattan Sources

ASIAN textiles, from Indian silk saris to Indonesian cotton ikat, are available in Manhattan, especially in and around SoHo. Fabrics range from sturdy cream-colored cotton to batiks to antique Kashmiri shawls.

SARA PENN/KNOBKERBY 211 West Broadway (near Franklin Street), (212) 925-1960. Cream-colored cotton cut-out fabric ($60) and silk saris ($125 to $900).

JAMSON WHYTE 67 Wooster Street (near Bleecker Street), (212) 965-9405. Indonesian and Indian batik scarves and bedspreads ($20 to $60).

MARK SHELLEN GALLERY 189 Greene Street (near Prince Street), (212) 925-3384. Nineteenth-century Kashmiri shawls ($300 to $3,000), and early 20th-century Indian cotton dhurries (starting at $1,000).

JACQUES CARCANAGUES 161 Spring Street (at Mercer Street), (212) 925-8110. Silk-embroidered quilts from India ($100 to $900).

KUMU 43 Spring Street (near Mulberry Street), (212) 334-4775. Indian cotton...
KEN TISA

RUGS

Opening Reception
April 18 - May 9
April 18, 6-9 p.m.

157 S. 3 1/2 West
Sara Penn Knobkerry Gallery
211 West Broadway
NYC, NY 10013
DERA A - COAT

Most coats match
some skirts -

$ 225 - 275

depending on amount
of embroidery

$ 250

This one

Sold for
CAPTIONS

Program for commencement exercises at Spelman College, 1949

Pages from Sara Penn's scrapbook album, 1950

Sara Penn in Europe, c. 1950s

Sara Penn, c. 1950s

Sara Penn in Concaneau, France, 1955

Sara Penn, 1957

Newspaper clipping announcing Sara Penn’s appointment to a national social-work training center, c. 1950s

Sara Penn at a demonstration as photographed for the New York World-Telegram and The Sun, 1963


Knobbery clothing label, n.d.

Knobbery envelope, n.d.


Knobbery garments on the cover and as editorial feature of the Saturday Evening Post, 1968. Story: Maggie Paley. Photos: Charles Moore, Jill Kremenitz

Bill Cunningham on Sara Penn, Knobbery, and “The Gypsy Look” in the Chicago Tribune, 1968


Clippings from Women’s Wear Daily and the New York Times on Serai Imports, Ltd., letterhead, c. 1969

Knobbery fashions on the cover of Esquire, 1969


Sara Penn mentioned by Phyllis Garland in Jet, c. 1970

Sara Penn mentioned by Jane Stanton in New York Magazine, 1970

Top: Sara Penn at Knobbery on the Lower East Side, 1970. Photo: Omar Kharem

Bottom: Sara Penn in her Lower East Side apartment, 1971. Photo: Omar Kharem

A Different Woman by Jane Howard (Avon, 1973)

Clothing by Knobbery in a Virginia Slims advertisement, Jet, c. 1975

Clothing by Knobbery in a Virginia Slims advertisement, Essence, c. 1977


Sara Penn behind the counter at Knobbery, 158 Spring Street, c. 1970s

Contact prints of portraits taken at Knobbery, labeled “Dan Dawson / Seret Scott / Marion Lake / etc.”

Letter from Sara Penn to the artist, dated 1971. Photo: Susan Stoffeld

Mailier advertising a holiday display of clothing and accessories at the Philadelphia Gallery, 1978

Chinese garment on view outside Knobbery, Spring Street, c. 1979. Photo: Wallace Litman

Chinese garment on view outside Knobbery, Spring Street, c. 1979. Photo: Wallace Litman

Top: Knobbery garment identified as “Chinese aboriginal style of African woven & Batik [sic].” 1979

Bottom: Knobbery window at 158 Spring Street, n.d.

Announcement for Knobbery’s exhibition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese costumes and textiles (as the Penn-Ulmer Textile Gallery, 109 Spring Street), 1980

Top: Jacket by Sara Penn, c. 1980s

Bottom: Knobbery gallery at 109 Spring Street, n.d.

Flyer advertising Walking Works by Sara Penn, an exhibition at the Unicorn Gallery, New York, 1981

Photographs used to advertise Walking Works by Sara Penn, c. 1981

Sara Penn in the studio of Marcia Marcus, 1981. Photos: Marcia Marcus

Letter of recommendation from Calvin Klein on behalf of Sara Penn supporting her application for the position of Director of the Museum Shop at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982

Beaded bag by Sara Penn for Leekan Designs, Inc. (center right), featured in an unidentified fashion magazine, n.d. Photo: Olivier Toscani

Knobbery at 211 West Broadway, n.d.

Top and bottom: Knobbery at 211 West Broadway, n.d.

Olive Wong, n.d.

Baskets from Knobbery in an unidentified magazine, 1994


Installation view of David Hammons exhibition at Knobbery, 211 West Broadway, 1994. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Erma Estwick

David Hammons, Splitting Image, installed at Knobbery, 211 West Broadway, 1994. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Erma Estwick

David Hammons, Cigarette Chandelier (above) and Asia Africa (below), installed at Knobbery, 211 West Broadway, 1994. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Erma Estwick

David Hammons at Knobbery, c. 1994. Courtesy the artist


Sara Penn and David Hammons outside Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, n.d.

Correspondence from the Walker Art Center regarding a David Hammons work exhibited at Knoberry

Top and bottom: Postcard for Gona: Medicine Container Culture of Chukunda People, Mozambique at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1995

Installation view of Gona at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1995

Installation view of Gona at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1995

Photocopy of brochure for Gona at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1995

Sara Penn / Knoberry business card, c. 1995

Knoberry bag at 211 West Broadway, n.d.

Futonji postcards with handwritten notes on garments on reverse, 1996

Top: Illustrated card with handwritten notes on a Knobberry exhibition on reverse, n.d.

Bottom: Postcard for Ancestral Spirits: Gona Medicine Containers from Mozambique, Egunung Garments of Yoruba Societies at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1996

Flyer for Ancestral Spirits at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1996

Installation view of Ancestral Spirits at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1996

Letter from Sara Penn to Metropolitan Home, 1997

Knoberry in a New York Times list of sources for Asian textiles, 1998

Postcard for Ken Tisa: Rugs at Knoberry, 211 West Broadway, 1998

Sara Penn and Woodie King, 2003

Knoberry, n.d.

Photograph of Knobberry Dera’s coat with handwritten notes on reverse, n.d.

Knoberry garment, n.d.
The images collected in this volume primarily come from Sara Penn's collection of personal ephemera, another envelope of Penn's materials shared with the author by Renoir Darrett, and many generous contributions from those interviewed for this project. As such, it reflects a view of Penn's work and experience centered on the materials she herself chose to retain throughout her life. A few images (of older newspaper clippings, for example) were sourced in order to support references made in the interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Jacob Robichaux and Sam Gordon for bringing me into the Gordon Robichaux fold as a writer and oral historian. This remit has led to so many incredible opportunities, including the privilege of interviewing Sara Penn in the spring of 2017 and many people close to her in the following years. Thank you both for encouraging me to stay with the project and trust that it would find a home. Ken Tisa's generosity of spirit and gift of gab is how we learned about Knobkerri in the first place, and it's who facilitated my introduction to Penn. Thank you, Ken. Thank you, Carmen Hammons, who has stayed in conversation with me about this project (and received way too many emails from me) over the past four years, giving me insight and guidance along the way. Thank you, Randy Kennedy, who first commissioned these interviews for Hauser & Wirth's digital arts periodical Ursa and made sure that I would be able to use them for future projects. Thank you, Rie Schmidt, for making my interview with Fumi happen. Thank you, Peter Stebbins, for volunteering your time as a researcher at the beginning of this project, and for connecting me to various people and resources. Thank you, Omar Kharem, for the use of your gorgeous photos, and Linda Mendelson for sending them. Renoir Darrett, your beautiful materials opened up a whole new world for this project; thank you for sharing them with me.

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To all the interviewees—Andrea Aranow, Charles Daniel Dawson, David Hammons, Joanne Robinson Hill, Sana Musasama, Kate Prendergast, Eric Robertson, Fumi Schmidt, Seret Scott, Elena Solow, Carol Thompson, Ken Tisa, Jane Barrell Yadav, and Paulette Young—thank you for trusting me with your stories and sharing with me so intimately and open-heartedly. Many of you provided contacts, connections, points of research, and photographs, and all of you let me into your special relationship with Sara Penn and Knobkerri. Your energy and love for Sara can be felt in this book, and I am so grateful to have experienced Knobkerri through your memories.

Lastly, I am ever grateful to Sara Penn for her vision and legacy, for making the world bigger and better. I thank her for letting me into her magical universe.

~Svetlana Kitto
SCULPTURECENTER

SculptureCenter leads the conversation on contemporary art by supporting artistic innovation and independent thought highlighting sculpture’s specific potential to change the way we engage with the world. Positioning artists’ work in larger cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts, SculptureCenter discerns and interprets emerging ideas. Founded by artists in 1928, SculptureCenter provides an international forum that connects artists and audiences by presenting exhibitions, commissioning new work, and generating scholarship.

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SVETLANA KITTO

Svetlana Kitto is a writer, editor, and oral historian. Her writing has been featured in *New York*, *Ursula*, *Guernica*, the *New York Times*, *Interview*, and *BOMB*, among other periodicals. She is the editor of the art publications *1996* by Matt Keegan (*New York Consolidated*, 2020); *Talking to the Sun at Fire Island* (BOFFO, 2019); *Courage and Persistence: Art That Fueled the Fight for Women’s Suffrage* (National Endowment of the Arts, 2020); and *Adult Contemporary Volume I* (2017). As an oral historian, she has contributed primary material to archives and exhibitions at the Brooklyn Historical Society; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; New York Public Library for Performing Arts; and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, for which she conducted interviews with Robert Morris, Barbara Hammer, and Bill T. Jones. Since 2013, she has curated the reading and performance series Adult Contemporary, which has been presented at Storm King, CANADA, Hauser & Wirth, Performa, Printed Matter, and elsewhere. In addition to freelance writing and interviewing, she works as a writer and editor for the gallery Gordon Robichaux in New York.

NEW YORK CONSOLIDATED

New York Consolidated (NYC) is a new nonprofit organization that seeks to foster equity through art and publishing.
SARA PENN’S KNOBKERRY
AN ORAL HISTORY SOURCEBOOK

SvETLANA KitTO