

Abby Rayner: Sparkle Plenty

By Kendra Frankle

While scrolling through Instagram during the holiday season, I stumbled across a post displaying different designs of beautiful symbols on light and dark blue and blush silk scarves. The scarves were filled with different symbols I recognized; they were related to Judaism. I was inspired by the beauty and intricacies of the scarves, especially after realizing that Abby Rayner, senior Fibers major here at SCAD had created them herself. Abby was selling the scarves as Hanukkah presents for Jewish women. I knew immediately I wanted to meet with her and hear the story behind the project.

Not many people come to SCAD thinking, “I’m going to major in Fibers,” because not a lot of people know what it means to be a Fibers major, or even what Fibers is. Like many SCAD students, Abby, a five-foot-nothing girl with a heart bigger than her body, began her journey at SCAD as an Illustration major. Although Abby came to SCAD with an illustration in mind, she has always been drawn to embellished and colorful textiles.

Like many students at SCAD, Abby was completely obsessed with the TV show “Project Runway” as a kid. “My aunt gave me the nickname ‘Sparkle Plenty’ because I loved glitzy clothes.” These skills are very apparent when you look at the designs on her scarves. As we wandered around the Fibers building, looking for the perfect place to take photographs, Abby commented, “Fibers encompass illustration but also includes so much more. I fell in love with the diversity of the department and its endless possibilities.”

“Judaism has always had a place in my work and I usually turn towards my faith when I feel stuck with a project,” said Abby. The elegant scarves Abby created are based on her professor asking the class to create a print or pattern that has a “function” or brings awareness to

something. “I was really struggling with finding inspiration for this project, so I went to our Chabad, an organization that focuses on making Judaism relevant in day to day life,” said Abby. At this point the location hunt stopped and found us sitting in an empty classroom talking. “Zelly, the wife of the Chabad Rabbis and a very close friend of mine, reminded me of the story of Miriam and it went from there.” Miriam was the first female figure in the Bible to be named a prophet. “She’s pretty much the original feminist,” Abby said with her curly red hair glowing in the natural light of the building.

Miriam expresses leadership during the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. After Moses parts the Red Sea, leaving the Egyptians to be engulfed by the waves, Miriam rejoices with the women in song and dance as their lives are spared. “The *iconic* scene of Miriam and the women dancing with tambourines not only represents the strength and resilience of the Jewish women but also a moment when all Jewish women can rejoice together in their faith,” Abby continues. “Miriam is also regarded as the ‘well’ that sustained the Jewish people during their journey, providing water to the people and animals in the desert. This abundance of water, flowers, and food frames the women illustrated in my design.” Abby’s textile strives to unite all Jewish women.

“So, what does being Jewish mean to you?” I asked as we continued to wander throughout the different classrooms of the Fibers building. “Oy, that’s a loaded question!” She responded. “Being Jewish is about having a sense of community wherever I go.” Even though many of us don’t grow up surrounded by a large Jewish community, if you run into one, they’re always welcoming and accepting.

The Jewish community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where Abby grew up is relatively small compared to the rest of the world. I couldn’t help but relate to Abby at this moment as I thought the same thing growing up. Abby told me that for the first two years of high school she went to a small Christian school, she was the only Jew in the entire school. At the beginning of

her schooling, Abby told me she learned quickly that her faith was not going to be embraced by everyone. “I dealt with both blind hatred and pure ignorance,” she said. Although she had to learn to overcome the hatred, Abby also encountered people who just wanted to learn more about Judaism and were respectful of the different beliefs. “Coming across these issues at a young age taught me how to be outspoken, firm in my beliefs, and patient,” Abby said.

I started to forget this was our first-time meeting — Abby’s ease with conversation and large smile quickly puts others at ease. Our “interview” turned more into a chat between friends instead of a discussion between strangers. “To me, Judaism is a shared heritage, understanding of struggle, a celebration of tradition, and of course, the best excuse to stuff your face with carbs every Friday night,” Abby shared.

The more Abby and I talked, the more our lives growing up seemed to mirror each other. Brought up in a multicultural family with a Jewish father and a mother who recently converted, Abby has always identified as Jewish. Emphasizing the celebration of tradition, taking care of others, and bringing beauty in the world in your own unique way are some of the typical Jewish values that Abby was raised with. While discussing her work in the past two years it’s clear that not only have these values always been a part of Abby’s life, but they have also become customary to the work she has created. “My senior collection focuses on bringing new life to traditional textiles and Jewish themes so that they continue to be relevant in our ever-changing lives,” said Abby.

When choosing to create a scarf as her design, the goal was to create a textile that all Jewish women could find a purpose for. “In Reform and Conservative Judaism, women wear prayer shawls to the synagogue, but Orthodox women don’t, so I knew that a prayer shawl wasn’t going to do the job. The versatility of a scarf made sense because it could be used as a neck scarf, purse accessory, headband, or headscarf to express Jewish pride,” said Abby. Abby’s

textile strives to unite all Jewish women. “Judaism is an incredibly diverse religion, culture, and ethnicity. I don’t believe that there is a right or wrong way to ‘Jew’. There’s a quote that describes this perfectly — ‘You put two Jews together, you get three opinions’ — everyone has their own traditions and ways of observing. A Jew is a Jew, is a Jew, is a Jew.”

Now that Abby had the idea, it was time for her to put her thoughts into action. Beginning with designing the scarves to production and marketing, the entire process took around a year for Abby to complete. Research seemed to play an important role in Abby’s initial process, she took an entire week to research her concept before she actually put pencil to paper. The idea of Fibers tends to be thought of as a physical process. Sewing designs into fabric or hand-dyeing the materials, but Abby introduced me to the digital side of Fibers. Most of her work is done digitally and in Photoshop. After her design was finalized, she sent color and material test prints to three different companies before she felt confident that the place she chose would bring her designs to life perfectly. Taking the time to perfect the project is something that makes Abby’s work so special. She went above and beyond instead of just completing the assignment for class.

“This project has given me the confidence to pursue more Judaism related projects throughout my senior year,” Abby said. “I try not to worry about the balance of Jewish and non-Jewish work in my portfolio because it’s something I’m really passionate about and it’s important to create positive dialog, especially in our world today.”

Last quarter, Abby made a pattern collection that illustrates the symbolic fruits and grains that make up the Seven Species – pomegranates, olives, dates, barley, wheat, figs, and grapes. The patterns of the Seven Species explore a modern twist on traditional Judaica, allowing the patterns to speak through a more vibrant color palette with whimsical brushwork. “There are a number of successful Jewish designers, Tory Burch, Diane Von Furstenberg, Donna Karan, and

Pnina Tornai” Abby named a few. “Judaism isn’t represented on the runway like other cultural and ethnic groups,” Abby said. “In the future, I hope that my art will continue to bridge the gaps within our diverse culture, as well as create a conversation with the broader community.”