

Visions on silk

A Hoboken painter
turns fabric into fine art

SISSI SISKA SWINGS A BROWN, green and burgundy shawl around her shoulders, sending its long black tassels into a wild dance. “Of course it would look much better on a taller person,” she says.

While the shawl with its glittering gold accents has been worn by models on runways, it always ends up back with Siska. “This one almost broke my heart,” she lovingly recalls. “I hadn’t painted on this type of silk [sand-washed charmeuse] before, and it was very hard to work on, so I’m keeping it as a showpiece.”

Siska, whose studio is in Hoboken’s Monroe Center for the Arts, draws inspiration from nature, as well as Michelangelo and Picasso. For the past 25 years, she has created prints for home furnishings, apparel and giftware. Her couture pieces have appeared on the runways of Perry Ellis, Marc Jacobs and Isaac Mizrahi, and she’s drafted designs for Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan and F. Schumacher & Co. While she was formally schooled in the arts at the Fashion Institute of Technology, she is purely self-taught when it comes to silk painting.

One day in the ’70s, while shopping on New York’s Christopher Street, Siska stumbled upon a Frenchman’s shop that sold painted silk screens. “I started asking him questions about how it was done,” says the artist, who was working as



Silk painter Sissi Siska, above, designed this dress for a Marc Jacobs and Perry Ellis runway show. Inset, an assortment of the artisan’s work.

a textile designer in the garment district at the time. “He promptly escorted me to the door.”

But that didn’t stop Siska. She asked around the garment district and soon found one studio where a few women painted on silk. Though they too were unwilling to share any trade secrets, Siska overheard a conversation about Clara Gordon, a Russian silk artist who had once produced designs for the czars and who had taught the technique to the studio’s owner.

Siska tracked down Gordon and paid to spend a day at her home to watch her paint. During that one and

only visit, Gordon taught Siska how to stretch silk over a screen and mix dyes. Now Siska blends those techniques with her own, employing folk tools from Indonesia as well as stamps, wax and even salt to get the desired effect.

When she’s not filling orders, Siska keeps busy with Silk Synergy, a group of nine artists whose orchid banners recently graced the conservatory of the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C.

“What I really love about painting on silk is how the dye takes to the fabric,” says Siska, “Each piece of fabric has its own personality.” □