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Jane Slater Marquis: Everything is Lovely, but Never Quite, Never Quite Like Black Mountain

Katie Horak

For the twenty years I knew Jane, the leaf study hung in a heavy wood frame on a brick hearth in the living room of her home. When you sat with her there, on a deep rattan couch she liked to nap on, she would often talk about the study and how she had created it as a student at Black Mountain College. The study is a collage of leaves pasted onto a piece of heavy white paper, held in place with black netting stretched over it and fastened on all sides. At some point, the leaf study slipped its hinge, falling down at a diagonal angle with one corner resting on the bottom of the frame, exposing the brown packing tape that Jane had used to fasten it to its white mat.

About a year before she died, Jane told me she wanted me to have the leaf study. I remember sitting on the side of her bed; she was propped up with pillows, feet in checkerboard socks. I said of course, I would be honored to have it after she passed. But she said no, take it now. It needs care.

I admit that I knew very little about the leaf study then, and I was a little unsure why she had chosen me to be its steward. Over our years together Jane had talked frequently about her time as a student at Black Mountain College, and my connection with that place was only through the stories she told me.

I met Jane when I was 23 years old; she needed another set of hands to help her fabricate stained glass windows, and as a recently graduated art student, I needed work. I can still recall meeting Jane for the first time, walking through her garden, the crunch of the gravel under my feet. I remember finding her in her studio, sitting on a wood stool at a large table filled with small pieces of colored glass. She would later laugh when she told the story of meeting me, of being dubious of me as she sized me up. A studio assistant needs to be an excellent personality match, as there are long hours together and there needs to be easy, unspoken communication. We fell into a comfortable artist/assistant relationship that quickly turned into deep friendship. I would sit with Jane for hours on end, cutting glass into shapes under her direction, wrapping their edges in foil to prepare them for solder. Weeks turned into years, and Jane's home and studio, and in many ways Jane herself, became my refuge.



Figure 1: Jane Slater Marquis, circa 2010. Photograph by Mark Takeuchi.

Jane Slater grew up in a small town in Utah in a pioneering Latter-Day Saints family, the second to last of five siblings. She had learned about Black Mountain College through her older sister's husband, Grant Dahlstrom, who ran a well-known printing press in Los Angeles and had encouraged her to visit a friend at Black Mountain in 1939 and apply in 1940.

In her application materials, Jane wrote, "I want to be free to learn as much as I possibly can about the things I am interested in yet be able to rely on the kind of guidance offered by the college." She said, "I expect to become more sensitive to life – the lovely parts and not so lovely parts."¹ Jane wrote that she was interested in studying

creative writing and art at Black Mountain and submitted a series of writing samples with her application. Jane was accepted for admittance in the Fall quarter of 1940.

In her first year, Jane (or “Slats,” as she quickly became known at Black Mountain) was described by her instructors as a middling student, exerting effort only in subjects that interested her. Instructors described her as quiet in class, reticent to participate, and showing little outward interest. She was lazy in work sessions.² Nevertheless, she was enthralled by this place to which she had been transported:

At 18, I nearly fainted with wonder at the ferns and moss thick on the paths outside the buildings that led up the mountains to Blue Ridge. I was a girl from rocky Utah. My “first love” and I would climb this trail late at night. I have forgotten him but not the pungency of the fragrant woods or the moonlight on them.³



Figure 2: Jane Slater at Black Mountain College, early 1940s. Courtesy Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

Coursework began to interest Jane when she took her first class with Josef Albers in the fall quarter of her second year; he had been teaching at Harvard and travelling in Mexico during her first year at Black Mountain. Over the next three years, she would take more than twenty-five classes with Albers, sometimes three in a single quarter – drawing, design, *werklehre* (basic design), painting, discussions of art – as well as six quarters of weaving with Anni Albers.⁴

I used to ask Jane what it was like being a student of Josef and Anni Albers, and her eyes always twinkled. I often wonder if she tired of being asked that question, as she was asked it a lot over the years, but she never seemed to hesitate to recount her memories in detail. In an interview with Fred Horowitz, Jane described the anticipation of going to Albers' color class, where students would lay their color studies on the floor and everyone would talk about them. She recalled the theater of each class, the anticipation of what Albers might say or do, and the unexpected ways he would describe colors. Once, Jane recalled, he described "a color as tasting like Coca Cola. And you just *knew* it tasted like Coca Cola."⁵

Jane particularly loved the exercise of fooling the eye with Albers' *matière* assignments. She wrote later that the assignment wasn't just to make one material look like something that it wasn't, and it wasn't just about creating an interesting combination of textures. Rather, she remembered, "it had to really *do* something. Of course, what he was really doing was making you *look*, making you see something where you hadn't seen it before."⁶

After nearly five years at Black Mountain, it was time for Jane to graduate. She wrote in later years that her final year at Black Mountain was when she really put her head down and worked hard, focused, producing the work for her final exhibition.⁷ It would be twenty years before Jane would begin to work in stained glass, but in her student work she was already using natural light as a second medium. In one piece she sandwiched leaves between two panes of glass, painting some for opacity and leaving others unpainted, letting the natural light expose their anatomy.



Figure 3. Jane Slater Marquis, leaves on glass, 1945. Courtesy Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

Upon graduation, Jane moved to Los Angeles to live with her older sister and her husband. It's impossible to imagine how difficult it must have been to depart from the creative community of Black Mountain College, after almost five years there, and settle into the monochromatic world of traditional postwar life. Frequent letters to Albers and fellow students, most of whom were still at Black Mountain after Jane graduated, illustrate a feeling of loss:

Dear Ati,

Last night I couldn't go to sleep for three hours, because for some occult reason I began to remember Black Mountain, the way it smelled in the more pleasant places, late afternoon, summertime, and everything and the people there. I guess you are there—I just habitually think of you there.

All the siren-charms of the great wide world cannot hold a candle to one inch of the place. Away from it, it is all a beautiful haze – haze because it's beautiful, beautiful because of haze, I dunno. Everything around me I like, everything is lovely, but never quite, never quite like Black Mountain.⁸

Jane entered into the Los Angeles art scene with the connections passed down to her through the Black Mountain community. Josef Albers connected Jane with Charles and Ray Eames, Antonin Heythum (the head of the industrial design program at Caltech), and the famous art collector and promoter Galka Scheyer.⁹ Jane loved telling the stories of meeting with the Eameses at their Venice studio, and of travelling by bus, streetcar, and taxi up to the Hollywood Hills home of Galka Scheyer, whom she found sprawled on a couch in an otherwise empty room dressed “in leopard skin pants and masses of amber jewelry.”¹⁰ Ultimately, to make ends meet, Jane created “jewel boxes” – repurposed wood boxes with interiors adorned with small pieces of mirror, glass, and paper collage – for sale at the Beverly Hills shop of the famous designer, Paul Laszlo.¹¹ At around the same time, Jane reconnected with fellow Black Mountain alumnus Lucian Marquis; Lucian had graduated from Black Mountain in 1942 and served in combat in World War II before returning to Los Angeles to teach at UCLA. After a brief courtship, Lucian proposed to Jane at the La Brea Tar Pits and within a few years they were married and living in Eugene, Oregon, where Lucian got a job teaching political science at the University of Oregon.



Figure 4. Jane Slater Marquis, Jewel Box, date unknown. Courtesy Katie Horak.

The period between the late 1940s and the late 1960s is the period of Jane's life I know the least about. I do know that in the 1950s Jane and Lucian had two children, Joshua and Annie, and that Jane occasionally taught art classes and worked as a graphic designer in Eugene. The academic calendar and Lucian's frequent fellowships allowed the family to live in Europe for extended periods, particularly in Italy, a place that became very special to Jane and would feature in her work. In 1966, they moved back to Southern California to Claremont, where Lucian was appointed professor of political science at Pitzer College.

In the early 1960s, Jane discovered stained glass. Claude Stoller, fellow Black Mountain alumnus and partner to Jane's brother-in-law in the architectural firm of Stoller

and Marquis, asked Jane to design windows for a synagogue project he was working on in San Rafael, near San Francisco. Stoller had hand-selected artists he knew and admired to collaborate with him on the project, including Trude Guermonprez, who designed the ark curtain, and Edith Heath, who designed the tile in the entry, among others.¹² Jane told Claude she knew nothing about stained glass, but he convinced her to create a design, pick out the colored glass, and they could have the panels fabricated in San Francisco. She designed twelve tall, narrow windows, six on either side of the main entrance, representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Rodef Sholom commission was a new beginning for Jane and her work. With stained glass, Jane had finally found a medium that took what she loved about the challenges of Albers' *matière* and color classes and added new complications and dimensions. She found she could put two colors next to one another with natural light behind them and change one's perception of each color due to their adjacency. And then, when dozens or hundreds of pieces of glass are soldered together in a composition, two things happen for the viewer: first, one's view from indoors out becomes more beautiful because of the filter in between. Second, one's experience of the indoor environment changes because of the way the natural light passes through the color and changes with every moment: with clouds gently moving overhead, the leaves of a tree rustling, the sun setting. Jane described this process in an interview in 1988:

I am always very concerned about every color and what they are going to do together. When choosing the colors to work with, I paste each piece of glass next to one another on a window to see the color with the light behind it. The problem with stained glass is that once the lead line is there, all the colors will change. Sometimes subtly and other times dramatically. One always works with calculated risks. [...]

No painting is so dependent on its environment as stained glass. Stained glass takes on the whole outdoors behind it. That means trees, traffic, buildings, movement, hour of the day, season of the year, climate.¹³

During this time Jane worked constantly, growing her glass inventory and designing windows on commission for friends' homes, and for her own home. In the early 1980s, Jane got her largest commission yet: a series of windows for a church being designed by the architect Charles Moore and his firm, Moore Ruble Yudell. Jane recalled going to Moore's office to present a concept to him, colored pencil on paper that she had taped together, and that he remained silent until the end of her presentation. When she asked him for his thoughts, he asked her how she, herself, felt about the designs.¹⁴

In Moore, Jane had found a collaborator who would let her control the design of the windows, providing a general color scheme for inspiration and suggesting little else. Furthermore, the St. Matthews congregation did not demand religious imagery in the designs of the windows, and Jane had ultimate creative freedom to convey subtle references as she wished. In the baptistry, she inserted slivers of clear beveled glass running horizontally between larger panes of colored glass, giving the illusion of being surrounded by a school of glimmering fish. In the sanctuary, Jane designed two large rose windows, twelve feet in diameter, across the room from one another. One features hundreds of small pieces of varying shades of green glass, with the swaying limbs of a sycamore tree behind it. Across the room, a window filled with varying shades of rose-colored glass, flecked with green, glows like the setting sun.

In 1986, Jane wrote a letter to Anni Albers and included a photo of the sycamore rose window. She wrote:

I remember once, Juppi [Josef] saying sadly, 'What's the use in training girls – they just go off and become wives and mothers. I'd like him to know that wasn't always so – so – I presume to send you a photo of one of three windows I did for a church designed by Charles Moore here in California. I have been working in glass for 24 years or so – and with each project I always think – what would Juppi have said to this one?'¹⁵



Figure 5. Jane Slater Marquis, Rose Window, St. Matthews Episcopal Church. Photograph taken in 2024, Katie Horak.

Jane's next commission, in 1988, was a series of forty panels on all four walls of a basement atrium in the Science Library at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where she and Lucian had retained connections from his time teaching there. The University of Oregon commission allowed Jane to combine her two loves – poetry and art. Each stained glass panel included a poem or verse relating to science. Jane selected forty verses across centuries – Plato, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Rachel Carson. Of

the forty quotes, only one has absolutely nothing to do with science at all: “Stick to your own bones, speak with your own voice, sit on your own behind,” by Josef Albers.¹⁶



Figure 6. Jane Slater Marquis, “Force is only a desire for flight: it lives by violence and dies from liberty,” Leonardo da Vinci. University of Oregon Science Library, date unknown. Courtesy Annie Marquis.

A second commission with Moore Ruble Yudell was a large window at the Church of the Nativity in Rancho Santa Fe, near San Diego. Architect John Ruble recalls the clever way Jane integrated crosses into the repetitive pattern of colors, something one gets to discover, rather than being knocked over the head with religious imagery.¹⁷

The project that brought me to Jane was a series of windows for a new dining hall and student center at Scripps College designed by architect Brenda Levin in 2001. I remember Jane’s love for the pattern she had chosen for the windows, which she had discovered in a book of Islamic geometric patterns. She considered the Moorish design to be appropriate for Scripps College, which has a campus composed mostly of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture from the 1920s.



Figure 7. Jane Slater Marquis, Mallott Commons, Scripps College. Photograph taken in 2023, Katie Horak.

I have to remind myself that Jane was nearly eighty years old when I started working with her in the studio. By that time, she must have been well aware that she had many more years of work behind her than ahead of her, though she worked in the studio every day. I understand now the role that Jane's recounted memories of her life played in my understanding of who she was, since I didn't have the gift of experiencing the full arc of life with her, as happens with lifelong friendships. Rather, ours was an

end-of-life friendship for Jane and a formative friendship for me, but somehow, our orbits aligned in that place and the sixty years between our ages dissipated.

In 2005, Lucian passed away and Jane continued to live in the house in the company of her daughter Annie, who lived on the property in a separate cottage, and then me, for a year or so in 2006 while I was a graduate student at the University of Southern California. Not long after that, maybe ten years or so into our friendship, working in stained glass became too physically taxing for Jane. She suffered from chronic pain related to arthritis not only in her hands, but in most joints in her body. Unable to bear the labor intensity of glass, Jane began to create quilts. With Annie, she would compile piles of fabric scraps, many repurposed from clothes and linens in the house. Jane would place them in composition with pins, and a friend would sew them together for her. Annie would then stretch them on bars, like a canvas. Jane created dozens of quilts in the years before her death, many of them quite large, and they hung everywhere in her house.

Jane was an artist before anything else, and she worked almost every day of her adult life until she was physically unable to do so. Working in stained glass, there wasn't an obvious place for her in the art world of Los Angeles. It was important to Jane that her work be experienced, but she didn't want it displayed, out of context, artificially lit in a gallery environment. She hated how it looked in photographs: static, the colors never quite right. As a result, despite a lifetime of work, Jane is little known. Many of those who worked with her – architects, artist assistants, fabricators – say that doing so changed their lives.¹⁸ And many others continue to be impacted by Jane's work in the places it continues to survive. In these ways, Jane's impact as an artist, and through her the lasting impact of Black Mountain, is impossible to quantify.

Jane would say numerous times over the years that her experience at Black Mountain remained a vivid part of her daily life. "I must say," she said, "there isn't a day of my life, when I'm working in my own studio, fifty years later, that I don't think of Albers. In one way or another. That's saying a lot!"¹⁹



Figure 8. Jane Slater Marquis, Quilt. Circa 2010s. Courtesy Annie Marquis.

I will never forget that after I had taken the leaf study from Jane's house, its absence was deeply felt by her. She would call me to ask after it – had I had it reframed, would I be able to take a photo of it for her? I told her it was reframed and that I would bring it back to her, so she could hang it back on the hearth where it had been for almost fifty years, but she insisted no. A photo would do. I found a photo I had taken of the study at the conservator's studio when it was out of its frame, without the reflection of the glass obscuring its view. I e-mailed the photo to Annie, who printed it in color,

oversized, on a large piece of paper, pinning it up on the wall across from her bed where she could see it always. It was there with Jane when she died in 2021, at home, in her bed.



Figure 9: Jane Slater Marquis, Leaf Study. Circa 1945. Collection of Katie E. Horak.

The leaf study hangs in my house now, on a wall in my office. When I see it, as I do almost every day, I think of Jane as a young woman, carrying dozens of quaking aspen leaves pressed between the pages of a book all the way to Asheville from Utah. I imagine her pasting them onto a thick piece of paper, stretching some old black nylon netting into which she had burned holes with her cigarettes over the top of the whole piece, and dabbing spots of black paint on the leaves here and there. I imagine how proud she must have felt when she shared it in class and Albers was delighted by it, photographing it to share with students in later years as exemplary work.²⁰ She would later say of creating the leaf study: it was “all very simple.”²¹

But when I look at it now, I imagine I am seeing what Jane saw as a young girl, in the creek near her house in autumn: a blanket of quaking aspen leaves floating slowly; the warm, dappled reflection of the sun on the water; a chill in the air.

¹ Jane Slater, Admissions Application, 1940, Black Mountain College Student Files [BMCSF], Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.

² Jane Slater, Course Cards, 1940-1945, Black Mountain College Student Files [BMCSF], Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC..

³ Melvin Lane, ed., *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts*, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990: 90. Jane's essay is titled, "This Paradise Apart."

⁴ Jane Slater, Course Cards, 1940-1945, Black Mountain College Student Files [BMCSF], Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.

⁵ Fred Horowitz, "Jane Slater Discusses Josef Albers, A Discussion with Fred Horowitz." February 6 and 14, 1996: 4. Transcript of a conversation between Horowitz and Slater. Courtesy Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

⁶ Horowitz, 10.

⁷ Horowitz, 11-12.

⁸ Letter from Jane Slater to Ati Gropius, undated (assumed to be 1945). Courtesy Asheville Art Museum. Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Estate of Jane Slater Marquis. Not yet digitized.

⁹ Horowitz, February 6 and 14, 1996: 8.

¹⁰ Horowitz, February 6 and 14, 1996: 8.

¹¹ Jane Slater, "2 page handwritten letter to Ati Gropius," undated (assumed by the author to be 1945). Jane wrote, "Four of my little box monsters are sitting like orphans in the shop of Mr. Laszlo – surrounded by those big monstrosities Mr. Laszlo chooses to call his MODERN design." Courtesy Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Estate of Jane Slater Marquis. 2021.28.035.

<[>>](https://collection.ashevilleart.org/objects-1/info?query=mfs%20any%20%22slater%22&sort=9&page=4)

¹² Tyrel Holston, "Weaving the Old with the New," Cooper Hewitt, September 5, 2013.

<https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2013/09/05/weaving-the-old-with-the-new/>

¹³ Chandre Kipps, "Stained Glass: A sight to behold," *Claremont Courier*, 1988 (exact date/issue unknown).

¹⁴ Recollection of the author.

¹⁵ Letter from Jane Slater Marquis to Anni Albers, October 28, 1986. Courtesy Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

¹⁶ Jane references this quote in her interview with Fred Horowitz. Horowitz, 16.

¹⁷ Conversation between the author and John Ruble, 2023.

¹⁸ Recollection of the author, based on conversations with Kirk Delman, who had been Jane's studio assistant for multiple decades, and collaborator Brenda Levin, FAIA.

¹⁹ Horowitz, 3.

²⁰ In a letter to Jane Slater from Ati Gropius in 1945, Ati wrote: "Slatso, you clever old beast not only does the girl tickle the pallatts (*sic*) of the idle rich with jewelry boxes but also keeps the flaxen-haired Jupp [Albers] busy showing tremendous photographs of her opuses to all his design classes." Courtesy Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Estate of Jane Slater Marquis. Not yet digitized.

²¹ Horowitz, 19.