

# ALCHEMY

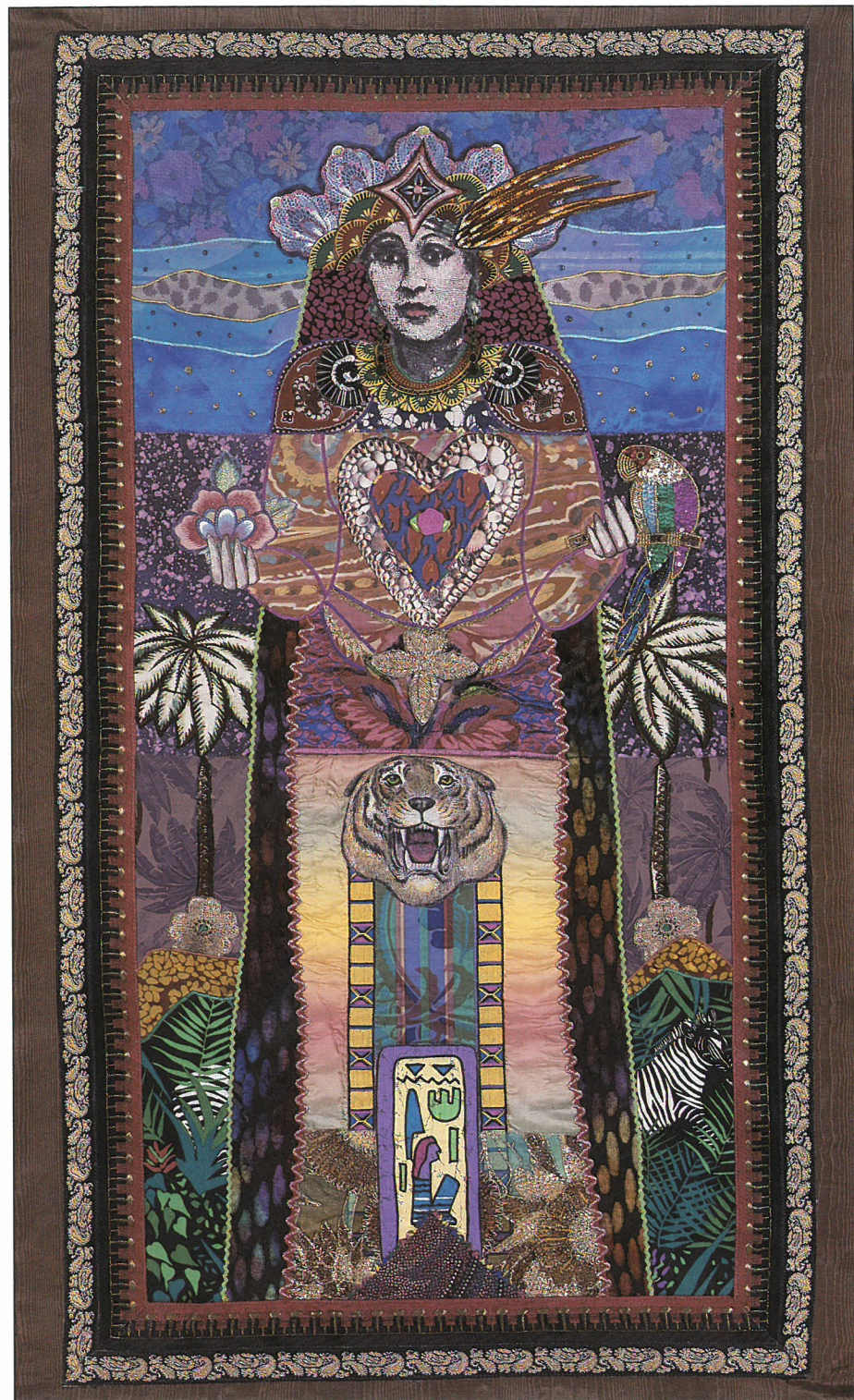
THE ART OF

AMY ZERNER



"Paradiso" (21 1/2" x 31") 1991





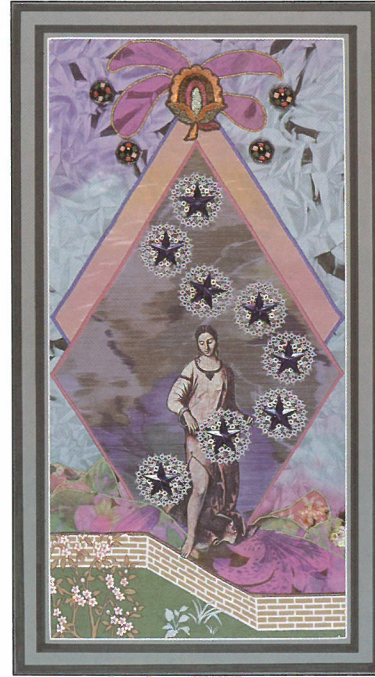
*Romi Kumu (27" x 45") 1991*



# ALCHEMY: THE ART OF AMY ZERNER



*"The Magician" (12" x 24") 1989*



*"Eight of Pentacles" (12" x 24") 1989*

Entering an Alchemist's laboratory, one expects to find the chaos of a dark and cluttered room where an old sorcerer fingers a musty manuscript while tending the bubbling vessels in a fiery furnace. This vision, conjured up by many 16th and 17th century artists, portrayed the art of alchemy as a futile pursuit to turn lead into gold—a symbol of human folly. Yet, the true initiate learns that the alchemical quest is a deeply pro-found philosophical path of self-enlightenment, and its visual heritage spans the ages.

Amy Zerner's alchemical works, her newest "Materializations" and paper collages, have emerged from her long involvement with symbolic imagery, now numbering close to five hundred works. Traditionally, the Alchemist must find the *Materia Prima*, or primal matter, that enigmatic substance needed to begin the work. Zerner's alchemical laboratory is her studio, filled with thousands of fabrics carefully boxed and catalogued. Florals, geometric patterns, abstract prints, moirés, silks, satins, rare Victorian laces and trimmings, veils, ribbons, borders, sequins, and metallic threads serve as her "primal" materials. She finds these fabrics both through the finest fabric importers and by scavenging in flea markets and specialty shops. Sometimes, they just magically appear at her doorstep, delivered by thoughtful friends. Her working process is intuitive; a theme appears and is developed through reflection, meditation and flashes of inspiration. Selecting fabrics with harmonious colors, patterns and textures, she cuts out the desired sections and sews the pieces together, embellishing them with painting, color xeroxes, direct dyeing, beading and appliqué. In the finished tapestry, these materials are densely layered to create a surface which mirrors the



multiple dimensions of human existence. This method reflects the central axiom of the alchemical work—*Solve et Coagula*—dissolve and crystallize, cut and sew back together. In alchemy, a conjunction of opposites occurs through a gentle heating of the vessel—Zerner orchestrates her mystical multi-media collages through an intuitive fusion of mind and materials.

For the Alchemist, the *Magnum Opus*, the Great Work, becomes the quest of a lifetime; For Zerner, these new assemblages echo the memories of her evolution as an artist. Painting with traditional techniques early in her career, she chose fabric as her media after creating an Art Deco bedspread designed by Tony Walton for the original Broadway production of the musical *Chicago*. This multi-layered confection of flowered chiffon and sequins inspired Zerner to explore the artistic potential of layered fabrics and begin to sew her first collage paintings. Captivated from childhood by fairy tales and mythology, she delved into a study of astrology, the power of the planets and stars to influence our lives. Early works included symbolic representations of the planets, *Pluto*, *Neptune* and *Venus*, Goddess images such as *Ishtar*, and a series of portraits entitled “*Landscapes of the Soul*”, which captured the astrological forces and color emanations of each sitter. Apparitions of ancient Goddesses have reappeared in her most recent works, such as *Romi Kumu*, p. 4, and a book devoted to them, *Goddess, Guide Me* (Simon and Schuster), will be published in 1992.

Aided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1986, she expanded the dimensions and complexity of her imagery, designing several pieces as large scale triptychs. In these “Illuminated Tapestries,” mystical temples and palaces arise, sites of universal worship for the viewer to enter and contemplate a higher state of consciousness. In *Temple of the Deep* (1986) p. 8, a nude woman dances joyously in an island paradise surrounded by dreamlike visions of an indeterminate world filled with underwater skyscapes and seafoam constellations.

In 1978, she married Monte Farber, a writer, composer and filmmaker, who shares her love of astrology. Farber is the author of the internationally best-selling *Karma Cards* (Penguin U.S.A.), an astrological tool for self-revelation. In 1989, Zerner and Farber collaborated to create *The Enchanted Tarot* (St. Martin's Press), an esoteric deck of cards used to contact one's higher consciousness and divine the truth. Like alchemy, the Tarot is steeped in tradition. For hundreds of years, artists have designed Tarot decks which retained the essential aspects of traditional imagery while using artistic license to transform standard archetypes to meet the demands of a new age. One of the most popular decks of the 20th century, initially published as *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1910), was also a collaboration between the artist Pamela Colman Smith and the hermetic author, A. E. Waite. Colman Smith and Waite reinterpreted the imagery of the traditional seventy-eight cards, including in each design a figure and landscape setting. In the 1930s, the surrealist artist Salvador Dalí designed a Tarot deck for his wife, Gala, appropriating and reproducing images from the history of art combined with traditional Tarot symbols and enigmatic personal designs.

In *The Enchanted Tarot*, Zerner carries on this tradition, reinterpreting the seventy-eight cards with her multi-media collages. Farber's accompanying text deciphers these images, reveals their messages and suggests accompanying rituals. Each of these collages contains figures or objects related to the traditional meaning of the card and encased within a magical environment filled with secret surprises. Twenty-two cards comprise the Major Arcana, understood as powerful archetypes and forces of universal energy which reveal a path of self-enlightenment. These cards represent the many challenges, pitfalls and triumphs that await the





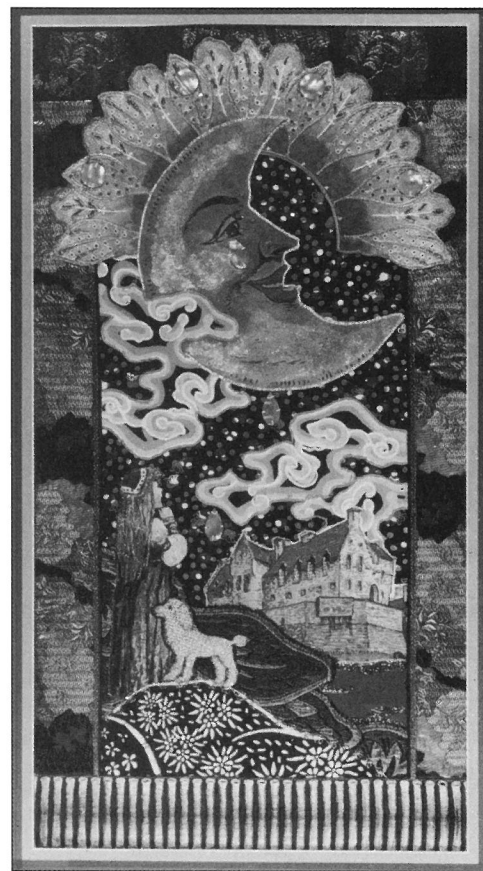
individual who attempts this psychic journey. The *Magician*, p. 5, is one of the first cards in the series. Like an Alchemist, he tends a fire whose flame rises to meet his hand—signifying his powers of transformation. Attached to his belt are tiny symbols of the four elements—*earth, water, fire* and *air*—also signaling his power to materialize the spiritual powers of the universe on the physical plane. These four elements play a larger role in the remaining cards of the Tarot deck—the Minor Arcana. Ancestors of contemporary playing cards, these elements govern the four traditional “suits” and are related to different spheres of human life:

- ♠ Earth: Pentacles (Diamonds)—groundedness, wealth and materiality
- ♥ Water: Cups (Hearts)—love and the emotions
- ♣ Fire: Wands (Clubs)—energy and enterprise
- ♠ Air: Swords (Spades)—the world of ideas and anxieties

In each suit fourteen cards progress from ace to ten ending with four court cards—Princess, Prince, Queen and King. The *Eight of Pentacles*, p. 5, which symbolizes “Craftsmanship,” might be used as the cornerstone for Zerner’s entire deck. A woman, encased within a diamond shape common to all the Pentacles, surveys eight spiraling lace pentacles, signifying a job well done. Careful planning, serene concentration and loving attention to detail have produced the blossoms that fill her garden. The symbolism of this card, with its meticulous craftsmanship and intuitive vision of refined beauty, permeates all of Zerner’s art.

Correspondence exists between the Tarot and Alchemy, such as the Major Arcana cards of the *Sun* and the *Moon*, which are traditional symbols of the conscious and unconscious mind, as well as the two mysterious components of primal matter, *Philosophic Sulphur* and *Philosophic Mercury*. The most direct link for Zerner’s metamorphosis towards alchemical imagery, however, comes from the four suits in the Minor Arcana which symbolize the four elements. As always, she works intuitively, and although her new works are not based on traditional alchemical illustrations, they share many similarities with that legacy.

Fragments of the oldest alchemical manuscripts date from ancient Egypt. Greek, Latin and Arabic texts reinterpreted and expanded these hermetic teachings, while the visual tradition began in the Middle Ages. Like Zerner, alchemical artists were always eclectic, gathering and transforming images to serve as the enigmatic symbols for their secret chemicals and processes. The illuminations in alchemical manuscripts were difficult to decipher, intended as a puzzle to foil the unworthy from attempting to unlock the secrets of this ancient art. During the Renaissance, mythological figures were added to represent the seven ancient planets which ruled over the seven metals as they evolved from lead to gold—Lead (Saturn), Tin (Jupiter), Iron (Mars), Copper (Venus), Silver (Moon), and Gold (Sun). Concurrent with the innumerable parodies of alchemy as a symbol of human folly, the



*"The Moon" (12" x 24") 1990*





*"Temple of the Deep" (65" x 98") 1986*



*"My Secret Flame" (90" x 61") 1988*





*Torch (6" x 9") 1991*

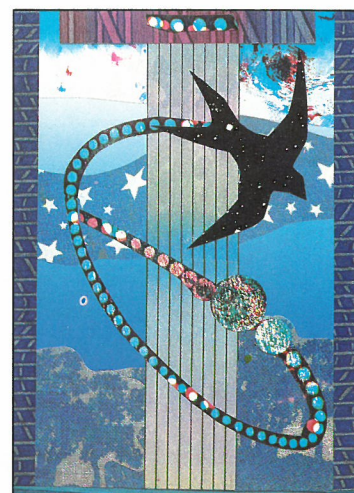
17th century witnessed the pinnacle of alchemical imagery. Many rare manuscripts were first printed as books and their illuminations turned into complex and beautiful engravings that finally codified alchemical symbolism. Like the elements in Zerner's tapestries, such as *My Secret Flame* (1988) p. 8, these engravings are filled with allegorical figures, landscape settings and geometric spacial divisions representing cosmic truths and alluding to the secret path of enlightenment. As all true Alchemists discover, the production of gold is secondary to the ultimate goal—the self-perfection of the Alchemist leading to a mystic union with cosmic Oneness.

The Occult Revival of the late 19th century rekindled many ancient paths of spiritual wisdom in the hopes of finally sharing these mysteries with the modern world. Symbolist artists and poets were drawn to Rosicrucian teachings while Theosophy proved central to the development of abstract painting, especially the works of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. The most devoted hermetic artists of the 20th century were the Surrealists who drew their inspiration from a variety of occult pursuits - seances and hypnotic trances to inspire their poetry, visits to psychics and mediums, having their astrological charts analyzed and their palms read, collecting crystals, and taking walking tours of the alchemical sites of Paris. André Breton, Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Leonora Carrington, and Victor Brauner, among many other artists and writers, used hermetic imagery in their works. Max Ernst, who created his own alchemical collages, once defined collage as "...the alchemy of the visual image. The miracle of the total transfiguration of beings and objects without modification of their physical or anatomical aspects." As in Zerner's use of collage, the found image retains its integrity—a flower, a butterfly, or a tower—but the alchemical process of creating the collage fuses these images into a total metamorphosis.

Recently, Zerner and Farber collaborated on another project, *The Alchemist* (St. Martin's Press, 1991), a spiritual kit for self-transformation. Zerner created forty-eight collages while Farber deciphered the messages contained in each image. Like the suits of *The Enchanted*

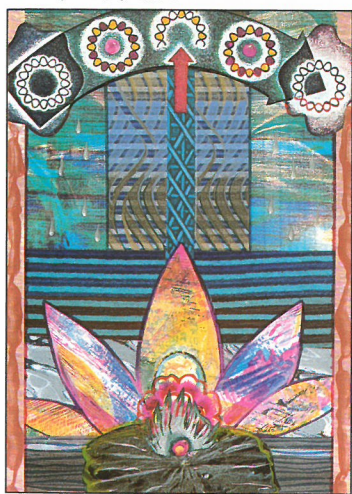
*Tarot*, these collages are divided into four categories each representing one of the four elements—Fire, Air, Water and Earth. Every element contains twelve different manifestations, so for example, the Water section includes the *Waves*, a *Waterfall*, and *Bubbles*, each possessing a very different interpretation.

To consult the wisdom of *The Alchemist*, four dice are thrown to indicate the numbered image. Fire represents the action one should take; Air, the idea one must keep in mind; Water, the emotion one might feel; and Earth, the path to follow. Four collages from *The Alchemist* are illustrated here—*Torch* (Fire), *Flight* (Air),



*Flight (6" x 9") 1991*

*Lotus (6" x 9") 1991*



*Bridge (6" x 9") 1991*







**Lotus** (Water) and **Bridge** (Earth) p. 9. These elements derive from traditional alchemy but Zerner's collages and Farber's interpretations provide new wisdom and insight. Fire is critical because the Alchemist must carefully moderate the heat of the alembic vessel at all times. Here, the **Torch** (Fire) carries a message to act as a strong, fiery individual. In **Flight** (Air), a bird soars above a mountain, embodying the idea of one's freedom to rise above a situation. In traditional emblems, ascending and descending birds represent the various distillations and condensations within the vessel as gases rise and fall. The **Lotus** (Water) signifies the emotion of deep and tranquil love. Lotus blossoms, a symbol of higher consciousness, are significant in Egyptian and Eastern Philosophy because they are rooted in the mud (primal matter) and yet each day their petals reach for the sun (the production of gold). Water is the alchemical means of purification, used to cleanse base matter of its imperfections, and the appearance of a rainbow, like the petals on this lotus blossom, indicate that perfection is near. Earth represents *primal matter*, the substance that is eventually refined into gold after numerous repetitions of alchemical operations. The **Bridge** (Earth) predicts a short-cut that may miraculously appear along the path. Visually these collages represent the most central truism of ancient alchemy, *As Above, So Below*. The earth reflects the cosmos, just as the alchemical operations duplicate the processes of universal creation. In each of these collages, background patterns of spiraling, vertical, horizontal and arching lines connect the earth and sky.

Zerner's most recent "Illuminated Tapestries" reveal other hidden secrets of the alchemical quest. In **The Alchemist's Dream** (1991) p. 11, the adage, *As Above, So Below*, describes the shapes of the materials echoed above and below, with balance and symmetry maintained throughout. In the center, a golden serpent affirms the cyclic nature of the work by representing both the beginning and the end. Serpents traditionally symbolize *primal matter* and gold represents the final goal. The enigma that one cannot create gold unless one already possesses it, simply means that each person contains the seeds of self-perfection. This golden serpent descends to meet a symbolic flame and both are encased within a conical vessel bordered by joyful spring flowers. The metallic materials throughout this hanging recall the seven metals transmuting from lead to gold in the alchemical search, while the delicate lace and diaphanous blossoms at the top suggest the transparency of the vessel through which the alchemical operations are carefully watched and monitored.

In **Vision Quest** (1991) p. 13, a priestess stands in a trance before a sacred gate. The interweaving of the landscape before and behind this invisible sanctuary carries the message that alchemy occurs in the everyday world, and magic exists in the mundane. The cycle of nature, with its continual certainty of death and rebirth, symbolizes the alchemical process and many traditional alchemical emblems incorporate symbolic landscapes. In this tapestry, stylized fabric designs across the top represent the *Sun* and the *Moon*, symbolizing *Gold* and *Silver*; the masculine and feminine properties. The masculine structuring and ordering of the geometric segments and divisions of this tapestry balance with the more dreamlike, amorphous feminine vision of the cosmos. The unification of these outer and inner worlds recalls a truism from *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, the most revered alchemical manuscript containing thirteen simple statements that summarize the quest — *The Sun is its father, the Moon its mother, the Wind carried it in its belly, its nurse is the Earth*. All elements unite so that conscious and unconscious forces become one—a true resolution of opposites. Two angels guard the diamond-shaped vessel while inside a turbulent ocean signals the beginning of purification.

**Western Medicine** (1990) p. 12, interprets the alchemical operations through the wisdom of Native America. Within the larger vessel, two small figures, the alchemical *King* and





*Queen*, are connected by a golden circular Medicine Wheel symbolizing the unity of the work. They stand atop an underground mountain where the eternal flame of the earth heats the vessel and causes these figures to unite. The turbulence in the atmosphere is indicated by storms and lightening bolts inside and outside the vessel. Another admonition from *The Emerald Tablet*—*Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment*. In this tapestry, Earth, Water, Air, and Fire are separated into horizontal layers while above electric gases spark and ignite as the cleansing ritual continues.

In *Paridiso* (1991) p. 1, a beautiful golden butterfly emerges from the top of the vessel and ascends to the heavens, signifying the final stages of the work. Because of its metamorphosis through the egg, larva, cocoon and butterfly stages, the butterfly is a traditional symbol of transformation and the human soul. More butterflies appear in *The Alchemist's Dream*, a reminder that the goal is always present at the beginning, the human soul contains its own perfection. The similarities between the two tapestries, with their silken geological strata and the sequined skies, signify the unity of the work from beginning to end. A final adage from *The Emerald Tablet*—*Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven and then again, descend to the earth, and unite together the powers of things superior and things inferior*. The Microcosm of the Earth reflects the Macrocosm of the Universe.

Alchemical imagery at first may seem dense and incomprehensible, but its hidden message is simple. Through diligent work and dedication any goal can be achieved. Zerner's art incorporates the three traditional levels, *Body*, *Mind* and *Spirit*.

*Body* concerns the material level, where her fabrics replace traditional chemicals. *Mind* indicates the Alchemist's mental effort to decipher the arcane symbols and to maintain the discipline of constant vigilance over the operations. For Zerner, it's the careful cutting and construction of the pieces, but also the intuitive and imaginative playfulness of her process. *Spirit* is perhaps harder to define. The alchemical quest reveals the eternal cycle of nature and the spirit's oneness with the Universe. Zerner's new alchemical tapestries and collages invite us to enter her magic world and find ourselves. These exquisite pieces are significant works of art as well as keys to unlocking an ancient wisdom for the modern world. Those who view these important images with an open heart are transported to a spiritual place of peace and serenity where dreams and waking, unconscious wishes and conscious reflections, the past and the future, merge into One.



"The Alchemist's Dream" (21½" x 31") 1991

M. E. WARLICK

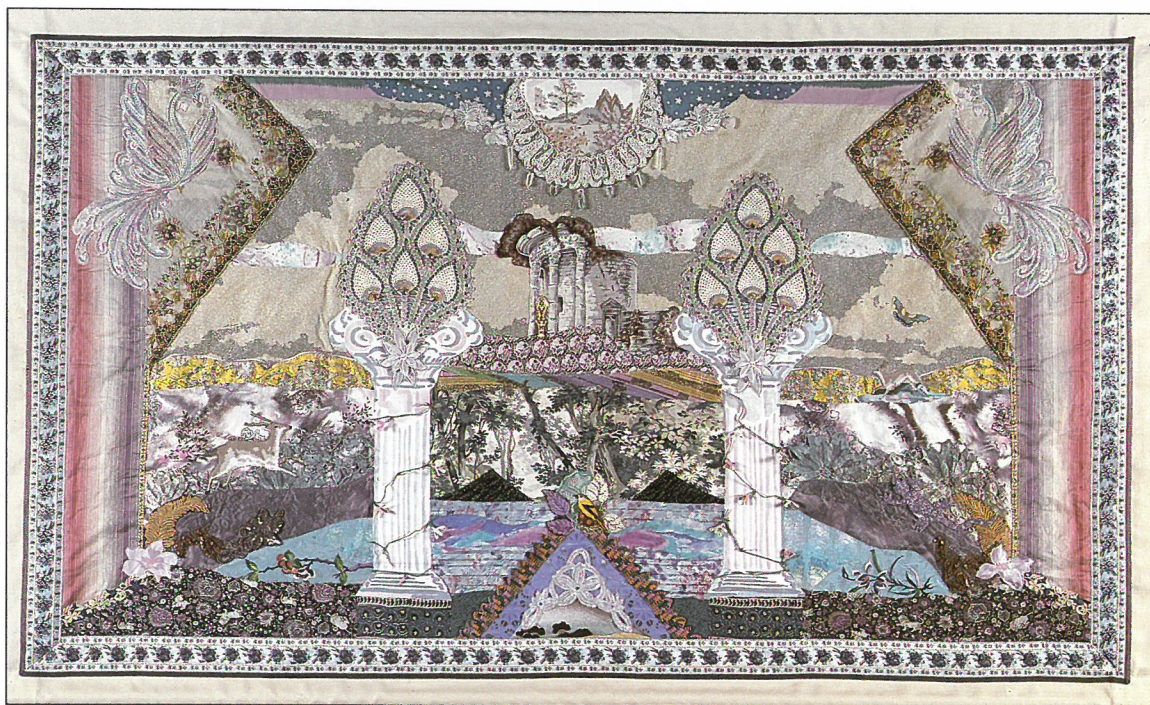
Dr. Warlick is a professor of Art History at the University of Denver where she is completing a book on Max Ernst and Alchemy.



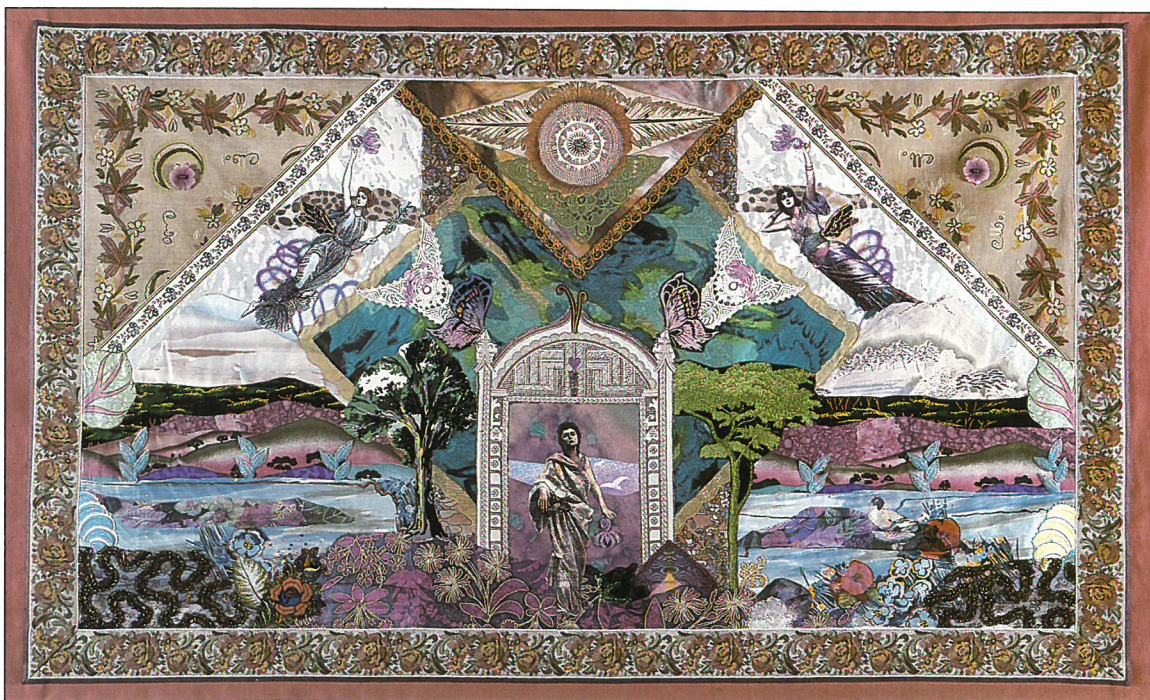


*"Western Medicine" (54" x 39") 1990*





*"Arcadia" (45" x 74") 1990*



*"Vision Quest" (45" x 74") 1990*





"Mystery School" (65" x 92") 1989