

# Colour Therapy

ULRIEKE BENNER'S  
FABRIC ARTISTRY  
HAS TIMELESS  
BEAUTY

BY ELIZABETH NOLAN  
Photos by John Cameron



On these pages:  
Ulrieke Benner, her fibres and modelled fashions.  
Next page: Inside Benner's Monteith Drive studio.

Ulrieke Benner's 10th year on Salt Spring is proving that "art you wear" has never been so comfortable — or enjoyable — for buyers and for the artist who creates it.

Those who venture out of the Ganges core for a Salt Spring Studio Tour exploration will be pleased by the warmth they'll find at the end of Benner's winding driveway. Her silk and felted wool creations blaze against the neutral white of her ocean-view parlour and sales room. Like bouquets of exotic flowers, the one-of-a-kind clothing and accessories are a burst of colour therapy that provoke a sense of joyous well-being.

Texture is equally important as colour in Benner's designs, which are contemporary without being trendy and therefore have a timeless beauty. Whether a tapered and felted silk gossamer scarf, a felt jacket embedded with corded detailing or a playful shawl with circular cut-outs, the effect is both whimsical and enduring.

Although she never intended to work in the area of women's clothing, Benner has a natural appreciation for high-quality materials and designs. As a child in Germany she grew up in a household where textiles played an important role in everything from the furnishings and the curtains to her mother's clothing. One of Benner's grandmothers was a master tailor, and the other produced finely stitched linens and tablecloths.

"I think from an early age on I loved this and I had an eye for this," Benner acknowledges, adding, "Working with my hands has always been very satisfying to me."

Despite the affinity between natural fibres and fine women's garments (she even came to North America toting a large collection of silk fabrics), Benner says her original intent was always to make products for interior design. But after attending a workshop on felting, to which she brought her own silk gossamer instead of using the cotton supplied, she learned what a wonderful combination the two fibres could produce and began imagining the possibilities.





Benner's early career included a short-lived apprenticeship with a furniture maker, to which her mother strongly objected. She went instead into teaching with a focus in English, geography and textiles. Teaching textiles to high school kids was quite different from working with fibres as a designer, however, and when the school budget was cut she took the opportunity to begin her own serious work.

Benner conducted her studies mainly in the United States and then went to work for a designer north of Boston. She realized she had to make the decision whether to live in Germany or North America, and chose Canada because she had enough points to qualify as a self-employed artist.

"I had visited Toronto a few times and was quite impressed with Queen Street West." In fact, as she stated on her immigration application, she planned to open a gallery there. "But the more times I went to Toronto, I just couldn't do it. I wanted to be on the water."

Benner had always enjoyed visiting Germany's North Frisian Islands, and decided an island was the place to go. After someone suggested she go to Vancouver she called the tourist bureau to learn about islands that were nearby. The person she spoke to asked what she did for a living and when she heard Benner was a fibre artist said, "Oh, you don't even have to think about it. Salt Spring is the place for you."

As someone who finds contact with the natural world deeply important, Salt Spring has been the perfect place to end up by chance. Benner has been lucky in her studio locations, which she has had on Scott Point and in the forest off St. Mary Lake before moving operations to her home, with its open ocean view looking across Stuart Channel.

"Being surrounded by nature, reaching my being instantly, or swimming in the ocean and being cleansed by the salt water — it's nurturing to me, so I can create something nurturing for others," she says. "It's so wonderful to look out the window and see the ocean and nature. What could be better?"

Another draw to the island was the existence of multiple venues for her work, including the Saturday market, the shops and galleries, and especially the studio tour. During the high season, Benner meets visitors from all over the world, often encountering five or six different nationalities daily.

Her work can also be found in the wider world: it is carried in select North American shops and was exhibited in Japan in 2005.

She has accepted a second invitation to show there this fall.

With all the advantages of living in a community known for its skilled artisans, it's also clear that Benner doesn't have to rely on a specific location. That's something she first realized while working for the prestigious American designer who chose to live on a small peninsula in Massachusetts.

"I learned there that it doesn't matter where you are — if you're good at what you're doing you can be anywhere," she explains.

Today Benner's regular practice is to make one unique piece of fabric for each garment, and the way she creates it is dictated by a loose idea with room for spontaneous movement. A recent creation is a snowy-white felted silk that is as soft as down and as delicate looking as clotted clouds. Another piece in smoked pearl grey contains tiny vertical distressed ruffles.

"I follow my intuition. I follow what I love to do rather than what fashion dictates for a given year," Benner says of her designs. "Every piece I make is unique, and I still have so many ideas. It's endless — it's fabulous. I get a lot of joy out of the studio, of people trying on the pieces and wearing them."

"Colour has a strong impact on our well-being," she continues. Pointing to a multi-hued "spirit shawl," she explains that variety looks good to wear, but is also beneficial to health or mood. That's something she's thinking a lot about and is turning more overt attention to.

If the time ever comes when she loses interest in the work — or the clients do — Benner says she'll be able to bow out gracefully and take up her other great interest in energy work and the healing arts. In fact, the two sides, always united in spirit within her textile arts, will soon be more visibly connected. Her tag line is changing from "art you wear" to "art you wear for body, mind and spirit."

Benner's studio is at 193 Monteith Dr. She can be reached at [ulrieke@ulriekebenner.com](mailto:ulrieke@ulriekebenner.com); 250-537-1723; or through her website at [www.ulriekebenner.com](http://www.ulriekebenner.com). ✨

*"I think from an early age on I loved this and I had an eye for this."*

**ULRIEKE BENNER**