

Judith Hope Blau, Who Turned Bagels Into Art, Dies at 87

She began selling necklaces strung with mini-bagels on a dare from her husband. Bagelmania (and a career as a toy designer) ensued.



Judith Hope Blau in 2017 with some of her Treetures, the creatures she invented to teach children about nature. It all started with bagel art. via People of Play

By [Penelope Green](#) May 22, 2025

Judith Hope Blau, a painter whose accidental detour into bagel art — necklaces, napkin rings, wreaths and candleholders fashioned from, yes, bagels — led to a career as a children’s book author and illustrator and a toy designer, died on May 4 at her home in Eastchester, N.Y. She was 87.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said her daughter, Laura Paul.

In the early 1970s, every Thursday was B-Day for the Blaus, a family of four living in Westchester County. That was the day Ms. Blau and a friend with a station wagon picked up 1,000 or so bagels from a bakery in nearby New Rochelle. Back home, the haul was tipped into a bathtub to dry out.

Bagels, [described by The New York Times in 1960 as “an unsweetened doughnut with rigor mortis,”](#) turn stale after a single day — and they made a fine, firm canvas for Ms. Blau. She helped the process along by stirring them with her hand, so the ones on the bottom of the tub wouldn’t get moldy. “Fluffing,” she called it.

Once they were dried, Ms. Blau painted the bagels with smiling faces — [she never painted a cranky bagel](#), The Times noted — helped by her daughter, who brushed in the whites of the eyes. Ricky, her son, pitched in by fishing out the rejects — the mangled or lumpy ones — and eating them. Lawrence Blau, her husband, who was a nuclear physicist, kept the books.

Once painted, the bagels were shellacked, tagged — “Don’t Eat Me” — and spread throughout the house to dry again. Mr. Blau once caught a bagel drying on the bathroom floor with his big toe and fell into an empty shower.

“There we were, living in a bagel factory in Eastchester,” Ms. Blau told a reporter in 1979. “My children, Laurie and Ricky, my physicist husband and I, once a serious painter, were totally preoccupied with preserving, painting, packing and selling hundreds of smiling bagel products.”

Running a bagel factory had not been among Ms. Blau’s career plans. When her children were small, however, she had made them bagel puppets and bagel necklaces. She was inspired by her grandfather, Isidore Korodsky, a Russian-born Bronx bagel baker known as Grandpa Izzy, who liked to entertain children by talking to his bagels and painting faces on them with chalk. After Ms. Blau’s daughter brought one of her bagel necklaces to school, where it was a hit, Mr. Blau dared his wife to show a bag of them to a Bloomingdale’s buyer. To her dismay, the store ordered 100.



Ms. Blau at home in 1976, showing off some of her unusual artwork. Newspapers called her the Bagel Lady. via People of Play

Thousands of bagel necklaces were sold in the first few months. They were so popular that knockoffs appeared. Newspapers called Ms. Blau the Bagel Lady. NBC came to film the Blaus' bathtub. Eventually, the family business overwhelmed the family — and the house — and Ms. Blau outsourced her bagel work to several companies.

The McGraw Hill publishing company learned of her doings and asked her to write a children's book. "The Bagel Baker of Mulliner Lane," featuring Grandpa Izzy, was published in 1976. Ms. Blau designed socks printed with bagel characters, as well as bagel bedding for Fieldcrest. She made plush bagel toys called Elephantagel and Pigagel.

A local newspaper declared that "Bagelmania was contagious and incurable."

Judith Hope Ravinett was born in the Bronx on April 5, 1938, the oldest of four children of Evalynne (Korodsky) Ravinett, who operated a string of laundromats, and Samuel Ravinett, a dentist.

She had been born with clubfoot, and when she was 7 she had surgery to correct the condition, after which she was confined to bed for a year. Then she contracted rheumatic fever and spent another year in bed.



Among Ms. Blau's many bagel designs were these pendants (shown here minus the chains). Ethan Paul

To entertain herself, she used crayons to draw on her bedroom walls. She filled shoe-box lids with soil, landscaping them with tiny plants and toothpick buildings. She made up plays and created puppets to act them out. She made yarn dolls and paper-doll clothes.

Her mother brought her bed into their side yard, and Judith drew pictures of the oak trees above her. In the afternoons, when the weather was warm, her mother moved her bed to the sidewalk in front of the house, and Judith sold her creations for a nickel each.

“Just because you can’t leave your bed does not mean your bed can’t leave the house,” [she recalled her mother telling her.](#)



Ms. Blau in 1976. Every week she and a friend with a station wagon would pick up 1,000 bagels, which became the canvas for her art. via People of Play

She went on to study fine art at Cornell University, Hunter College, the University of Rochester and Columbia University. By then she was dating Mr. Blau, and they married in 1959.

Her first job, pre-bagelmania, was as an animator at Terrytoons, the venerable cartoon studio in New Rochelle best known for Mighty Mouse. She had begun to paint, exhibiting her work in local galleries; in the early 1970s, she also began making hand-painted jeans and caftans that she sold in boutiques.

In addition to her daughter, Ms. Blau is survived by her son, Richard; three siblings, Barbara Weingarten and Lawrence and Ted Ravinett; three grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. Dr. Blau died in 2015.

Ms. Blau's bagel empire was so successful that toymakers came calling, asking her to branch out.

She designed Sweetie Pops, dolls that preschoolers could dress themselves, with arms and legs that snapped on and off. Hasbro sold a million in 1985.

Hasbro also produced Ms. Blau's Baby All Gone (she came with plastic food and utensils to feed her) and Baby Check-Up (she came with a stethoscope and other medical accouterments); more than 10 million of both dolls combined were sold worldwide.



Among Ms. Blau's many other creations were playthings that mimicked her childhood creations: Bedside Buddies were knapsacks shaped like animals that could be tucked between a mattress and box spring to hold other toys to play with in bed. She also designed sheets printed with prosceniums and various characters drawn from three story lines — "twin bears," "ballerinas" and "icky sticky monsters" — that also had hand puppets stitched into the hems.

An ardent environmentalist, Ms. Blau created an educational program to teach children about nature; it involved characters she called [Treetures](#), who dispensed knowledge about trees. And she was the author of a number of books for young children, including “Hello! Good-Bye!,” in which a puppy learns an existential truth:

Hellos, good-byes
Good-byes, hellos.
Everybody comes,
Everybody goes.

* [Penelope Green](#) is a Times reporter on the Obituaries desk.