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Renwick Gallery Hosts “Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection”

“Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection,” on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum from March 14 through July 6, is a landmark exhibition that explores contemporary jewelry from a global perspective. The exhibition traces the development of artist-made jewelry and honors its craft roots while also placing the work within a larger framework of seminal movements in 20th century art. “Ornament as Art” showcases a broad array of national and international works made between 1963 and 2006.

“Helen Drutt is a legendary champion of connections between contemporary craft and fine art, and has worked tirelessly since the 1960s to educate the public and experts in the field,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “I am delighted the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery, which is dedicated to fostering an appreciation for decorative arts and craft traditions, is showcasing this important exhibition, one of the most in-depth examinations of avant-garde jewelry and an enduring testament to Drutt’s pioneering work.”

“Ornament as Art” features 300 objects, including 275 pieces of jewelry and drawings, watercolors, sketchbooks and sculptural constructions by the artists. The exhibition is drawn from the Helen Williams Drutt collection, considered by many to be one of the most significant contemporary jewelry collections in the United States. The collection was assembled during a 40-year period in which the history and developments in the field were observed and documented by Drutt. More than 115 artists from 21 different countries are represented in the exhibition with the largest concentration working in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain and Italy. “Ornament as Art” was organized by Cindi Strauss, curator of modern and contemporary decorative arts and design at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Robyn Kennedy, chief of the Renwick Gallery, is the coordinating curator in Washington.

“By touching on major innovations in technique, material, scale and concept, and by identifying distinct threads of aesthetic inquiry worldwide, this exhibition examines and celebrates key aspects of contemporary jewelry, ultimately demonstrating the limitless creativity of the medium,” said Kennedy.

The exhibition is organized in five sections. The first introduces the emergence of a new idea of jewelry. Subsequent sections explore the global dialogue taking place among artists and the freedom these artists felt to explore wide-ranging possibilities in ornament; the development of a narrative impulse in jewelry inspired by personal stories, myths, politics, history or popular culture; and the effect of interdisciplinary movements such as geometric abstraction, constructivism, minimalism and conceptualism on jewelry. The exhibition concludes with more recent work that explores the interaction between body, viewer and object, which often challenges the traditional purpose of jewelry.

Among the artists represented in “Ornament as Art” are Jamie Bennett, Sharon Church, Lisa Gralnick, Stanley Lechtzin, Bruce Metcalf, Albert Paley, Joyce Scott and Olaf Skoogfors from the United States; Manfred Bischoff, Claus Bury, Georg Dobler and Gerd Rothmann from Germany; Gijs Bakker, Nel Linssen and Emmy van Leersum from the Netherlands; Peter Chang, Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins from the United Kingdom; Giampaolo Babetto and Bruno Martinazzi from Italy; Liv Blåvarp from Norway; and Bernhard Schobinger from Switzerland.

In the 1960s, a dramatic shift occurred in the ways ornament was perceived. Breaking with tradition, artists placed their works within larger artistic movements, signaling a period of independence in which concepts and ideas were valued more than precious materials. In Europe, artists such as Bury, Bakker and Rothmann incorporated alternative materials into their dynamic, often sculptural, pieces. The influence of these avant-garde artists, based in Germany and the Netherlands, on jewelry artists in Europe and particularly America, was significant.

By the 1970s, information about the stylistic and technical advances taking place in Europe was disseminated to American artists, students and professors through exhibition catalogs and lectures. American artists such as Lechtzin and Paley, responding to European currents, helped define a new American aesthetic, one which prioritized technical innovation, an increase in scale and the incorporation of plastics and other alternative or industrial materials in their work. Lechtzin, along with Skoogfors, proved to be influential as a teacher, encouraging the next generation of American jewelry artists such as Gary Griffin, Paley, Metcalf and Eleanor Moty, in their creative experimentation.

In the 1980s, many artists renounced their ties to precious metals while others questioned wearability by radically altering the scale and shape of their work. The explosion of large-scale, international exhibitions on many continents in the 1980s allowed for a greater awareness of shared ideas and resources. In recent decades,

many artists redefined ideas of body adornment through sculptural constructions that question personal space. By stretching form beyond accepted norms, these objects became environments whose connection to the body was essential to their success as living sculptures. Many works featured in the exhibition were made to be worn, as well as to be hung on the wall.

Highlights that are on view include the sterling silver and polyester resin “Torque 22-D’ Neckpiece” (1971) by Lechtzin, a leading innovator in electroforming technologies; Bury’s “Ring” (1970), a revolutionary work that blends precious metal with alternative materials; and Bakker’s vibrant red “Dewdrop’ Neckpiece” (1982), a large scale-work whose seemingly fragile flower petals are crafted from a print laminated on PVC.

Some more recent, notable works include Dobler’s linear “Brooch” (1985); Metcalf’s “Wood Neckpiece #7” (1992), which combines hand-shaped wood elements with found objects to create a dramatic, narrative composition; a paper and elastic “Necklace” (1995) by Linssen; and Schobinger’s “Scherben vom Moritzplatz’ Berlin Necklace” (1982-1983), a distinctive combination of antique crystal beads with shards of Coca-Cola bottles found in a politically charged section of Berlin.

About Helen Williams Drutt English

Since 1966, Drutt has been collecting jewelry made by artists. Initially, she was drawn to the dynamic sculptural form of a Lechtzin brooch. The realization that a piece of jewelry could be closely identified with the aesthetics of fine art inspired a lifelong journey of discovery that took her to artists’ studios, collections and exhibitions around the world. In 1973, she established the Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia, where the craft movement had been vibrant since the 1960s, and began to teach a history course on modern and contemporary crafts at the Philadelphia College of Art. In 1983, her personal collection was exhibited at museums in the United States and Europe. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston acquired the collection, which consists of more than 800 works, in 2002. Drutt co-authored “Jewelry of Our Time: Art, Ornament and Obsession” (1995) with Peter Dormer, and wrote “Brooching it Diplomatically: A Tribute to Madeleine K. Albright” (1998), as well as conceiving a related exhibition. Drutt is an honorary member of the Society of North American Goldsmiths and was named a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania, as well as a *Visionary!* of the Museum of Arts & Design and the recipient of two honorary doctorate degrees, among other awards. In 2007, Drutt and her husband H. Peter Stern generously donated 35 sculptural and functional objects by some of America’s most accomplished craft artists to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in honor of the Renwick Gallery’s 35th anniversary.

Symposium

“A Grand Passion: Global Perspectives on Contemporary Art Jewelry,” co-organized by the museum and the James Renwick Alliance, will take place in the museum’s McEvoy Auditorium Saturday, April 12, from SI-104-2008

10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Symposium speakers include Drutt and four internationally respected artists who have worked with her in the past—Americans Robin Kranitzky and Kim Overstreet, Australian Robert Baines and German Claus Bury. A discussion of the international exchange between artist and collector, moderated by Renwick Gallery Curator Jane Milosch, follows the presentations.

A wide array of additional public programs are scheduled in conjunction with the exhibition, including a presentation Friday, March 14 at noon by world-renowned Dutch artist and designer Gijs Bakker, founder of the influential firm Droog Design; a book signing follows with Drutt, Strauss and artists whose work is featured in the exhibition. A complete listing of related free programs is available in a separate press release or online at americanart.si.edu.

Credit

“Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection” has been organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Generous funding has been provided by The National Endowment for the Arts and the Rotasa Foundation. The James Renwick Alliance supports the exhibition’s presentation at the Renwick Gallery.

Publication

The richly illustrated catalog, published by Arnoldsche, features essays by Strauss and Drutt, a chronology of major events in contemporary jewelry, a complete illustrated checklist of the collection and artist biographies. It is available in the museum store for \$90.

Tour

Following its presentation at the Renwick Gallery, the exhibition will travel to the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in Charlotte, N. C. (Aug. 16 – Jan. 4, 2009) and the Tacoma Museum of Art in Tacoma, Wash. (June 27, 2009 – Sept. 13, 2009).

About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., near the Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines) Metrorail stations. Museum hours are from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: americanart.si.edu.

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