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New Exhibition “June Schwarcz: Invention and Variation” Opens March 10 at the Renwick Gallery

Exhibition Is the First Retrospective of Pioneering Artist’s Career

The inventive designs and technical innovations of pioneering enamelist June Schwarcz (1918—2015) transformed 20th-century enameling and profoundly influenced a new generation of artists. Schwarcz created a remarkably varied body of work in a career spanning more than 60 years, continually breaking new ground through developing new processes and incorporating unorthodox influences into her work. “June Schwarcz: Invention and Variation” is the first retrospective to cover the entirety of the artist’s career.

The exhibition is on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum from March 10 to Aug. 27 and features nearly 60 artworks, including works never displayed in public, showcasing the breadth of Schwarcz’s forms and techniques. The exhibition is organized by guest curators Bernard N. Jazzar and Harold B. “Hal” Nelson, leading scholars of 20th-century enamels and co-founders of the Los Angeles-based non-profit Enamel Arts Foundation, and is coordinated by Robyn Kennedy, chief administrator at the Renwick Gallery.

“We are starting 2017 at the Renwick with exhibitions exploring the work of June Schwarcz and Peter Voulkos, two mid-century artists who utterly transformed their disciplines, and in turn, modern craft,” said Abraham Thomas, The Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator-in-Charge at the Renwick Gallery. “Both of them exuded a spirit of creative disruption through their ground-breaking experimentation with materials and process and by simply challenging what a vessel could be. They both also absorbed the influence of abstract expressionism to create works that offered a delicate balance between the raw and the refined.”

Schwarcz was a pivotal figure of the vibrant craft community that emerged in the U.S. following World War II, and became a prominent voice in American art. She was introduced to enameling in the 1950s, quickly mastering the art form and soon pushing the boundaries of what was thought possible in this ancient medium. Schwarcz continuously experimented with her methods and materials, innovating new practices and techniques to create objects unlike anything that had come

before. She was among the first to marry her art with electroplating and other industrial processes, beginning her pioneering experiments in the 1960s. She used the process to create more varied surfaces, build greater depth and eventually to construct three-dimensional sculptural forms unprecedented in the history of enameling.

Schwarcz also broke with convention in her aesthetics, which represented a radical departure from tradition. Living in New York, Chicago, Rio de Janeiro and finally settling in Sausalito, Calif., and a member of artistic circles that included influential figures such as László Moholy-Nagy, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Kay Sekimachi, Voukos, Lillian Elliott and others, she absorbed the worldly, modernist sensibilities around her and translated them into vibrant designs. Her passion for Japanese art and design; African, Pre-Columbian and Oceanic art; Romanesque architecture; and costuming and textiles all found expression in her often abstract surfaces and virtuosic use of color and form.

Among the honors and awards she amassed in her lifetime, Schwarcz was designated a California Living Treasure in 1985, earned a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Enamelist Society in 1991 and was presented with the Masters of the Medium award by the James Renwick Alliance in 2009.

“June Schwarcz’s enormous influence can be seen reflected throughout the Renwick’s collection, such as in the jewelry of Jamie Bennett and William Harper and in works by other artists from the mid-century through today,” Kennedy said.

Information on gallery talks is available on the exhibition website, americanart.si.edu/schwarcz.

Catalog

An accompanying catalog published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum includes a foreword by Elizabeth Broun, director emerita of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and an essay by Jazzar and Nelson. It will be for sale in the museum’s store and online (\$34.95, hardcover).

Credit

The exhibition is organized by the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support is provided by Ruth M. Borun, the Elizabeth Broun Curatorial Endowment, Dorothy Tapper Goldman, the Margot Heckman Endowment for Craft and Decorative Arts, the James Renwick Alliance, the Rotasa Foundation, the Share Fund and the Elizabeth B. and Laurence I. Wood Endowment.

About the Renwick Gallery

The Renwick Gallery is the Smithsonian American Art Museum's branch for contemporary craft and decorative arts. The Renwick is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission is free. Follow the museum on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Tumblr](#), [Pinterest](#), [Flickr](#), [iTunes U](#) and [ArtBabble](#). Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Website: americanart.si.edu.

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