

ornament as art

Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection

Objects of adornment have been a significant part of cultures around the world since the earliest recorded history. Whether imbued with power, bestowed as a trophy of social status and wealth, or worn as personal decoration, jewelry communicates basic messages about who we are and for what we stand. In contemporary times, jewelry has moved beyond its ornamental roots—even beyond its role as a signifier—to become an art form that is no longer associated solely with any one defining characteristic, be it the material, technique, or design. This shift was the result of an intense period of activity in the second half of the twentieth century, during which intellectual concepts became more valued than traditions of preciousness; the production of jewelry returned to the studio environment; and artists were influenced by broad artistic movements.

The first discernable shift toward innovation was seen emerging from the studios of university- or apprenticeship-trained metalsmiths beginning in the 1960s. This close-knit community of artists in America and abroad accelerated artistic development across geographical lines through conferences, lectures, exhibitions, and publications. These opportunities exposed artists to one another and ultimately established the foundation of the field.



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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.

the emergence of a new idea of jewelry

Artists in the 1960s and 1970s openly challenged traditional ideas of jewelry by invoking avant-garde influences from architecture, painting, photography, and sculpture so that their work was seen in a broad context rather than as simple adornment. Past ideas of jewelry that centered on preciousness were discarded; forms such as brooches, bracelets, and rings were reimagined; and alternative modes of making were embraced. The results were a firm break with the past and the rise of a new concept of jewelry.

In the United States, the new generation of jewelry artists experimented with techniques and with organic shapes and larger scales. While most American artists continued to use precious metals and natural materials in their jewelry, they redefined their approach to the materials. Some artists, like Stanley Lechtzin, looked to currents emanating from Europe and began incorporating plastics into their work. European artists such as Claus Bury, Gerd Rothmann, and Fritz Maierhofer revolutionized the field by combining plastics with metals. Industrial materials and the treatment of jewelry as body sculpture—what would become known as the *Hollands Glad* [Dutch smooth] style—resonated in the work of Dutch artists Emmy van Leersum and Gijs Bakker. Gold also continued to play a role in European jewelry of this period; however, the resulting forms were more sculptural and more laden with concept than anything that had been seen previously.

By the 1970s, a new jewelry ideal that embraced independent, creative expression had taken hold, encouraging artists to consider new directions in their work. Exhibitions, journals, catalogues, and a steady influx of visiting artists to jewelry programs accelerated the spread of information about the new jewelry across geographic lines.

A wave of pioneering students emerged from American graduate programs. Eleanor Moty, Robin Quigley, and Helen Shirk incorporated synthetic, natural, and industrial materials in their jewelry and used innovative processes such as electroforming, photoetching, and anodizing. The centuries-old technique of enameling was also reborn in the jewelry of William Harper and Jamie Bennett. The trend established by

European artists in combining plastics with metals surfaced in the jewelry of Americans Peter Blodgett, Walter Kelley Morris, and Robert Ebendorf, who created works that were highly sculptural and experimental in form.

In Europe, the use of alternative or industrial materials proliferated during the 1970s because of widespread availability and low cost. Dutch artists such as Hans Appenzeller used PVC (polyvinyl chloride) and rubber while the Australian artist Margaret West focused on stainless steel and titanium. Geometric abstraction and motifs taken from industry were also prevalent during this time.

diversity, experimentation, and the global viewpoint

Jewelry's relationship to material usage and concept were further challenged in the early 1980s as artists from Japan, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand joined the global dialogue. Many jewelry artists, seeking to push the boundaries of their chosen medium, renounced their ties to precious metals altogether. Others questioned wearability by radically altering the scale and shape of their work to achieve a more active dialogue with the body.

Ideological concepts taken from artistic movements outside of jewelry, the introduction of narrative themes, and the recognition of cultural meaning were influential during this mature phase. The freedom that artists felt to explore wideranging possibilities in ornament during the 1990s meant that truly diverse jewelry was being made throughout the world. Although there is evidence of international trends during this period, including the significance of color, material, and form, artists remained true to the spirit of openness and experimentation that has been present since the foundation of the field.

drawings and sketchbooks

Many jewelry artists work intuitively—they go directly to their materials without the benefit of drawings or models—while others experiment on paper before making a piece. The Helen Williams Drutt Collection is rich in drawings and sketchbooks, which can be seen throughout this exhibition.

Drawings and sketchbooks offer a window into the artist's creative process. Notes about materials, color, and form often accompany the images. Often, several versions of the same idea are rendered in an attempt to resolve aesthetic choices. Sometimes there is a direct correlation between the drawing and the finished piece of jewelry; at other times the drawing serves as an occasion to revisit the final product.

the narrative impulse

Narrative jewelry has evolved into a significant genre within the field. With a distinctive mix of popular culture, politics, mythology, and figural representation, this jewelry embodies the personal, emotional, and philosophical concerns of the artists. Often the works are open to many meanings, with the artists preferring that viewers develop their own narratives, while at other times the artist conveys a very specific message.

Jewelry made in the American narrative tradition often uses of found objects arranged in a collage or assemblage. For artists such as Ramona Solberg, Nancy Worden, J. Fred Woell, and Merrily Tompkins, the use of cultural relics is less about the talismanic power of found objects and more about using these objects as storytelling devices. Only recently has narrative jewelry appeared on the international scene. Artists such as Pierre Cavalan, Ramón Puig Cuyàs, and Esther Knobel use their native landscapes as well as personal experiences as inspiration for their work.

the influence of twentieth-century artistic movements on jewelry

After World War II, the upheaval brought by changes in cultural, political, and economic conditions led artists worldwide to alter their aesthetic, intellectual, and production practices. Artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s questioned historical positions on art making, repositioning the function, purpose, and meaning of art. Interdisciplinary movements, such as geometric abstraction, constructivism, minimalism, and conceptualism influenced artists across a variety of media. Many jewelry artists active in art-making centers and universities also embraced these movements, using some of the strategies to forge their own artistic identities.

Jewelry's connections to avant-garde theories of art were mitigated by the need for function. Because it relies on form and not merely idea, jewelry—whether decorative, sculptural, or born from serious intellectual and design processes—was unable to adopt the strict conditions set forth by the leading theorists of the time. Since the 1960s, jewelry artists have revisited theories of modern art as points of reference, filtering them through the functional needs of their chosen medium.

the body and beyond

Recently many artists have 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.

Jewelry conceived in this manner serves as an extension of the wearer's body and psychological mindset. The interaction between body, viewer, and object is central to understanding the role that these works play in the public sphere. Some pieces offer bold statements that draw attention to the wearer: others allow for an intimacy not possible in other disciplines. Many of the works seen here were made to be worn as well as to be installed on the wall. This dual function challenges the viewer to question the purpose of these objects.

Helen Williams Drutt

Helen Williams Drutt English has been acquiring jewelry made by artists since 1966. Initially she was drawn simultaneously to the dynamic sculptural form of a Stanley Lechtzin brooch and works by Olaf Skoogfors. 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. Her interest in the resurgence of the craft movement post World War II led her to develop the first curriculum in the history of modern and contemporary crafts and to open her eponymous gallery in Philadelphia, which she directed from 1973 to 2002. The results of over forty years of activity include extraordinary contributions to the field as a scholar, educator, and visionary, as well as the creation of an outstanding collection, which Drutt, in collaboration with a group of patrons, gave to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston beginning in 2002.

The Helen Williams Drutt Collection is a remarkable record of the most significant artists, aesthetic styles, and evolution of techniques and materials in contemporary jewelry made between 1963 and 2006. Through more than 800 works by 175 artists from 18 different countries, the collection documents the creative process and rigorous intellectual inquiry that have shaped the field.

Though selected works in Helen Drutt's possession were previously exhibited in group exhibitions, the concept of the Helen Williams Drutt Collection was initiated by the Château Dufresne; Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Canada, with the inaugural exhibition in 1984–85.

The collection traveled to the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii (1986), Cleveland Institute of Art (1986), Philadelphia Museum of Art (1986–87). As the collection expanded, it was exhibited at Taideteollisuusmuseo (now Designmuseo), Helsinki, 1992; Röhsska Konstslöjdmuseet, Gothenburg, 1992–1993; The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, 1993; Museum Bellerive, Zurich, 1994–95; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1994–95; and the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend, 1995.

After its European venues, the collection was placed in storage, though selected loans were made available. The holdings were then increased to strengthen the collection's position and began to include drawings, sketchbooks, and related historical works which now comprise the MFAH: Helen Williams Drutt Collection today.

In building her collection, Helen Drutt's desire has been "to support the work and establish a foundation for the history of ideas central to the field." This exhibition and catalogue honor that wish and celebrate the many contributions of the artists involved in defining contemporary jewelry.