

Helen Williams Drutt Collection from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
By Judith Toman

Helen Williams Drutt, the woman who assembled this extensive personal collection, was Executive Director and founding member of the Philadelphia Council of Professional Craftsmen (1967-1974). (Strauss 2007, 48) Her early interest in jewelry began with many artists whose work was following the minimalist and conceptual movements of the 1960's and early 70's in American art styles. "In America, geometric configurations that prioritized the grid and symmetry in repetitive form came to symbolize the movement." (Minimalism) (Strauss 2007, 40) "During the same period, many American artists began to incorporate Minimalist strategies in their newfound concern with the idea over object. By creating a system in which ideas were the authoritative elements, many artists crossed into Conceptualism." (Strauss 2007, 41) She has collected 720 pieces dating from 1963 to the present. The collection holdings represent 175 artists from 18 countries.

Drutt operated galleries in Philadelphia and New York from 1973-2002. She began buying work from various artists in the 1960's with the realization that pieces were being lost from the record and not being well catalogued. She began showing contemporary jewelry, focused on metals, in her Philadelphia gallery, always displayed as fine art rather than objects for sale. (Strauss 2007, 50) Drutt began attending and giving lectures on contemporary work of artists she collected in the early days of her collecting and currently has an international reputation in art circles and among artists working in jewelry. The collection attempts to place the work within the larger artistic movements of its time.

With respect to items in the collection becoming part of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2002, she notes in the exhibition catalog, "I felt a responsibility to the work and to the artist and a responsibility to making certain that all the sweat and tears that went into bringing them together for forty years were not in vain." (Williams 2007, 8) She adds that it is important that the work and documentation come together as part of the body of work of the artists represented in the collection of some 300 objects, including 275 pieces of jewelry that travel to the Mint Museum of Craft and Design August 16, 2008 through January 9, 2009. The show travels to the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. (March – July 2008) and to the Tacoma Museum of Art (June – September 2009) following its visit to Charlotte.

Artists represented in both the Drutt exhibit and permanent collection of the Mint Museums include: Liv Blåvarp, Lisa Gralnick, William Harper, Bruce Metcalf, Joyce Scott, Kiff Slemmons, Ramona Solberg and Albert Paley, among others.

Reading about several of the artists in the collection I noted that some have created jewelry as well as larger sculptures. It was clear upon studying their jewelry that the scale is different, but that the jewelry is really small sculptural work.

Albert Paley does this perhaps the most dramatically. Between 1966 and 1977 he created what are often referred to as "personal sculptures" rather than jewelry. (Lucie-Smith

1991, 11) He developed many of the same design concepts he brought to large public sculpture when he closed the “jewelry” chapter of his creative history. Pieces of his jewelry were designated by critics as “unwearable” because of their size. (Broun 1991, 7) He countered with the notion that his jewelry was made for “women with a well-developed sense of their own worth.” (Broun 1991, 8) With some of his necklace pendant pieces measuring 17 inches in length they would indeed be suited for women who are strong physically as well as possessing a strong self-assurance.

The collection includes Paley pieces created from precious metal such as forged silver in the Art Deco style. Paley devoted much attention to problem solving within his work. He treated the back of his pieces with as much care as the front. Instead of using a traditional pin on the back of a broach, for example, he explored using the fibula as a completely integrated pin stem from the Greco-Roman fibula form used in early jewelry. The result, seen in his “fibula broach” shows a sculptural piece that can be viewed from front or back as a completed work. (Strauss 2007, 242)

Joyce Scott whose beadwork sculptures form part of the Mint’s permanent collection has beaded jewelry in the Drutt collection. Scott raises issues of racism, sexism, cultural stereotypes, world politics and urban unrest in her sculpture as well as her jewelry. One piece in the collection creates a beaded tableau that makes clear that an act of violence has taken place. (Strauss 2007, 284)

William Harper is described by Manhart as an alchemist, magician or sorcerer in his work with materials and creation of jewelry with strong visual depth. (Manhart 1989, 8) He combines precious gems and metals often cloisonné with plastic, pieces of mirror and stones. Harper “incorporates the notion of preciousness, the notion of primitivism and the question of beauty and the aspect of power into what he calls ‘shock exhibitionism’” (Manhart 1989, 11)

Ramona Solberg often used historic elements or objects with historic significance mixed with found objects in her jewelry. Her love of materials and influence by Native Americans is evidenced in her created pieces using found objects. (Strauss 2007, 302) She was often irreverent in her work, in one case creating a bracelet that combines old ivory, coral and turquoise with cow bones gnawed by a friend’s dog. (English 2001, ix)

The Drutt collection began from very personal pieces acquired by a woman who was instrumental to those pioneering their works in the 1960’s through the end of the 20th century. As part of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston it now becomes a collection with greater public exposure and provides us a 40-year history of the collector and the artists who came to the height of their craft during this period of Minimalism and Conceptualism using jewelry as their medium. Much of the work in this collection highlights not so much the precious materials we think of as forming the basis of jewelry, although they’re there, but the works on display capture the conciseness of form, use of unusual materials and sometimes even meaning within the pieces on display.

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