

Metal Rising: The Forming of the Metal Arts Guild,
San Francisco (1929-1964)

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master's of Arts in the History of Decorative Arts.
The Smithsonian Associates and Corcoran College of Art + Design

2011

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a project I hold dear to my heart. A milestone in my life in which I will never forget. My research started as a journey across the United States to tell a story about the formation of the Metal Arts Guild, but has ended with a discovery about the strength of the human spirit. I was not fortunate to meet many of the founding members of the Metal Arts Guild, but my research into the lives and careers of Margaret De Patta, Irena Brynner, and Peter Macchiarini has provided me with invaluable inspiration. Despite the adversity these artists faced, their strength still reverberates through the trails of history they left behind for an emerging scholar like me.

Throughout this project, I have received so much support. I would like to thank Heidi Nasstrom Evans, my thesis advisor, for her encouragement and patience during the thesis writing process. It was during her Spring 2007 class on modernism, that I was introduced to a whole new world of art history. I also want to thank Cynthia Williams and Peggy Newman for their constant source of support.

A huge thank you to Alison Antleman and Rebecca Deans for giving me access to MAG's archives and allowing me to tell their organization's story. It was such a pleasure to meet many of your members past and present. I wish the organization continued success and look forward to the symposium in November 2011.

There are many MAG artists I wish to thank for telling me their stories and allowing me to probe their lives and careers. Thank you to merry renk, Florence Resnikoff, and Imogene "Tex" Geiling who opened their homes, archives, and minds to me on numerous occasions. I would also like to thank Richard "Dick" Sperisen and Daniel Macchiarini for not only sharing their fathers' archives, but also for bringing the spirits of Francis Sperisen and Peter Macchiarini to life in your stories.

It was during my Summer 2009 fellowship with the Oakland Museum of California that I met Julie Muñiz. She has been an invaluable resource for this thesis and introduced me to a deeper world of Margaret De Patta. I look forward to seeing the

upcoming retrospective exhibition, *Space-Light-Structure: The Jewelry of Margaret De Patta*.

I also wanted to express my deep gratitude to Martha Bielawski for providing me access to the private archives of Margaret De Patta. I will also miss my time with Beaugard.

During this research process, I encountered several people who pointed me in the right direction. A thank you must also go to Mike Holmes of Velvet Da Vinci, Marcus Davies of the San Francisco Art Commission, and Marisa Bourgoïn of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Additionally, I would like to thank the various staff members of The San Francisco History Center and San Francisco State University Labor Research and Archives Center.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering support during this process. A big thank you to my parents who were always in my corner and told me to see the big picture. I also want to give a special thank you to my darling husband, Seth, who means more to me than anything in this world. Your enduring love is what pushed me through the finish line.

And finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother, Molly Boykoff. She loved all that glittered - family and jewelry. I will always remember her lovely twinkling spirit who told me to pursue my dreams.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the formation of the Metal Arts Guild of San Francisco (MAG) through the careers of three pivotal metalworkers: Margaret De Patta, Peter Macchiarini, and Irena Brynner, who were central figures in the American modernist studio jewelry movement. The date range for this study, 1929 to 1964, encompasses the careers of the founding members of MAG and the international reach MAG attained.

De Patta, who studied under constructivist László Moholy-Nagy, is considered by many as one of the icons of modernist jewelers; she was known for her use of light and line, and concern for structure in her designs. Macchiarini, who worked with sculptors Ralph Stackpole and Beniamino Bufano, blurred the lines drawn between sculptor and jeweler; his jewelry designs were experiments in layering techniques and studies of structure and form. Brynner, who apprenticed for jewelers Caroline Gleick Rosene and Franz Bergmann, is recognized for her innovative organically-shaped body jewelry forms and pioneering use of electronic welding.

Contemporary scholars chronicling the evolution of the American studio jewelry movement, modernist American jewelry, and the careers of pioneering metalworkers have recognized MAG's influence on Bay Area jewelers and beyond. In *Messengers of Modernism: American Studio Jewelry 1940-1960*, a catalog published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts (now known as the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), jewelry historian Toni Greenbaum referenced several of the founding jewelers of MAG, but did not elaborate on the background of the Guild or its breadth of influence beyond Northern California.¹ In Greenbaum's essay, "Body

Sculpture: California Jewelry,” in *California Design: The Legacy of West Coast Craft and Style*, she briefly described the purpose of MAG and states, “[t]here is little question that De Patta was the greatest modernist jeweler in California.”² Marbeth Schon, has addressed the formative years of American metalsmithing and acknowledged jewelers associated with MAG in *Modernist Jewelry 1930-1960: The Wearable Art Movement*, but failed to discuss the influence of MAG within the context of the American studio jewelry movement.³ Finally, Glenn Adamson’s essay, “Wearable Sculpture: Modern Jewelry and the Problem of Autonomy” in *Thinking Through Craft*, discussed the activity of “a group of abstractionist jewelers,” including De Patta, Macchiarini, and Merry Renk in the United States, but neglected to name the group and the connection they all shared – membership in MAG.⁴

Those scholars recognize the careers and contributions of individual MAG members to the American studio jewelry movement, and confirm the significance of MAG even if not doing so explicitly. Further, MAG’s contribution to the development of modernist jewelry is documented in numerous period publications. However, no attempt has been made until now, to reconcile the combined accomplishments of highly visible MAG members and the impact MAG as an organization had on jewelry movements during the mid-twentieth century.

This thesis is the first comprehensive and historical account of the formation of MAG, and places the Guild and its founding members within the context of the American modernist jewelry movement. It examines the socio-economic and political events giving impetus for a group of individual metal craftspeople to start organizing, the aims of

MAG, and the careers of three key MAG members. MAG believed its collective association would create a network of strength and advantage by providing artistic, commercial, and educational support. Sixty years later, the legacy of the Guild's founding members still endures.

CHAPTER 1: EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM IN JEWELRY

Chapter one examines the historical context and milieu in which the Metal Arts Guild of San Francisco (MAG) developed into a pioneering metal arts organization. This section will review the conditions propelling the birth of the American studio jewelry movement by discussing the emergence of European, American and California modernism and the simultaneous revival and expansion of craft. Additionally, this chapter addresses the circumstances in which New York City and San Francisco became centers of activity for the cultivation of modern jewelry design in the United States.

The American studio jewelry movement grew out of a mid-century craft revival in the early 1940s, and was part of an artistic response to the socio-economic and political climate in the years leading up to and following World War II. Craftspeople sought social and economic reforms following the fallout from wartime. They used adornment as a means to connect with humanity and to address their concerns about commercialization of design, rapid industrialization, human suffering, and social conditions on a new world stage.⁵ Unlike the Arts and Crafts movement at the beginning of the late nineteenth-century, studio jewelers had no allegiance to a single unifying philosophy, aesthetic, or leader. Instead, an international assemblage of artists, craftspeople, and intellectuals utilized jewelry as a medium to reconcile the role of art, craft, and industry. A direct result of this understanding was the emergence of modernist jewelry.

Bearing witness to the age of the machine and the rise of the atomic era, some metalsmiths released any nostalgia for the past and sought inspiration from the present-day. While studio jewelers did not completely abandon traditional forms, artists started a

new phase in the applied arts. In the eyes of the modernist, jewelry was no longer defined by standards of beauty, the fashion of the times, or the intrinsic value of the piece, rather jewelry was characterized by individuality, intention, and self-expression. Drawing inspiration from a multitude of resources, jewelers looked to photographers, architects, painters, industrial designers, and sculptors for direction.

Studio jewelers often cited sculpture as a reference point for their work. MAG artists Margaret De Patta, Irena Brynner, Peter Macchiarini, and Bob Winston all credit modernist sculptors such as Ralph Stackpole, Henry Moore, László Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Calder, Claire Falkenstein, and Pablo Picasso among those influencing their artistic direction.⁶ (fig. 1) These artists redefined traditional sculpture by focusing not just on the solid object and the space surrounding it, but also on using negative and voided space to create positive elements and planes in their pieces.⁷ The three-dimensional nature of sculpture lends itself to be easily applied to jewelry; however, the main difference between jewelry and sculpture are the considerations such as durability, fabrication, function, form, and scale. Jewelers often describe their work as miniature sculpture and/or wearable sculpture. The jeweler must study the relationship of the work to the human form and account for the weight and use of the piece (i.e. bracelet, necklace, or ring).

MAG founder Margaret De Patta believed that there were similarities between sculpture and jewelry as she thought the “[p]roblems common to sculpture and architecture are inherent in jewelry design, i.e. space - form - tension - organic structure - scale - texture - interpretation - superimposition and economy of means ... each playing

its role.”⁸ Irena Brynner, another MAG founder, also had a realization of sculpture’s connection to jewelry after seeing someone wear the jewelry of sculptor Claire Falkenstein. Brynner advised, “[s]omebody had a band, a silver band, and here hung a completely free – what do you call them – mobile, you know? And I thought, my God, but that is sculpture! I don’t have to go away from sculpture, I just will change the size and approach, and it has to be in relation to the human body! That was a revelation to me.”⁹ (fig. 2) Merry Renk, another MAG artist, made both sculpture and jewelry; she began making large-scale sculptures for a brief period of time, in order to compensate for an eye injury she received from a car accident in 1974.¹⁰ (fig. 3) These examples highlight the often blurred line between jewelry and sculpture as artists vacillated between the two media.

Modernist ideas found in the visual arts started to dictate the approach, philosophy, and aesthetic of metalsmiths. Jewelers applied modernist art principles, like abstraction and constructivism, to their work. Having few restraints regarding design, function, and structure and with the shortage of traditional raw materials, jewelers now featured found objects, moving parts, modern materials, and new technology to illustrate their design visions, developing a new modern jewelry tradition.

The initial wave of jewelers began their careers without any technical or formal training in traditional goldsmithing and metalsmithing. At the time, aside from available apprenticeships and high school industrial art classes, a void existed in metalwork at university art programs, and no guild system had been established in the United States.¹¹ MAG founders such as Bob Winston, Margaret De Patta, and Pete Macchiarini were a

few of the noteworthy pioneering jewelers who began to embrace modernism in the 1930s. They laid the foundation for future American studio metalsmiths to flourish during the 1940s and beyond. Such pioneers navigated an unconventional course in metalsmithing by integrating their earlier vocations as engineers, sculptors, painters, graphic designers and laborers, with their new endeavors in metalsmithing and jewelry design. In addition to their unorthodox entry into the field of jewelry, the pioneers shared an interest in the avant-garde and the newfound theoretical approaches to art and design. Physical proximity to the leading modernists would begin to influence and shape the work of American artist-jewelers (including several MAG members) as they were in a position to work for, study under, and connect with the leading artists of the time.

Peter Macchiarini studied ornamental work, marble carving, and drawing at the Art Academy at the Pietrasanta in Italy; later, he worked in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) with modernists such as sculptor, painter, and muralist Ralph Stackpole, and muralist Beniamino “Bene” Bufano.¹² Irena Brynner studied classical painting at the École Cantonale De Dessin et D’Art Applique (Cantonale School of Design and Applied Art) in Lausanne, Switzerland. Following her immigration to the United States, Brynner took sculpture courses under Ralph Stackpole at the California School of Labor in San Francisco. Brynner was influenced by many of the MAG founders, especially Margaret De Patta and Bob Winston.¹³ De Patta was a student of both educator and sculptor László Moholy-Nagy and industrial designer Eugene Bielawski (her future husband) at the School of Design in Chicago.¹⁴ Merry Renk, also studied with Moholy-Nagy at the Institute of Design (formerly the School of Design).

Renk had also traveled extensively throughout Europe during which time she met Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi who looked at her hands and said, that she “had the potential [for sculpting].”¹⁵

American jewelers began incorporating a reinterpreted version of European modernism. Translation of these modernist ideas was expressed through the use of abstract forms, smooth and textured graphic surfaces, interchangeable movements, and biomorphic shapes. Some artists went beyond applying the modern aesthetic and adopted the philosophical underpinnings behind the movement. Margaret De Patta, created a new visual language in the development of her jewelry designs through the interpretation of constructivist theory. (fig. 4) László Moholy-Nagy, a constructivist and former head of the Bauhaus metal workshop in Germany, helped shape De Patta’s philosophy of design. Merry Renk’s design aesthetic was also influenced by Moholy-Nagy’s principles of design, as she was a student at Institute of Design. Moholy-Nagy encouraged Renk to study the framework of natural forms and convert them into abstract design.¹⁶ Although Renk’s earlier works were non-objective, she later shifted to symbolic realism.¹⁷ She found her interest in the properties of material and experimented with metal and enamel. Other studio jewelers were influenced by their contemporaries’ use of modern design, but not the philosophical source behind their work. Irena Brynner, a painter by training, was largely interested by the aesthetic of modern jewelry. While her early jewelry pieces were dictated by her limited skill set and techniques; as she matured as an artist, she began to experiment with lost-wax casting and welding techniques that evolved into a new modern expression. During the mid-twentieth century, American artist-jewelers

adopted a diverse range of modernist ideas in their work. However, this American assimilation of modernism, did not occur in isolation; rather, its roots can be traced to Europe.

Prior to its arrival in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, European modernism was defined by several interwoven intellectual, political, and artistic movements and ideas throughout Europe. The activities within these movements varied from country to country, but the connecting force behind the modernist was the aspiration of creating a new utopian world in response to societies turmoil during the inter-war years.¹⁸ Seeking out this utopian concept entailed entwining oneself with the idea of rejecting historical references and ornament, embracing the machine, emphasizing function over form, and looking toward the future.¹⁹ A utopian world was not defined by a style, but rather a philosophical approach of how to improve everyday life through social, spiritual, and/or political reforms.²⁰ As a result, architecture, art, and industrial design of the time was a vehicle for the expression of modernist principles in action. The integration of industry and mechanization altered the aesthetic output in various fields. Buildings, furniture, fashion, textiles, literature, film, and objects showcased new advances in science and technology, reflected order and utility, and incorporated the influence of the machine. Materials such as steel, glassware, plastic, and ceramics were prototyped for use in mass production. As European modernism made its way across the Atlantic to America, these ideas interacted with a dynamic political and socio-economic landscape that made it possible for an new International Style to take hold and crystalize into what would become known as American modernism.