

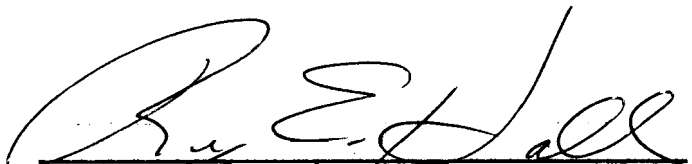
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MY METALSMITHING AND JEWELRY

A Studio Thesis
Presented to
the Department of Art
Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia

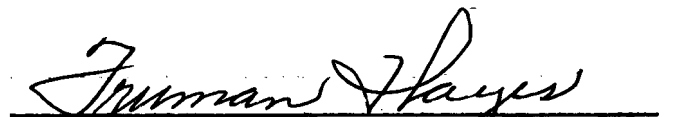
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PREFACE

During the past several years, I have investigated and mastered to some extent numerous techniques of metal-smithing. These include centrifugal and vacuum casting, raising and forging, electro-plating and stripping, and the use of rubber molds in producing models for casting. All of these techniques as well as many others are explained at length in various books on jewelry and metalsmithing. However, I have found no text which really attempts to delve into the philosophical aspects of the subject of metal-working or to deal with problems of space and form in anything but a superficial manner.

As far as I am concerned, these are the crucial aspects of the subject, and I shall attempt in this paper to develop a philosophical and formal discussion of my views and work in metalsmithing. It is not the physical "making" of a piece which interests me, but rather what has been called the "spiritual" aspect--the idea.

Because my graduate work has been carried out over a period of several years, this paper does not deal with one theme or problem but rather with the whole of my attitudes and work. For the sake of clarity, I will approach the analyses in a chronological manner. The stages of development, though diverse, are still closely tied together by several characteristics basic both to my metalwork and drawing.

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PART I

SOME POINTS OF VIEW EXPRESSED

Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, it has become accepted practice to place the crafts in the category of the so-called "minor arts."¹ The dictates of function and craft techniques--even size, in the case of jewelry--were generally believed to limit the expressive form and significance of the crafts object. Today, there is little reason why the crafts should remain in this "minor" category.

Of course, those craftsmen who begin by mastering an obscure technique and then building their ideas around this technique, or those who allow the limitations of commission work to be the main influence on their artistic output sometimes deserve to be placed in such a category. But so does any painter or sculptor who allows a technical "tour de force" or the pressures of acclaim or monetary success to warp the true direction and growth of his ideas.

In an age of such technical advancement, there is no reason why a craftsman should not be every bit as free and expressive in his work as the "fine artist" unless he is personally less creative. Unfortunately, the crafts often

¹Ceramics, metalsmithing, and weaving are among the crafts habitually categorized in this manner.

appear as a cozy retreat for those who have little to say in terms of artistic expression. Traditionally, the crafts object has often won acclaim for technical excellence, the use of expensive and durable materials, the number of man-hours of labor on each piece, and so on. All this has nothing to do with its value as an art object.

The contemporary American craftsman is less directly designing for function--the reality of machine-made commodities--as he is obsessed by the nature of his materials, the interaction of the materials and himself, and the degree to which he can reach object-ness. . . . The object truly made for itself has the power to renew itself in the energies, memories, and actions of men.²

In the area of jewelry the function aspect is often less significant than in most other crafts. Jewelry is not meant to be utilitarian in the usual sense; it is meant to be personal adornment. Its ancient ability to impart power and magic (as in the charm and talisman) has not been altogether lost and even today lifts much jewelry above the level of the purely decorative.³

In addition, I find the forms of the body much more conducive to "hanging" than the white walls of a gallery. Just as the images of the draftsman often relate unconsciously to his own bodily characteristics, my jewelry is for the most

²Rose Slivka, "The Object: Function, Craft, and Art," Craft Horizons (September-October, 1965), p. 10.

³Ibid.

part designed for my body. In this sense, its function simply offers yet another channel towards greater personal involvement.

Since selling and showing one's work are the accepted prerequisites to status as a professional craftsman, it seems pertinent to add that I work with neither end specifically in mind. If a piece merits exhibiting when finished, I show it. But I have no dual standard, working on the one hand to sell while conserving my best efforts for show production. In general, group or one-man exhibitions, where a number of selected pieces are shown together, give a more comprehensive idea of my work than does the competitive exhibition.

For the most part, I find commission work highly distasteful if some limitation is imposed in the premise (for example, a certain stone is to be "designed for"). On the other hand, I am delighted if someone admires a finished piece and would as soon give my work away to friends as to try to attach a fair monetary price to a favorite piece. These attitudes may seem a bit lofty but they do allow me to work with the freedom and personal involvement which are vital to any artistic endeavor.

PART II

THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF MY WORK

The craftsman cannot hope to compete with the machine in efficiency or economy. Instead, he should emphasize the one thing in which the machine cannot surpass him--his imagination. Out of endless expressive possibilities, each craftsman struggles to find what speaks for him; he must reach beyond questions of utility to individuality, to the ideological functions of art.⁴

The intent in my work is to create something unique, personal, and beautiful. To those contemporaries who may find the latter term a bit trite I would add with Kandinsky, "Beauty can be measured only by the yardstick of internal . . . necessity. . . .That is beautiful which is produced by internal necessity."⁵ Certainly, one cannot force the issue. Artistic expressiveness grows as part of the development of the whole individual and each piece finished through struggle and personal commitment leads to new channels of expression.

⁴ Helen Giambruni, "Wendle Castle," Craft Horizons (September-October, 1968), p. 51.

⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), p. 75.

I see my metalwork as a growing, organic entity which has progressed from stage to stage in a "natural" sequence of development. As I have become interested in new ideas and objects, these have affected my work in a simple and direct way.

In art, as in life, I have always felt a preference for the organic forms of nature. Thus, the linear arabesque, the curving, rounded or irregular form is far more prevalent in my work than is the purely geometric. Initially, casting afforded the most facile way to produce these forms, since the modeling process involved in working with wax allows a greater fluidity of form than construction with sheet metal. In several pieces, including the "Seed Pod Pin" (pl. I), actual organic materials were incorporated into the wax model and burned out in the casting process. In other instances, I found the controlled oval format to be a good frame for containing vigorous, flowing textures such as those in the "Oriental Pin" (pl. II).

Many of the characteristics consistently found in my later work are already apparent in this relatively early piece (1964). Most importantly, it illustrates an essentially two-dimensional concept of space. Even when the piece itself is quite three-dimensional, as in a box (pl. V), the textures are essentially applied to the surface in a relief manner. These textures have, however, tended to become deeper and

more baroque in many of the later pieces (pl. IV). In addition, the "Oriental Pin" has the same asymmetrical composition and meandering line as much of the later work. It also signals my extensive use of brass and "organic looking" stones (baroque cuts, agates and Mexican opals), both of which impart a feeling of warmth and life to the metal piece.

I soon developed an appreciation for the possibilities afforded by combining casting and constructing techniques.⁶ In many pieces, juxtaposing of the polished surfaces of sheet metal with the textures of casting greatly enhanced the attributes of both. The "Wing Pin" (pl. III) is an example of cast elements combined with the highly polished, curved surface of forged sheet metal and the curved regularity of a bezel-set cabochon stone.

The lid of the large brass jewel box (pl. IV) is handled in much the same way as the "Wing Pin." The vigorous textures of the curved base and nob are accentuated by a moss agate and the lid itself is gently curved in a recessed

⁶My first jewelry instructor, Ronald Hickman, taught me a valuable lesson when he insisted that one should never cast what can be more effectively constructed from sheet metal. The casting technique is often used and abused to avoid learning a few basic metalsmithing techniques.

fashion to reinforce the curvilinear force of the textures. The cylindrical body of the box and the textured foot give it a ceramic-like character. In this piece, the polished body of the box is played off against heavy plant-like textures to produce a feeling of richness and strength. However, the earlier, smaller powder box (pl. V) is perhaps more successful due to the consistently fine quality of the cast motif and a better sense of proportion and containment within the overall form of the piece.

During the past year, my working method has gradually evolved, both in concept and construction, towards what might be called a "collage process." Here, ready-made forms, fragments of castings, bits of slag and stones are combined to produce the whole. This collage process allows me to escape much of the technical drudgery of casting and cleanup of major raising projects. The development of the idea is gradual and continues during the entire "making" process. The interest and excitement felt at the outset can thus be retained until the work is completed and the pieces often reflect the freedom and freshness this method affords.

The "Brain Pin" (pl. VI) is probably the best of the early pieces done in this manner. This work combines sterling and brass slag and wire with a slab agate, Mexican opal, crinoids, and a small seed pearl. The soft greys and whites are accented by pink and copper tones to form a startling

color effect and the forms are controlled yet delicate and evocative. In a sense, this piece represents the culmination in a progression of cast organic works produced prior to this year.

The brass piece with a beaded hatpin (pl. VII) was the first in a new series of works utilizing parts of antique or costume jewelry. The richness and variety of curvilinear forms in many of these pieces recalls something of "mod" fashions and psychedelic "hippie" dress. The hatpin piece depends for effect upon the beauty of hammered brass placed against the iridescent quality of the beading. There is a basic simplicity about the rounded forms and the use of spacial elements gives this piece an air of elegance and monumentality.

My use of this type of "ready-mades" has nothing to do with the grotesque or nostalgic image; rather, I find a gentle humor in some of the resulting combinations. The aim of these pins is, above all, to create works which are themselves the costume, not simply pleasing additions to a favorite cocktail dress. There is a decided renunciation of the use of materials for their historic preciousness (gold, gems), and a frank delight with the glitter of beading and glass stones and with the form possibilities of materials like plastic tubing, feathers, and parts of old jewelry. The large necklace-pendant (pl. VIII) is the most involved piece

so far completed in this series. The simplicity of the front section, with the sweeping curve at the shoulder level, pulls the eye to the back of this piece which extends to the waistline in a cascade of jeweled "bobbles." These pieces are flamboyant; they are meant to dominate the wearer, both in mood and appearance.

PART III

THE RELATIONSHIP OF PENCIL DRAWINGS TO MY METALWORK

In terms of concept and execution, my approach to drawing has definitely been affected by metalwork. Initially, drawing served as something of a release for me. When I was faced with the rigors of metalsmithing--the time and physical effort requisite for the realization of an idea, drawing would provide me with a nearly perfect antithesis: two-dimensional problems, spontaneity, immediacy of materials and directness of product.

Drawing is, above all, a highly personal and sensitive activity, and it has helped to free me in my metalworking from some of the pitfalls common to that area: preoccupation with technique, strict use of "accepted" precious materials, adherence to outmoded notions of function and practicality. My drawings were a major factor in my shift to a collage approach in metal. Perhaps because of them I have felt an increasing need for more immediacy and involvement during the execution of the metal piece.

My interest in the figure in drawing and my interest in exploring the figure are no doubt interrelated. Certainly the use of old photographs and the "discovery" of antique anatomical engravings have occurred and progressed simultaneously.

of the recent drawings (pls. IX, X, and XI) have made reference use of old family photographs. These "stills" show me a freedom seldom experienced when working directly on a posed model. The "Watch Fob Pin" and the cameo (pls. XII and XIII) both relate directly to the drawings. In a sense, they are an attempt to capture something of the feeling of the drawn or painted portrait in a piece of jewelry.

I strive to make each line in a drawing sensitive and alive. The importance of the line itself takes precedence over any "subject" which it may describe or define. As in jewelry, it is the curvilinear contour of human or plant-forms which most interests me.

It would be a great satisfaction if I felt I could still in a piece of metal the same feeling of warmth, life, intimacy my drawings seem to convey. My sensibilities seem better attuned to grasp the whole of the idea in drawing--to manipulate and make subtle adjustments while retaining the impact of the gestalt. In a metal piece the parts become too deliberate or "fixed" and make tedious the evolution of the idea. It is still difficult for me to retain a genuine flexibility when working with metal.

PART IV

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the visual artist, having to verbalize about a work is often a source of frustration. These written commentaries about my metalsmithing have been made more or less as an afterthought and as such, lack much of the spirit and poetic feeling of the work itself.

The visual impact of the work of art can never be captured through the medium of words nor can a photo-reproduction give a fair approximation of the art object. It is my hope, however, that this paper will not lead to any misconceptions about my work. The commentaries have been intentionally simple so that they would not mar or detract in any way the true magic and presence of the actual pieces, all of which are included in my graduate exhibition.

APPENDIX

Photo - Reproductions

PLATE I.

Seed Pod Pin December, 1964

$2\frac{1}{4}$ "h. by $2\frac{1}{4}$ "w.



PLATE II.

Oriental Pin Spring, 1965

2 5/8" h. by 2 1/2" w.



PLATE III.

Wing Pin Spring, 1965

 $2\frac{1}{2}$ "h. by $3\frac{1}{2}$ "w.



PLATE IV.

Jewel Box Fall, 1967

7 $\frac{1}{4}$ "h. by 6"dia.



PLATE V.

Powder Box Fall, 1966
(top and side views)

3"h. by $3\frac{1}{2}$ "dia.



PLATE VI.

Brain Pin Spring, 1968

2 $\frac{1}{4}$ "h. by 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ "w.



PLATE VII.

Pin with Beaded Hatpin Spring, 1968

6½" h. by 5¼" w.





PLATE VIII.

Necklace-Pendant Spring, 1969
(front and back views)

13"h. 10"w. by 8"dia.



PLATE IX.

Portrait with Papa, 1911 Summer, 1968

19"h. by 15½"w.



PLATE X.

Two Sisters Fall, 1968

19"h. by 15½"w.



PLATE XI.

Homer's Girl Summer, 1968

19½" h. by 19" w.



PLATE XII.

Watch Fob Pin Fall, 1968

4" h. by 3 3/4" w.



PLATE XIII.

Pin with Rose Cameo
Fall, 1968

2 3/8"h. by 1 1/2"w.

Gold plated Cameo Pin
Fall, 1968

1 3/4"h. by 1 5/8"w.



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... XXVIII,
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... Concerning the Spiritual ...
... via, Scholts, Inc., 1931.
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