NOW: Roberto Cavalli, 18th century/ 1960s-inspired ensemble, 2002–2003, blue denim with multicolor silk embroidery, printed silk *crêpe de chine*.

Sculptural Ornaments

Avant-garde jewelry advocate Helen Drutt shares her discoveries over the past 45 years in a comprehensive exhibition. **BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY**

One restless night in the late 1960s, Helen Drutt found herself at a crossroads. The connoisseur of studio craft, who already owned works by George Nakashima and Wharton Esherick, had just seen something she could not get out of her head. At a meeting of the Philadelphia Council for Professional Craftsmen held at his home, Stanley Lechtzin had shown her a piece of his avant-garde jewelry. "I'd never seen jewelry like that," Drutt says. "It wasn't a painting and it wasn't a sculpture but it had the same aesthetic. It didn't have any of the homogenized look of conventional jewelry. It wasn't just something to be worn on a dress or sweater. Something was really happening, ideas were pulsating in the work.

"I couldn't sleep the night after I saw the Lechtzin," she continues. "I couldn't stop thinking, 'How come I didn't know about this? How could this be happening in my city and I had no idea it was happening?"

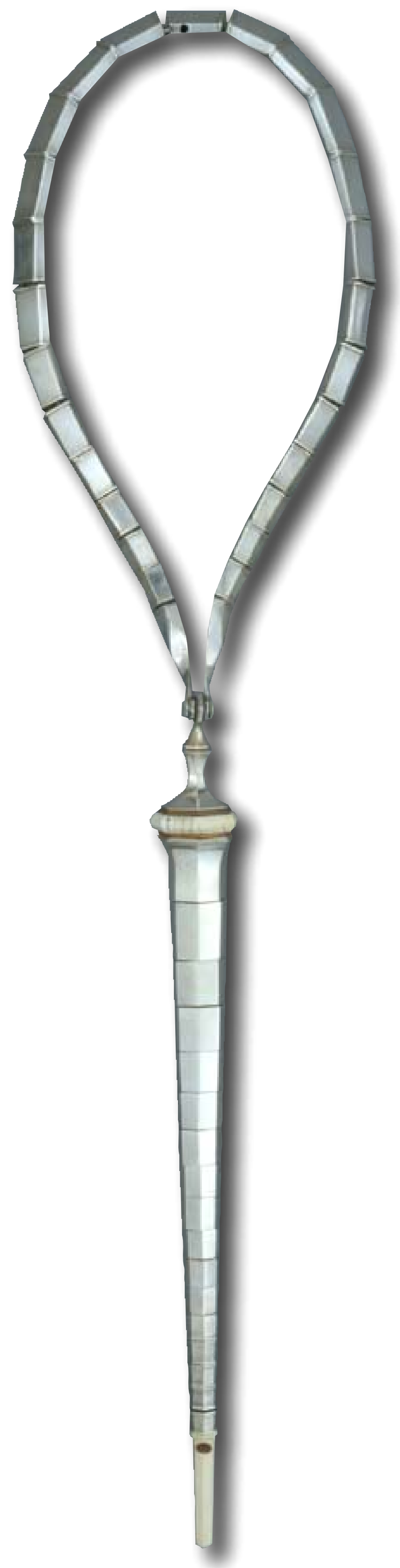
These questions led Drutt on a 45-year quest to discover and champion the best artists of experimental jewelry—a vocation that is being celebrated beginning this month in "Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Sept. 30–Jan. 21). The exhibition will show more than one-third of the 804 jewelry works in its permanent collection.

The Philadelphia resident is a legend in the field and has helped build many world-class collections, including Daphne Farago's jewelry collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Unlike Farago, however, who set out to chronicle the history of 20th-century studio jewelry in the United States, Drutt acquired the work of artists she knew, starting in the mid-1960s. "I was interested in that moment of the revolution, the moment in which social jewelry and studio jewelry took off into a different sensibility," Drutt says.

And nothing embodies that divergence better than Lechtzin. "You can't talk about the development of the studio jewelry movement in this country without talking about Stanley Lechtzin," says Cindi Strauss, the curator of "Ornament as Art." At the time Drutt met him, Lechtzin was establishing the jewelry program at Tyler School of Art in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, and was revolutionizing contemporary art jewelry with the use of electroforming (a form of electroplating using precious metals to get detailed, lightweight three-dimensional forms). "His own jewelry was extraordinary, both in terms of technology and his combinations of precious materials with mica or resin," says Strauss. "His program at Tyler was one of the most innovative and exciting in America."

Recognizing that European studio jewelers were well ahead of the Americans, Lechtzin traveled to lecture and teach. Tyler students—most notably Albert Paley, Eleanor Moty and Bruce Metcalf—inevitably went on to become leaders of the art jewelry movement and internationally known in their own right. And Drutt continued contact with the artists once they left Philadelphia. "Many collectors buy one piece from each artist," she says. "I had a tendency to go in-depth, if I could find the funds."

As a result, Drutt's exhibition bears witness to the evolution of ornament by artists such as Paley, whose works Drutt eventually sold at the eponymous Philadelphia gallery she founded in 1974.



THEN: Scalamandré Brown Gabriel Pillow Front, pattern P20355-015, early 19th century, silk.

Her collection contains five of Paley's pieces, starting with a double-fibula brooch from his MFA degree show and ending with a monumental (23") silver neckpiece made just before he abandoned jewelry for large-scale metal work. "We have two of Paley's fibulae in the collection," Strauss says. "Even those were not small. They are each 4 to 5 inches long and were meant to be worn in the center of your chest as breast ornaments."

And Drutt did not hesitate to wear works from her collection at every opportunity. "There's hardly a piece he made that I didn't wear," she says of Paley. Once, in 1976, at a Bicentennial dinner held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she caught fashion doyenne Diana Vreeland staring at her Paley brooch. "She could place what everyone else in the room was wearing, except for me!"

At first, wearing studio jewelry was simply a way to educate the public about the craft movement. "If I wanted to talk about the crafts at meetings with people like the director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I couldn't carry in a Nakashima table or a big ceramic pot, but I could wear a brooch that acted as a catalyst. It was an easy way to start the conversation."

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In the early 1970s Drutt's focus eventually branched out from Philadelphia artists to studio jewelers across the country, then Europe. She was an early supporter of the German artist Claus Bury, who, like Paley, began with jewelry and then found fame as a sculptor. His jewelry and drawings reveal intricate creations with multi-functional ornament. "If I'd been offered a choice between an Alexander Calder or a Claus Bury, I would have taken the Bury," Drutt says, who owns a dozen pieces by Bury, seven of which are in the exhibition. "He's not a household name, but I know that in the history of ideas in my field, his work was major."

By the 1970s, British artists redefined conceptual pendant with design: Wendy Ramshaw created an elegant brass ring stand (1977), which turns the jewelry itself (nine rings) into sculpture, and David Watkins designed an acrylic neckpiece (1974) that resembles a bicycle lock.

THEN: Scalamandré Blue Gabriel Pillow Front, pattern P20355-012, early 19th century, silk., 2004, silk and rayon.

Peter Chang, "Bracelet," 1991, acrylic, gold leaf, resin and pvc.

Claus Bury, "Ring," 1970, gold and Perspex acrylic. Bruce Metcalf, "Wood Neckpiece #7" (right), 1992, mixed media.

Artists, especially those in northern Europe, started pushing the limits of jewelry as body sculpture in the 1980s. Dutch jeweler Lam de Wolf draped the body with painted textiles while in England, Marjorie Schick favored wooden dowels. "These works forced the wearer and viewer to interact with the jewelry on a level that hadn't happened before," Strauss says.

Drutt expresses pleasure at having her collection catalogued and preserved. "I've done my generational thing. I've recorded the history of ideas in my lifetime. Now I'm helping someone else build a major collection," she says. She pulls out a red necklace constructed by Robert Bains from powder-coated wire and bicycle reflectors that she recently acquired in Australia. "Isn't this amazing?" she says. She admires the necklace with satisfaction, then smiles sheepishly and admits, "I just can't stop."

Cathleen McCarthy has written about jewelry and wearable art for Ornament, Country Living, Departures *and* The Washington Post. *In* Art & Antiques, *she has covered everything from ancient gold to contemporary design.*