

THE ART OF PERSONAL ADORNMENT

SUMMER 1998 \$5.75

ORNAMENT

Cornelia
Goldsmith



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A Distinctive Counterpoint

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Granulation is used most judiciously by Cornelia Goldsmith; its purpose serves to underscore and add depth to a piece's contoured surface. For heightened contrast, twenty-two karat gold granulation is applied to white gold or sterling silver—a particularly delicate task, as the applied heat must be at exactly the right temperature to fuse the granules of gold to the base metal. One miscalculation and the silver flows over the granules, ruining the piece. This can be especially devastating because Goldsmith's designs depend on a clean counterpoint between the granulated

gold highlights and a great deal of open, ungranulated space. One of her most popular pieces, a pair of striking domed earrings, is of sterling silver overlaid with a simple gold spiral of granulation, accented by button pearls. Here, the granulation conveys a jewel-like tone; less a matter of generalized surface treatment, the smallest mistake would blemish the earrings. "I've developed an approach that is more akin to fabric, like constructing a net," Goldsmith points out. "Lately, I don't use granulation in patterns, but more as a surrounding material or to suggest a shadow. Granulation is one of my strong techniques, so I use it, but the technique is really in the background. I'm trying to express the piece, not just the granulated surface."

Her designs have a spontaneous, organic quality that reflects her emotional connection to the work. Inspired by nature, the forms resemble shells, seeds and stones. Asymmetrical and animated, they seem as if Goldsmith has captured them in the act of being bent and tossed by the wind. "I have a love of detail and precision, although my pieces do not look so," she says. The word "balance" is frequently mentioned in discussions of her work; yet she is intrigued by contrast and strives to give equal weight to opposing elements of color, form and texture.

The "Cat's Eye" necklace of white gold, for example, is subtly heart-shaped, with a teardrop rhodolite at the point. The cat's eye motif in gold floats in the middle, slightly askew. At the center of this shape is a gleaming, stylized bird surrounded by rich granulation. A formal, upswept framework, suggesting the architecture of an Asian temple, attaches the free-form move-



ment of the heart to a strand of pearls. By combining recognizable and abstract shapes, contrasting colors of metal and the polished facets of cut stones against the warm, smooth pearls, Goldsmith plays the observer's eye across the surfaces and hints at complex layers of narrative within the design.

Her heavily-granulated eighteen karat rings are, indeed, like the "little stories" she describes. Each one is embellished with a minute scene: birds, moons, stars or "a cross for faith" are recurring symbols. "Even as a small child, I thought most gold rings were pretty boring and didn't have personal meaning. I customize my rings with the collector's own symbols and stones." Her "Wave" ring features a big blue-green tourmaline that reminds her of Neptune. Even its irregular, wave-like edge suggests the sea and its king. "It's like a crown for your finger," Goldsmith states. She covers bracelets with the same mystical decorations, delighting in having a larger canvas "for a longer story." Her "Bird" earrings express a whimsical side. "These are really about the shape rather than trying to represent an actual bird. I use rhodolites and champagne diamonds for the eyes. It's important that the eye sparkles; it symbolizes that one should be awake in life."

To an array of torches, cutters and pliers, Goldsmith adds the tools of intuition and faith. Even her name is a stroke of fortunate serendipity—she became a Goldsmith when she married ten years ago, before she imagined making a living in the actual trade. Since launching her own Sausalito, California, studio in 1991, she has eschewed the easier livelihood of making production jewelry in favor of developing her skills as a designer via a slow process of trial-and-error. She lit-

WAVE earrings of twenty-two and eighteen karat yellow gold, eighteen karat white gold, lanzanite and diamonds; fabricated, die-formed, twenty-two karat granulation, 2.25 centimeters high, 1997. Photographs: George Post, except where noted. CORNELIA GOLDSMITH. Photograph: Edward Goldsmith. Opposite: CAT'S EYE necklace of twenty-two, twenty and eighteen karat gold, rhodolite, tourmaline, diamonds and fresh water cultured pearls; fabricated, die-formed, twenty-two karat granulation on oxidized sterling silver, 5.1 centimeters high, 1997. Retail prices for earrings start at four hundred dollars; silver pieces range up to fifteen hundred dollars and gold pieces from eight hundred to four thousand dollars.





DISC necklace of twenty-two, twenty and eighteen karat gold, tourmaline; twenty-two karat handmade cable, fabricated, die-formed, twenty-two karat granulation, 4.4 centimeters high, 1996.

erally feels her way along, and she would not want it any other way. "It's rare for me to sit down and design a piece and be happy with it," she explains. "Often I know the piece doesn't look right; it has to move me." There is little designing beforehand; she prefers to develop ideas on the piece itself. "This is about as detailed as I get," she says, opening her sketchbook to a collection of loose swirls and markings—the coalescence of the "Dancers" series in her imagination. "This is the design that came out," she says, indicating a curling, three-pointed shape. "It's not exactly a picture of a dancer but more about movement. When I made this shape, I heard music in my head and knew the movement was right."

As she pages through the book, sunlight washes over the jeweler's bench in her airy studio. Nearby, a fountain

sends water cascading gently over a massive chunk of marble. The hushed environment echoes the sensibilities of an artist who spends time listening to the whispers of inner impulse. "I take a long time to work out my ideas; that is why I do not make too much. Sometimes I finish a piece and don't like it. When I'm working very closely, I don't see when something is out of balance; afterwards, I see it as a whole piece and might take it apart, or decide that I don't want to sell it. This is difficult when it's necessary to make a living."

Looking back, the path to her profession seems chosen early. "I always wanted my own jewelry, but could never find what I liked," she says, remembering her childhood in Kiel, Germany. "When I was fourteen, my first earrings had to be hammered, not round and smooth. I was very particular." At nineteen, she yearned to go to trade school. Before she could enroll, the German system required a sponsor for her apprenticeship. "But no one would hire me," she says. "I had no connections, and I couldn't just go to school; so instead I went to India with my boyfriend." When the boyfriend returned home, she stayed, working in an ashram and devoting herself to spiritual teachings; for a long time, Goldsmith was content. "I had been raised as a Christian but felt we did not live that religion," she says. "It was beautiful to go to the eastern side and do real meditation."

By the late 1980s she was restless and needed to make a living but refused to settle for conventional work. She traveled to the United States for several years of self-imposed exploration in jewelry techniques, first at Glassell School of Art in Houston, Texas, then to Massachusetts for courses in design, lost wax casting, metal sculpture and enameling at the DeCordova School of Art, Massachusetts College of Art and the North Bennet Street School. She became fascinated with the notion of adornment as part of ritual, and hoped to design work that achieved "an aesthetic balance between artistic creativity, spirituality and craftsmanship." Influenced by the work of Cecelia Bauer, whom she met at North Bennet, she later spent a year studying granulation techniques at Bauer's New York City studio. "Her work was timeless," Goldsmith remembers, "like something made two thousand years ago. I decided that what I made couldn't just be pretty, but had to have meaning."

She searches for the earliest trial pieces, which currently reside on her desk, holding them in her palm. They are so distant from the style she has refined over the years. Laughing, Goldsmith says, "They're clunky copper enamel but also have feeling; you can see how I tried so hard, and how far I've come. That was ten years ago. My husband saw all the first pieces; at the time, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, I was



GUARDIAN brooch of twenty-two, twenty, eighteen and fourteen karat gold, sterling silver, tourmaline, rhodolite and diamonds; fabricated, die-formed, twenty-two karat granulation on oxidized sterling silver, 4.6 centimeters high, 1997.

searching; but he said: 'I know you're going to make it.' She married the man named Goldsmith, considering it a tiny prophecy.

In 1994, she worked as an assistant to goldsmith Kent Raible. "Kent gave me the basics necessary to pull my business together," she says. Her attention to detail and the fact that she handcrafts all the components and tubing attest to her tenure there. She also realized she was not cut out for production. "I'm too much of a designer to meet the demands of the bench," she explains. "I'd see all the pieces lined up for finishing that day and my hair would stand up; I need to keep excited about the work."

Opening her own studio has been risky. Each piece must be distinctive, and her refusal to show anything that is not to her exacting standards means she worries about maintaining a slim profit margin; but the trade-off, she insists, is worthwhile. "I sell in just a few retail stores and don't consign. I don't have enough inventory, and it's a limited line. People buy one piece, then they come back and don't find what they want because I don't have a lot of one design. The work is so specific and personal that it doesn't sell in every gallery, or even at every show. I went to one show and knew right away by looking at the other booths that I wouldn't sell; I was out of place, and had nightmares about it. My work isn't for everyone. But

I don't want to get stuck with old designs; otherwise where's the excitement and creativity?"

She accepts commissions, especially enjoying the challenge of interpreting a client's vision while retaining her own. A stylized "Tree of Life" pendant, a departure for Goldsmith, came out of one such project. "A woman provided me with pink heart sapphires for a commission. I wouldn't have thought to use hearts myself, but I began to think about them as symbols of the preciousness of life. This tree represents the dreams we have in life. It is granulated along the branches, with sapphires and some diamonds, like fruit."

Goldsmith is filled with many more ideas. A new clasp for a string of pearls has gold granulation on silver on one side, silver granulation on gold on the other. It is excruciating to make, because errant silver can so quickly flow over the surface. Goldsmith then has to scrap the work and start over, "because I have to have it right." Fortunately, an easy rule of thumb will keep her, she hopes, in balance: "I have decided that I will add only new pieces that I want to wear. If I do what I think other people like, it's always off. My heart and feelings come out in the pieces I favor."

Chiori Santiago, a freelance writer from Berkeley, California, writes frequently on the arts.