

CRAFT at a



The new world of handcrafted jewelry

CROSS



Craft, says the dictionary, is “a trade or occupation requiring manual skill.” For centuries this has meant that artisans actually had their hands on what they were crafting, leaving figurative, if not literal fingerprints, on the work they made. This kind of personal “touch,” or signature if you will, has led to the elevation of the finely crafted “handmade object.” But if the hand no longer handles the object during its production, is the object handmade? And if industrial materials are used, requiring industrial equipment, is it craft? These are intriguing questions at a time when some craft/artist/studio jewelers design and produce their work with computer-aided design (CAD) and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) programs, and other artists outsource projects because they work with industrial materials — stainless steel, industrial paints, rubber, plastics — that require specialized equipment.

Above: Kari Woo's Amber Bar Ring. Sterling silver, amber. 1" x 1" x ¾".
Top: Circle Brooch #1 by Karen Krieger. Sterling silver, etched and patinated sterling silver pattern sheet, and 14K gold details. 2" diameter.



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BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON



Above: *Apology Brooch*, from The Shorthand Series by Rebecca Strzelec. Fused deposition modeled, ABS plastic and medical adhesive. 5.6" x 4.5" x 2".
Top: Karen Krieger's *Ceremonial Spoons*, fabricated from sterling silver with etched sterling pattern sheet inlay, assorted stones, 6"- 8.5" high.

Bucci, who teaches at Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, reminds us that using CAD isn't magic. Just as with traditional handcraft, "it's about trial and error and seeing what works and doesn't work. Until you really delve into it, and begin to work and make mistakes, you won't know what is feasible and not feasible. This isn't magical. You don't touch the button and out comes the jewelry or vessel. This is the result of thousands of hours of concentration of commitment."

Strzelec hopes her students will use CAD to "start a new language, inform the discipline in another way." And she expects them to really push the technology, rethinking the way jewelry is traditionally designed. For example, if the piece includes hinges, she pushes them to think beyond traditional hinges. "They're using an ABS plastic that is hard and forgiving. If you design it thin enough, it will flex and have memory. It will perform as a hinge. The form is not interrupted and the hinge becomes integral to the piece. It's not something added on."

DIGITAL OR HANDMADE?

If the indications that these jewelers give us are correct, we may be looking at a time when a student chooses his or her school and future by choosing which technology they want to use: traditional metalworking or CAD. To some extent, it seems, jewelry school programs seem to be choosing their turf even now.

Woo, who teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design, says the department "encourages experimentation with alternative materials," but while students are exposed to CAD and are welcome to use it, it isn't part of the jewelry curriculum. "I would say that the handwork is still the priority in terms of the making process," she says.

"The possibilities are endless sitting at the bench fabricating with tools," says Tavern. "But the same can be said about CAD/CAM. It's the future. It's inevitable that it's going to be big in the field." She doesn't think jewelry programs will get away from traditional techniques any time soon. "The people teaching those programs are still grounded in the traditional skills."

But Strzelec says she believes that in as little as five to eight years, students may be opting to follow a purely CAD path. "They'll be the first generation that will have no experi-

ence touching the material. It scares me a little," she says. (And she didn't just take a ride on the *Enterprise* with Bucci.) "I feel like I'm one of the last generation that will have both [metalworking and CAD experience]. I still appreciate the history [of jewelry making]."

Bucci sees the change coming as well. "I can't fill a metal-smithing class but I can fill a CAD class," he says simply.

Yet even Strzelec, who uses CAD, rapid prototyping, plastics and high-tech medical adhesives in her work, is not married to modern technology. If CAD doesn't work for the concepts and designs she has in mind, says Strzelec, she will use whatever she needs to use.

"I'm not too much of a purist. I don't believe in that as an artist." She sighs and repeats the "mashed potato analogy," for which she has been quoted way too often. "If I had to make them out of mashed potato to make them work correctly, that's what I'd do."

And speaking of mashed potatoes, it's a good time to take a look at the alternative materials artists are using. What is the perception of a consumer when looking at a piece of jewelry made via a CAD program and produced in . . . plastic? Or one made of stainless steel and industrial paint? How do these compare to work that is made with silver or gold or both?

Tavern's work, made in sterling, often incorporates plastic disks. "I like how modern plastic is. My work is modern and minimal. The plastic complements it more than a natural material, like wood." Tavern finds little resistance from customers to the material. Although her audience is primarily women in their 20s and 30s, she says that older women have purchased the work as well. "I think because it's simple, it's more accessible to people visually," says Tavern.

Strzelec's work often depends solely on plastics. "It's extremely light. I can build it hollow, and do things you can't do in metal, yet still [have the piece] be durable and still have an enormous amount of detail." And of course the color is not dependent on applying a surface treatment such as a patina. But, Strzelec admits, "at the end of the day, you're holding a piece of plastic. That's very different from holding an ounce of gold. How do you convince people that the object, the concept and form, are worth its weight in [whatever

you choose]? How can the form language you use and the concepts in the piece get you past the fact that this is a material that is made to throw away? How do we make it jewelry-worthy? Look at the history of what's been done with nontraditional materials, and raising [a piece of jewelry] until it's worthy to sit on the same shelf with gold and jewel-encrusted objects." Being a fan of René Lalique's Art Nouveau jewelry, the great French designer immediately leaps to my mind. People felt the same way about the cow horn he picked up at a local slaughterhouse before he turned it into jewelry of surpassing beauty.

"Your concept [is] . . . the most valuable thing," says Bucci, "not the materials. If you're only selling material things you should find another job somewhere. I think it's all about the idea. People kill each other over concepts."

It doesn't matter if a piece of jewelry has been designed — and produced —



Kristin Mitsu Shiga's *When There is Nothing Left to Burn (You Have to Set Yourself on Fire)* neckpiece. Sterling, Strike Anywhere matches. Pendant measures 3" L x 2 1/4" W x 1/2" D. Photo by Dan Kvitka.