



Open Close Front Back: Exploring Contemporary Art Jewelry Design

March 1–September 16, 2023

Unless faced with something particularly unusual or difficult to maneuver, many people likely put on or take off a piece of jewelry without thinking about the mechanics of its design. Contemporary art jewelers—those constructing jewelry by hand as they undertake conceptual explorations—necessarily consider composition, materials, closures, and the relationship between the object and the wearer.

This exhibition, drawn entirely from RAM's growing collection, celebrates contemporary jewelry while emphasizing the consideration of it from new angles—sometimes literally. For example, some brooches are displayed in a way that focuses attention on the back rather than the front. While the back may be invisible when a piece is worn, an artist might still take advantage of the fact that it is the side that the wearer interacts with—continuing elements from the front, adding an inscription, or, at a minimum, thoughtfully incorporating it into the overall composition.

Similarly, jewelers carefully consider how a neckpiece opens and closes—is it an element they want to draw attention to, something they want to hide, or something they avoid altogether through alternative design choices? All of these factors impact the overall visual effect of the work as well as its wearability.

Biographies and statements from select featured artists

When I taught, we used to study what can be done with one straight line. I can spend years with a circle. If you have the ideas and the materials, the results are limitless.

Betty Cooke (b. 1924–) is known nationally for creating streamlined jewelry designs using circles and lines. Cooke earned a BFA at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore. Beginning in 1955 she has been a Partner of Cooke and Steinmetz Designers and Consultants. She has also had her own business with her husband, William Steinmetz, entitled The Store, LTD., in Baltimore, Maryland, since 1965. Cooke has won numerous awards and honors including the Distinguished Women's Award of the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland in 2007. In 1995, she was awarded a retrospective exhibition of her work which coincided with the establishment of the Betty Cook 1946 Scholarship Endowment at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore. In 1990, Cooke was elected as a fellow to the American Craft Council. Her work is included in numerous private and public collections including RAM; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Read: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-betty-cooke-11731>

Watch: <https://youtu.be/FLp2M-pss9c>

Canadian artist **Dan Cormier** (b. 1954–) has been working with polymer since 1992. Cormier first discovered FIMO®—a specific brand of the material—following his formal studies in illustration and interior design. After falling in love with it, Cormier decided to pursue a career emphasizing making work with polymer. He began by selling his jewelry from a street vendor’s cart in his hometown of Montreal, Canada. Since then, Cormier has earned a reputation as one of polymer’s most innovative artists. He has pioneered several different techniques that continually push the limits of the material’s structural possibilities. Besides creating polymer works, Cormier teams up with his partner, Tracy Holmes, to host and teach workshops. RAM was given multiple works by Cormier as part of the Polymer Archive Project—a gift that kick-started RAM’s emphasis on collecting the material.

Explore: <https://www.dancormier.ca/>

When she creates her jewelry, **Jee Hye Kwon** (b. 1976–), draws her inspiration from organic forms in the natural world and in architecture. Kwon enjoys representing the small details of buildings, such as reinforcing rods and the wooden beams that create the ‘skeleton’ of the house. She exemplifies these elements through multiple gauges of wire and sheets of metal. Kwon studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, earning both an AAS and a BFA. Aside from RAM, her work is included in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California and the Kamm Teapot Foundation in North Carolina.

Read: <https://www.jeehyekwon.com/>

Known for his metalsmithing expertise and technical skill, jeweler **Harold O’Connor** (b. 1941–) was internationally educated—first at the University of New Mexico, then at the Instituto Allende in Mexico, and, eventually, at the National Arts and Crafts School in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has also studied in Finland, Germany, and Austria. Widely “considered one the great teachers of his generation,” O’Connor is the author of *The Jewelers Bench Reference* and has conducted over 200 workshops around the world. O’Connor began making work in the 1970s with modern processes like photo-etching, often with resin, but has grown to favor working with natural materials “like wood, bone, metals, and some amber,” to emphasize an organic, topographic aesthetic. O’Connor is an archive artist at RAM represented currently with 21 works—primarily brooches but also including earrings, rings, and a pendant.

Art, like life, is a challenge. It challenges all our resources, mentally and physically. It can’t be predictably created from a linear didactic formula. It eludes methodology, technology, or ritual. It is, like life, more about being human, being vulnerable, being imperfect, and about things unexplainable. It is not a science. Art is about surprise, about the unexpected, about letting go and risking. It is about taking steps towards places where they may not be any footholds, and falling, and failing.

J. Fred Woell’s (b. 1934–d. 2015) work often combines themes of consumerism and violence to create humorous assemblages. Woell pioneered the concept of using found objects in jewelry. Feeling strongly that gold should not determine a piece’s value, he instead created “anti-jewelry.” Woell earned his BFA from the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; an MFA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; and a second MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield, Michigan. After graduating, Woell taught metals classes for elementary and high school students, creating his own jewelry in his spare time. Later, he moved to Deer Isle, Maine, and taught at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts intermittently until he retired in 2001. He also taught metals courses at Boston University from 1976–1987 and at the State University of New York at New Paltz from 1989–1993. Throughout his career, Woell has earned honors such as three National Endowment for the Arts grants. He was inducted into the American Craft Council's College of Fellows in 1995 and earned the Society of Arts and Crafts' Artist Award in 2004. In addition to RAM, Woell's art is in the permanent collections of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Honolulu Museum of Art Spalding House; and the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. Patricia Wheeler—Woell's wife—stated that he was still working in his studio until a couple days before his passing.

Read: <https://www.metalmuseum.org/post/2018/04/19/inside-the-collection-j-fred-woell>
<https://artjewelryforum.org/articles/in-memory-of-j-fred-woell/>

Nancy Worden's (b. 1954–d. 2021) love of creating jewelry began when she was young. Worden took her first jewelry class at Central Washington University in Ellensburg when she was still in high school. She went on to earn a BFA at Central Washington University and later earned a MFA at the University of Georgia. By the 1990s, Worden had developed a reputation for a style that was uniquely her own, merging both personal and political themes. In addition, she used found materials—some would say somewhat unusual ones such as hair curlers and eyeglass lenses—for their formal and metaphorical associations. Throughout her career, Worden was continually involved in metals art education. She taught casting, mold making, and narrative jewelry classes at places such as Pratt Fine Arts Center, Seattle, Washington; Central Washington University, Ellensburg; Penland School of Craft, North Carolina; and in international venues. Today, her work can be found in the collections of places such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts; the State Heritage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia; and the Seattle Arts Museum, Washington. With six new pieces for the collection, RAM now has seven works by Worden in the holdings.

Watch: <https://youtu.be/S6o1jmtg1vo>

Artists of Color at RAM

RAM is committed to supporting diverse voices—whether that diversity reflects race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, social standing, or world perspective. In this moment in time, it is critical that spotlights are placed on voices that have been historically underrepresented, and at RAM that begins with women and artists of color. Artists of color are identified in this context as non-white and non-European in heritage. This simplification—which is arguably a flawed starting point—does not account for the nuances and variations of society. It is a beginning—a way to direct those who want to educate themselves about what is possible when new perspectives are discovered. Modifications to this approach are expected as RAM learns and grows. Further, as an educational institution rooted in the humanities and using art as a catalyst, RAM wants to encourage inquiry and exploration about the world in which we live. RAM hopes spotlighting artists of color spurs further engagement with these artists and their ideas.

The following is a list of artists of color whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Jee Hye Kwon, Yuka Saito, and Yukihiro Shibata

Women Artists at RAM

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women. This percentage—which is consistently increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum’s holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist.

The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Flora Book, Jessica Calderwood, Sharon Church, Betty Cooke, Kathleen Dustin, Anne Finlay, Arline Fisch, Lisa Gralnick, Judith Hoyt, Esther Knobel, Jee Hye Kwon, Eleanor Moty, Ivy Ross, Yuka Saito, Mary Ann Scherr, Linda Threadgill, Brigitta Turba, Pier Voukos, Silvia Walz, and Nancy Worden