

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston;
Helen Williams Drutt Collection
Building a Collection: A Passionate Journey

Helen Williams Drutt English



A.

"An awareness of time is a profoundly individual experience. That in the course of his life every person sooner or later finds himself in the position of Robinson Crusoe, carving notches and... crossing them out... and these notches are a profoundly solitary activity isolating the individual and forcing him toward an understanding... of the autonomy of his existence in the world," as Joseph Brodsky, the Russian poet once wrote. One of my notches has carved a segment in the history of modern and contemporary crafts through the formation of a collection. At what point in one's life does the notion occur of placing privately owned objects into a permanent place in the public forum?

If, indeed, the desire to "hold" history through the acquisition of works is primary, then eventually it is necessary for those objects to be secured in an institution that will regard them with the highest artistic integrity. It is important to make certain that forty years of commitment to the field will not be dispersed at auction. It is also important that my lifework not become a responsibility for my children; it constituted my passion, not theirs. Responding to the interest communicated by Peter C. Marzio, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, (MFAH), in 2002, made it possible for me to secure a repository that would allow the works to enter into a comprehensive, permanent museum collection, and, in so doing, be incorporated into a diversity of exhibitions. This was the ultimate dream for one whose work was challenged by dissolving the boundaries between the fine and applied arts. In addition, the responsibility to each artist who supported my passion for the field was fulfilled by the MFAH in its desire to document and preserve the works in a scholarly fashion, as well as ensuring their legacy.

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The resurgence of the modern craft movement after World War II signaled great changes in the field of contemporary jewelry. Although exhibitions exploring new movements in the fine arts were part of the early 1960s, information heralding avant-garde concepts—and approaches diametrically opposed to the prevalent ideas of ornamentation—were rarely part of this public forum. Two major exhibitions occurred in Europe: In 1961, the "International Exhibition of Modern Jewelry: 1890-1961" was held in London, and three years later, "Internationale Ausstellung: Schmuck" was held in Darmstadt, Germany. These exhibitions proved to be the catalysts for collections in Europe to develop. Throughout the world, however, works still awaited discovery and artists awaited recognition.

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In 1964, I was the proud owner of a gold-plated circle pin, acquired around 1948, and my grandmother's cameo brooch, laced in platinum and diamonds, which was given to her by my father in 1918. It was inconceivable to me that four decades later, I would be surrounded by the treasures of my time. My interest in decorative embellishments for the body lay dormant until I was thirty-five. A third acquisition in 1955, was a replica of Queen Shubad's gold-leaf necklace. I wore it with pride! A decade later, I discovered that the prototype had been made by Olaf Skoogfors for the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

In 1965, during a visit to Stanley Lechtzin's studio, a brooch that was near completion caught my eye. The electroformed object was an abstract form that incorporated the aesthetic qualities of painting and sculpture, and it stirred me passionately. At the same time, Olaf Skoogfors and I were engaging in



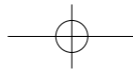
B.

lengthy and stimulating conversations about nature, music, industrialism, socialism, and constructivism, evoked by his pins and pendants. Both Skoogfors and Lechtzin lived and taught in Philadelphia. Initially, one reason for owning the work was to promote my newly born interest in the craft movement. It was logical that no one could carry a vessel or chair into a meeting, yet wearing a brooch was no different from being a living billboard. Jewelry acted as a catalyst for questions and queries from museum directors, curators, acquaintances, students, even strangers. A golden triangle was formed—artist, object, observer—bound together by pioneering galleries, visionary institutions, artists, and patrons. And the memories of that time are numerous. I remember delivering an impromptu lecture to a charwoman in a train station as she tried to grasp the lyrical complexities of an Albert Paley brooch. Another time, I was an unannounced guest lecturer on a flight from Philadelphia to Detroit because I was wearing an electroformed torque by Lechtzin. The recognition of their works stimulated continuous debate and inquiry. It was important for the works to have a walking educator.

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A.
Gijs Bakker
Botticelli Project Neckpiece, 1990
1990
PVC, print, gilded brass, 18k gold
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston;
Helen Williams Drutt Collection
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

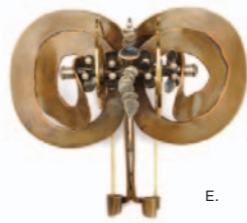
B.
Beyond Ornament: Selections from
the Helen Williams Drutt Collection
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
August 16, 2003 through July 5, 2004
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock



C.



D.



E.

C.
Bernhard Schobinger
Scherben vom Moritzplatz
Berlin Necklace, 1983-1984
antique crystal beads, splinters of
television bulbs, German Coca-
Cola bottle, silver, steel wire
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams Drutt
Collection, gift of Gail and Louis
K. Adler in honor of Faye Sarofim
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

D.
Stanley Lechtzin
Torque 22-D Neckpiece, 1971
sterling silver, polyester resin
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams
Drutt Collection
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

E.
Albert Paley
Double Fibula Brooch, 1968
gold, silver, bronze, pearls, moon-
stone, Madagascar labradorite
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams Drutt
Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs.
John W. Mecom, Jr., by exchange
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

F.
Peter Chang
Bracelet, 1991
acrylic, gold leaf, resin, PVS
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams
Drutt Collection
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

G.
Tone Vigeland
Neckpiece, 1981
steel, silver, 14k and 18k gold
12.5 x 12.5
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams Drutt
Collection, gift of the Susan
Vaughan Foundation
photo: Hans-Jorgen Abel

The founding of the Philadelphia Council of Professional Craftsmen (PCPC), in 1967, and the development of the first syllabus for a modern craft history course, in 1973, at the Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) were important factors that led to the establishment of the Helen Drutt Gallery, in Philadelphia, in 1973-74. These events placed me in contact with artists and significant works that until then had evoked little public response. During this time, panels, lectures, and exhibitions were organized, including the first David Watkins—Wendy Ramshaw show to be held in America, in Philadelphia (1973). With continuing independent research, these activities dominated my existence and ignited the acquisition spark. I was encouraged to consider acquisitions as essential to the operating budget of the gallery as the utilities and services necessary to sustain it.

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In the beginning, the formation of the Helen Williams Drutt (HWD) collection was not intentional, nor was it a primary concern. Objects were disappearing from exhibitions held at universities, colleges, and nonprofit institutions, and were not being documented properly. Museums were not seriously collecting jewelry, and there was no forum for private collectors. The lack of support made me realize that collecting to “hold” history was becoming essential. My instinct for the recognition of major works was strong.

Today, the MFAH: HWD collection reflects the activities that were central to my life in Philadelphia and to the travel that the mounting interest in the craft movement ultimately necessitated. Some of the first acquisitions were Stanley Lechtzin, Bruce Metcalf, Eleanor Moty, Albert Paley, the Pencil Brothers (Ken Cory and Les LePere), Olaf Skoogfors, and Fred Woell. When Claus Bury came to this country to lecture in the fall of 1973, he was my house-guest, which resulted in another acquisition for the collection. My knowledge of his work initially came through his documentation in the catalogue *Gold + Silber, Schmuck + Gerät: Von Albrecht Dürer bis zur Gegenwart*, which accompanied the exhibition in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1971. This publication was a seminal force in my introduction to European work.

Works by avant-garde European artists, removed from the traditional concept of jewelry, compelled me to make purchases from abroad—in particular, a Gerd Rothman bracelet, in 1973, from London’s Electrum Gallery. My relationship with the late Emmy van Leersum and Gijs Bakker began during their American lecture tour in 1974; as a result, I began to visit the Netherlands. As the friendship grew, it led to a deeper understanding of their work as well as a commitment on my part to preserve their, and many other international artists’ history in an American collection.

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In 1980, the World Crafts Council meeting in Vienna, created a dynamic forum for international crafts, heralded by “Schmuck International.” It was there that I first met its organizer Peter Skubic, as well as Bruno Martinazzi, Fritz Maierhofer, and Inge Asenbaum, who was the founder-director of Galerie Au Graben and a major collector. The many encounters with Martinazzi in the decade that followed eventually led to the introduction of his work to the American audience. Chance meetings with other artists provided an introduction to a range of previously unknown individuals and works. One of the most rewarding was with Breon O’Casey, at the Irish Historical Society, New York, in the fall of 1981.

Serendipity and sheer pursuit on my part played an important role in the acquisition of work. Peter Chang, for instance, entered my life quite accidentally; we met in the Frankfurt train station en route to “Ornamenta I,” at the Schmuckmuseum, in Pforzheim, Germany. It was there that I also bonded with Manfred Bischoff and developed a deeper friendship with Georg Dobler. During that decade, invitations to lecture and perform research brought me to Israel in 1983 and to Australia in 1992, broadening the scope of the collection as well as the exhibition schedule in the gallery. As the collection traveled throughout Europe and the United States, opportunities to incorporate works by artists not represented by the gallery presented themselves. The late 1990s saw renewed interest in America’s Northwest. In addition to the works of Merrily Tompkins and the Pencil Brothers, the holdings were increased to include Ron Ho, Kiff Slemmons, Ramona Solberg, Don Tompkins, and Nancy Worden.

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The notion that a collection existed did not occur until I was invited by Paul Smith to participate in an exhibition entitled “The Collector,” at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York (now Museum of Arts and Design), in 1974. In 1984, however, the HWD collection formally began its exhibition schedule with an invitation from the Montreal Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and continued to tour Europe and the United States through 1995. After it entered the permanent collection of the MFAH in 2002, selections were exhibited in “Beyond Ornament,” 2003-4. A comprehensive exhibition of the collection, “Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s Helen Williams Drutt Collection,” will be organized by Cindi Strauss, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts and Design at the MFAH, and shown in February 2007, accompanied by a definitive catalogue. This journey has been augmented by lecturing, visiting studios, conducting oral histories, and organizing exhibitions, as well as attending events that always expand the dialogue.

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Traditionally, it is the role of the art historian and critic to recognize and preserve the work of their age, but the independent observer, free from politics and board restrictions, also affords the artist freedom from oblivion. Our museums, therefore, are filled with objects from collectors whose spirit of adventure and passion has documented the taste of their time and held the reins of history.

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Luis Buñuel, in his autobiography, talks about memory—that life without memory is no life at all, that the hidden treasures we have buried in our mind are waiting to be recalled. Possessing the physical pieces reinforces that transition from our memory into language and into history. It’s like Hemingway’s initial impressions of Paris: “The images stay with you your entire life, like a movable feast.” For us, it is a visual feast that forms one segment of the international history of jewelry. Other collections may embrace a different selection of artists and works, also central to the field, that reflect the activities of their collectors and the artists connected with them. Different cities, different artists, and different stimuli—they all form another chapter in the chronicles of twentieth and twenty-first century art.



F.



G.



H.
William P. Daley
Manhattan Canyon Wall, 1971
stoneware
73 x 112 x 14
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Gift of Marlin
Miller Jr. and Helen Williams
Drutt English
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

I.
Robin Kranitzky and
Kim Overstreet
Starmaker Brooch #1626, 1993
nickel silver, acrylic, brass, paper,
egg shell, postcard fragments,
found objects, Mylar, balsa
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams
Drutt Collection
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

J.
Manfred Bischoff
René Descartes Ring, 1971
mirrored glass, coral, gold,
copper alloy
73 x 112 x 14
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams
Drutt Collection
photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

K.
Bruno Martinazzi
Aquila Brooch, 1990
20k gold, marble; fabricated,
unique
1.25 x 1.25 x .5
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston; Helen Williams
Drutt Collection
photo: Jack Ramsdale



The MFAH: HWD collection documents my experiences and relationships of the past forty years. It is not meant to be an inclusive history. The premise for the acquisition of a work was based on a dialogue with the artist. Rarely did objects enter the collection from people with whom there was no contact. More than six hundred fifty works of art were drawn from seventeen countries within five continents. The collection includes pieces by established artists and by artists little known at the time of acquisition who have since achieved international renown. Some have moved into other fields of contemporary art, industrial design, and architecture, and some died prematurely from illness—Toni Goessler-Snyder, Tony Papp, and Olaf Skoogfors. Their history is bound in the objects. Among the internationally recognized artists are Gijs Bakker, Claus Bury, Peter Chang, Georg Dobler, Yasuki Hiramatsu, Hermann Jünger, Stanley Lechtzin, Bruno Martinazzi, Breon O'Casey, Albert Paley, Wendy Ramshaw, Gerd Rothmann, Emmy van Leersum, Tone Vigeland, and David Watkins.

How do people come together? How does the international dialogue begin to expand? Among the important events that occurred in 1970 were the World Crafts Council meeting, in Dublin, and the first meeting of the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), in St. Paul, Minnesota. Thirty-five years later, I realize how important those meetings were. Contact among the patrons, artists, and museum professionals gave rise to a historical exchange of information—and the birth of collections. Today, some of the professional events that continue to expand the dialogue are the SNAG conferences in the United States, Schmuck in Munich, and art fairs such as SOFA NEW YORK, SOFA CHICAGO, and Collect in London.

Seeing and discovering transforms the act of acquisition into the greater notion of caretaking and securing the history for the artist. This concept defines the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Helen Williams Drutt Collection and reinforces its journey from the private sector into the public domain. Although its residence and ownership have changed, the desire to continue expanding the collection has not diminished. In recent months, great consideration has been given to increasing its historical base as well as to fulfilling my mandate from the museum to search for collateral material and consult with the department of Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts and Design.

The MFAH has made a major commitment to our field. In so doing, it has lent credibility and integrity to works that previously struggled for recognition. Their legacy has been secured, and my work has been confirmed by a major institution. It's been a great journey!

Helen W. Drutt English has been a resource to scholars and institutions in the field of Modern and Contemporary Crafts for over thirty-five years. Founder/Director of the Helen Drutt: Philadelphia (1973/4 – 2002) she has also organized seminal exhibitions which include *Poetics of Clay: An International Perspective* (2001), and *Brooching it Diplomatically: a Tribute to Madeleine K. Albright* (1998), both traveled internationally. Co-author with Peter Dorner of *Jewelry of Our Time*, she has contributed essays to numerous publications.

Portions of this essay are excerpted from the introduction to *Jewelry of Our Time*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1995.

Exhibitions of the Helen Williams Drutt Collection, listed under a short form of the titles given by the exhibiting bodies:
A Movable Feast 1964-1994, Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Ostend, 1995; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1994/1995
Schmuck Unserer Zeit 1964-1994, Museum Bellerive, Zurich, 1994

Contemporary Jewelry 1964-1993: Selected Works, HWD Collection, The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AK, 1993
Korun Kieli (The Language of Jewelry) 1964-1992, Röhsska Konstslöjdmuseet, Gothenburg, 1992/93; Taideteollisuusmuseo, Helsinki, 1992

Modern Jewelry 1964-1984, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA, 1986/1987; Cleveland Institute of Art, OH, 1986; Honolulu Academy of Arts, HI, 1986; Montreal Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1984/1985

Published in conjunction with the SOFA NEW YORK 2005 special exhibit *A New Vision: Collecting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston* presented by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Helen Drutt; Philadelphia and lectures Building a Collection: A Passionate Journey by Helen W. Drutt English and *A New Vision: Collecting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston* by Cindi Strauss.

A New Vision: Collecting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

A New Vision: Collecting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston will feature select highlights from the MFAH's decorative arts collection including works by the Norwegian artist Tone Vigeland from the newly acquired Helen Williams Drutt Collection of modern and contemporary jewelry. Also included in the presentation will be a monumental ceramic installation entitled *Manhattan Canyon Wall* (1971) by the American artist William Daley and one of Wendell Castle's trompe l'oeil mahogany sculptures, *Coat Rack with Trench Coat* (1978), among other pieces.

The MFAH's decorative arts department was founded in 1976 and has been collecting craft since that time. In the past decade, the museum has reaffirmed its commitment to this area by actively acquiring and exhibiting ceramics, fiber, furniture and woodwork, glass, jewelry, and metalwork. The special exhibition reflects the museum's aim to collect globally in all media by both acknowledged masters and emerging artists alike.
-Cindi Strauss, Curator, Modern & Contemporary Decorative Arts and Design, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.