



***Edge of the Sublime: Enamels by Jamie Bennett***

March 22 – September 6, 2009

- This is the first-ever retrospective of works by one of the most important enamelists working today, presented by the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA and curated by Jeannine Falino.
- This exhibition explores Jamie Bennett's development of a variety of enameling and metalworking techniques to produce highly color-saturated imagery on his signature brooches, necklaces and pendants.
- Jamie Bennett is an internationally recognized metalsmith whose painterly innovations have greatly expanded the field of fired enamel into a medium for contemporary expression.
- His work is included in the collections of over 20 museums around the world including: The Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The Philadelphia Museum of Art; Musée de Arts Décoratifs, Paris; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; and the Renwick Gallery, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- RAM has loaned a Bennett wall plaque from its collections to this traveling show.
- *Edge of the Sublime* provides an overview of the artist's productive career in making jewelry, enameled wall reliefs and other works on paper painted in oil and encaustic.
- The exhibition highlights significant examples from each of the major series of works produced by the artist, such as the *Pattern* series from the 1970s, *Coloratura* series from the early 1980s, *Jurjani* series from the mid-1990s and *Floriligia* series from the early 2000s.
- Included are over 100 ornaments, 20 paintings, enameled wall reliefs, drawings, sketches and notebooks. The drawings and accompanying text inform viewers of Bennett's artistic practices, revealing both the artist's working processes and his conceptual development.

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- Most of Bennett's pieces are brooches. His earlier work is more frontal and two dimensional—inherent properties of enameling. It was also more graphic in design. Originally, he enameled on cast forms that were more organic in shape. Later, he enameled on electroforms. Electroforms allowed Bennett to easily achieve more three-dimensional shapes and textures. These electroforms no longer needed a "frame" or bezel to affix the enamel to the brooch mechanism.
- Jamie Bennett is a Professor of Art in the Metal Program at the State University at New Paltz. He received his BFA from the University of Georgia and his MFA from SUNY at New Paltz.

## **Notes From *The Contemplative Jeweler*, Essay by Jeannine Falino**

### **Influences**

- Jamie Bennett was influenced at a very early age by his mother Jean Grippi, a designer for a prominent New York dress manufacturer.
- Metalsmith Robert Ebendorf had the most significant impact on Bennett's career. Ebendorf has an outgoing spirit and had an excellent grasp of the nascent metalworking scene in the United States and abroad. As a self-described beginner who was just finding his way, Bennett was energized by the easy interaction, encouragement, and generous sharing of information that he experienced with Ebendorf. In 1971, Bennett enrolled in graduate school, following Ebendorf to the State University of New York at New Paltz (SUNY New Paltz), where he could devote himself to becoming a metalsmith.
- Bennett joined as one of the first students in the Gold and Silversmithing program at SUNY, New Paltz. The senior professor at the time was Kurt Matzdorf, known for his whole-hearted commitment to the craft. Highly-skilled and disciplined in his approach, Matzdorf provided the foundation that Bennett needed. On an intellectual level, Matzdorf's love of historical metalwork and his detailed discussions of such acknowledged masters as Cellini, Fabergé, and Lalique balanced Robert Ebendorf's preference for new thinking and methods. Ebendorf encouraged Bennett to experiment beyond traditional forms of jewelry. By contrast, Matzdorf instilled in him a lifelong pleasure of studying historic forms and cultures. By turns, these divergent approaches had powerful influences upon Bennett's career.

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- During the following summer, Bennet attended an enameling class at the Penland School of Crafts taught by William Harper, acclaimed for his skill and artistry in the enamel medium.
- Bennett participated in the third SNAG conference of 1972, held in New York City, where he met jeweler Merry Renk, blacksmith Albert Paley, and jeweler Eleanor Moty (a University of Wisconsin-Madison art faculty member), among others, at a time when the field was still relatively small.

## Style

- An early sketch of a mannequin covered with paper patterns provides the most literal source for Bennett's exploration of this subject, as do actual surviving patterns belonging to his mother that the artist has retained in his studio. Together they document how Bennett's early work originated in these templates for the fashion industry. Most of these early designs, which form the early pattern series in white and black, were variations on this theme.
- Bennett began to experiment with finishes and colors, building up assertive shapes and textures that began to require unique contour settings. This was the first indication that the frontal picture format that had dominated his work, and that of most contemporary enamelists, had reached the end of its usefulness. In this period, the forms that Bennett chose were abstract and related to the human figure, complemented with an increasingly rich palette of color.
- A major breakthrough, that can be witnessed in the *Priori* series, preoccupied the artist for some years. To create a different sort of experience for the wearer, he hit upon electroforming, a method of creating three-dimensional sculptural shapes. Bennett was interested in what ornament meant at a very basic human level before the first jewelers turned it into a valuable object made of gold and precious stones. He chose the word *Priori* as a way of signaling that they were "formed or conceived beforehand," that is to say, before the formalized conventions of jewelry came into existence.
- Bennett fashioned more electroformed brooches of varying shapes, the *Rocaille* series, perhaps his most successful, was a feather-like shape that terminated in a

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scroll or leaf. In breaking with convention and creating a completely new form, Bennett paved the way for a new generation of contemporary jewelers to create works of art that were unrestrained by the framework of traditional jewelry.

- The next phase of Bennett's career indicates his heightened receptivity to works of art, as described in a lecture delivered by the artist in 1998. "It is important to me that the work, the physical object is, sensual; the work itself not just the image on the work or the idea of the work. Being sensual means that they are active, alive, stirring, they are vulnerable, and revealing. Hopefully it is not just a matter of looking and understanding, but also [of] being involuntarily stirred.
- Bennett began a new series of inquiries into non-western cultures, especially that of the Arab world, using the patterns and intense colors that he found in tiles, textiles, and Persian miniatures, influenced by his travels to Istanbul and Morocco.
- In the last six years, Bennett's works have grown larger and more expansive, with increased space for pattern and a sensuous interpretation of nature. The *Florilegium* series possesses a new sculptural monumentality even as the delicacy of decoration, painted with a hair or two of the brush, creates a pattern more like a silken weave than an enamel.
- Mosaic scenarios offer a broad surface for the inclusion of calligraphic banners, floral details, microscopic views, and painterly sketches. The artist's brush control and his combinations of color, pattern, and form show a mastery of composition, rendering each one as a small masterpiece.
- Bennett's probing search for meaning in form and decoration is by no means at an end and yet his achievements thus far are hardly modest. Bennett is a contemplative jeweler who has redrawn the shape of his field by denying the jewel in jewelry.

## RAM and Enamels

- *Edge of Sublime* is the second enamels exhibition presented at RAM in the last two years. In 2008, RAM featured the work of internationally respected American metalsmith Earl Pardon (1926 – 1991). *Earl Pardon: Palette Maestro* presented a career survey covering his work from the 1950s through the 1990s.
- RAM's collection includes many enamel artists and metalsmiths who were instrumental in influencing and shaping Bennett's career such as Robert Ebendorf, Eleanor Moty, William Harper, June Schwarz and more.
- Enamel work by William Harper can also be seen currently in RAM's exhibition *Go Figure!*.

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## Definitions of Terms

- **Enameling** is the process of fusing glass to metal. A thin layer of finely ground glass is applied to a metal and heated in a hot kiln until the glass flows into a smooth glossy surface. It is then removed, cooled and reapplied, often many times. Enameling is an art form offering a wide variety of techniques, color palette and exploration to the artist.
- **Champlevé** offers a recessed technique applied to metal. It is achieved by the use of acid etching, engraving, embossing, electroforming or fabrication. The enamels are then inlaid into the design.
- **Cloisonné** is probably the most well known of all enameling techniques. The term "cloisonné" comes from the French word cloison meaning an enclosed area or cell. Thin strips of wire are applied to an enameled surface in a design and fired until they sink. Various colors of enamel are then inlaid in and around the wires and re-fired.
- **Electroforming** is the process of using an electric charge to deposit metal onto a form or surface, usually taking place in a liquid bath.
- **Encaustic** is a painting medium in which the pigment is suspended in wax instead of oil. The surface of an encaustic painting is often sealed with a heat source.
- **Limoges** was made famous in the latter part of the 15th century as a small town in southern France where this skillful painting technique was invented. This method requires the use of fine painting enamels and a careful and patient blending of layers to create variations in tone and color.
- **Liquid Enamels** is an application that makes it possible to experiment with a wide variety of techniques. The metal can be dipped or the liquid can be painted, poured, spattered, scratched or manipulated in many ways.
- **Plique-à-Jour** is a beautiful technique offering the look of a stained glass window by using transparent enamels without a metal back. Basse Taille, french for "low cut," describes the texturing of metal to create illusionary depths when the light from transparent enamels reflect off the metal.