



Earl Pardon: Palette Maestro
April 13 – August 10, 2008

- Earl Pardon was born in 1926 and died in 1991.
- After his tour of duty during World War II, Pardon studied painting and sculpture focusing on European art history and its influence on art in America at the Memphis Academy of Arts under the GI Bill.
- During the summers of 1948, 1949 and 1950, Pardon attended the National Silversmiths Conferences sponsored by Handy and Harman. He also studied under Swedish silversmith Erik Fleming and Reginald Hill of the Central School of Art in London at The Rochester Institute of Technology, learning smithing techniques combined with technical skills of painting and sculpture.
- Early in his career, Pardon was influenced by the beauty of African and Oceanic art, as well as by objects from South and Central America. Later, he traveled to Mexico and Italy, looking at historical remnants that he would re-interpret into his modernist view of art.
- Pardon, like many colleagues in the 1950s, sought common reference in the canons of modernism. This movement describes the style and theory of art from the period beginning in late nineteenth century and ending in the mid-twentieth century. It is closely associated with the term modern art, which is work that is characterized by a departure from an emphasis on literal representation. Pardon, like other modernists, embraced the newfound freedom of expression and experimentation and created art that stemmed from color and form.
- Paul Cézanne, considered the “Father of Modernism,” influenced Pardon’s response to color. Zen painters provided his structural and spiritual vision. And, Pardon credits sculptor David Smith, who he visited in Bolton Landing with his Skidmore students, as a powerful influence. He believed that art jewelry owed as much to sculpture as to craft. This concept is demonstrated in Pardon’s metal canvases of non-symmetrical shapes and abstractions.

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- “Earl admired the work of Paul Klee, Miro and Picasso,” according to his son Tod, a second generation metalsmith. Strong evidence in the color palette of Earl’s enamels suggests that he also studied the work of Morris Louis, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Alexander Calder, and Mark Rothko.
- Pardon created with the eye of a painter. He went beyond the stretched canvas and incorporated non-traditional materials, such as gold and silver, rocks, shells, ivory and ebony, into his “portable” art, which was Pardon’s term for jewelry.
- Earl demanded that his work possess a quality of mystery...“having a life of its own...I loved the things you don’t expect.”
- Upon graduation from MAA in 1951, Pardon joined the faculty at Skidmore College, where he taught painting, sculpture and jewelry making.
- In 1958, Pardon and Josef Albers were given a two-person exhibition at Chiku-Rin Gallery in Detroit, Michigan. Earl’s work was included in a group show at the Weatherspoon Art Gallery (1960) in Greensboro, North Carolina with that of Milton Avery, Saul Baizerman, Charles Eames, Max Ernst and Leon Golub.
- Pardon contemplated opening a gallery in New York City during the 1950s with Dorothy Sturm, a fellow Memphis jeweler/artist represented by the Betty Parsons Gallery, but he preferred the less pressured academic environment at Skidmore College. He “found teaching came naturally and without any difficulty.”
- During the 1950s, Pardon expanded his professional activities by accepting positions at Towle and Old Newbury Crafters. His designs for the silver industry reflected a strong influence of Scandinavian modern interiors. He experimented with silver hollowware and flatware designs that incorporated wood, enamel, stainless steel, and plastic. A salt-and-pepper shaker, flatware (*Contempra House* and *Elan*) and boxes with painterly surfaces attest to Pardon’s interest in a wide variety of forms.
- Pardon credits his training at Memphis Academy of Arts for imbuing him with confidence and with interest in all media.
- In 1954, Thomas Tibbs, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, commissioned Pardon to construct a mural for the premier exhibition, *Enamels*. The show featured historic examples of enamel work borrowed from major museums, as well as contemporary work by Pardon’s peers, including

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Kenneth Bates, Margret Craver, June Schwarcz, John Paul Miller and Ronald Pearson. Pardon's mural, titled *Suspended Forms*, will be exhibited for the first time since its inception, at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York.

- Maria Bergson, a leading interior designer of the 1950s, discovered Pardon's work at the enamel exhibition. She invited him to submit a design for The Prudential Life Insurance Company Headquarters in Newark, New Jersey. His 10 x 18 foot "sculpture wall" of copper, bronze, and nickel modules was the winning entry. Pardon's piece outranked several metalsmiths, including Harry Bertioia, who Earl had chosen as his mentor during his early years of study. The Prudential Building remains on the Newark skyline, but the only remaining trace of Pardon's sculpture wall is the maquette currently on exhibition here at RAM.
- In the last decade of his life, Earl left the painted canvas behind and exclusively committed himself to his jewelry. Often, he was able to produce a new piece each day with the advent of the micro-torch, which advanced his efficiency in the construction of tiny sections of enamels pinned with gold rivets.
- Earl Pardon played a significant role in the evolution of 20th century studio jewelry. He mastered materials and brought his divergent interests in painting and sculpture into innovative "portable" art.

Notes written with the kind assistance of Rosanne Raab, March 9, 2008.

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Art Terms

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New, Novel, Never Shown Before 2008: Recent Gifts to the Collection

Sterling silver – Has a standard minimum **millesimal fineness** of 925, which indicates that sterling is an alloy of silver containing 92.5% pure silver and 7.5% other metals, usually copper.

Millesimal fineness – a system of denoting the purity of platinum, gold and silver alloys by parts per thousand of pure metal by mass in the alloy. For example, an alloy containing 75% gold is denoted as "750".

Fine silver – Since it is 99.9% pure, fine silver is generally too soft for producing large functional objects. Therefore, the silver is usually alloyed with copper to give it strength, while preserving the ductility and beauty of the precious metal.

Enamel – Glass that has been ground up and applied to metal in a dry or liquid state then fused (melted) at a temperature of approximately 500° F.

Maquette – A three-dimensional model, often executed by an artist involved in a commission. The maquette represents what the formal work will look like, but in a smaller scale. It would be at this stage that either the collector or the artist would discuss changes that might be made for the final work.

Pâte de Verre – Meaning "glass paste" in French, it is an ancient technique in which glass is made by blending and refining powdered glass of different colors into molds. The process was revived by French glassmakers around the end of the 19th century.

Intaglio – Printing technique in which paper is pushed into depressed or recessed lines made in a metal plate and filled with ink. The image on the plate can be made with acid or a sharp tool.

Etching – Intaglio technique in which a metal plate is first covered with an acid resistant ground, and then worked with an etching needle. The metal thus exposed is "eaten" in an acid bath, creating depressed lines that are later inked and printed.

Lithography – Printing technique where a print is made by first drawing on fine grained, porous limestone or a zinc plate with a greasy material. Then, by wetting the stone and applying greasy ink, which adheres only to the drawn lines. Dampened paper is applied to the stone and is rubbed over with a special press to make the final print.