



# Jack Rogers Hopkins

California Design Maverick:  
Master mid-century designer-craftsman

Edited by Jeffrey Head & Katie Nartonis

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# Essay List

- 5 Editors Note  
Jeffrey Head & Katie Nartonis
- 12 Jack Rogers Hopkins: *Maverick Maker  
& Metaphysical Thinker*  
Katie Nartonis
- 42 Introduction  
Jeffrey Head
- 60 Close Proximity:  
*Jack Hopkins in San Diego*  
Dave Hampton
- 83 The Wearable Sculptures  
of Jack Rogers Hopkins  
Jo Lauria
- 93 An All Pervading Implication  
Glenn Adamson
- 106 Jack Rogers Hopkins, *Our Father*  
David Hopkins



Ring. 14k gold with citrine stone.  
1968. Hopkins Family Collection.

# The Wearable Sculptures of Jack Rogers Hopkins

Jo Lauria

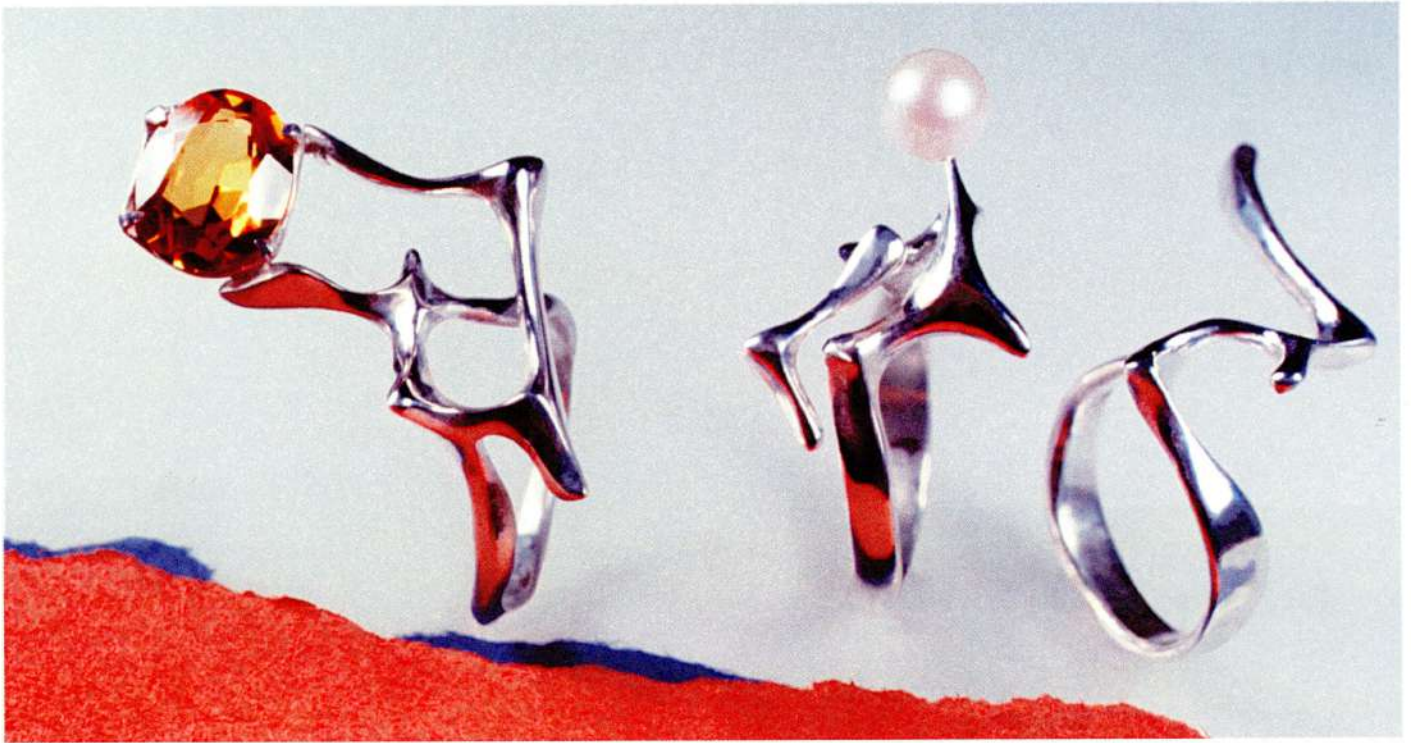


Ring with diamonds. White gold. 1967.  
Hopkins Family Collection.

A sense of adventurousness, the willingness to experiment, and the belief in the integrity of process must have been inscribed in Jack Rogers Hopkins's genetic code. To each discipline that Hopkins committed he searched for the edges, grafting his own aesthetic vocabulary onto the natural materials with which he engaged. He collaborated with clay to coax it into expressionistic forms; he stacked, laminated, and carved wood into rounded, sinuous seating sculptures; and he teased metal into fabricated and cast jewelry that formed sensual, fluid shapes that embraced the body.

Charting the chronological sweep of Hopkins's career reveals that he focused his creative output on jewelry-making from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, producing boldly sculptural and abstracted pieces that were exhibited nationally and featured in major craft catalogs and magazines. Fortuitously, Hopkins was poised to dive into the deep creative waters of the post-WWII years when California was experiencing a craft renaissance. Eudorah Moore, director of the *California Design* exhibition series from 1962 through 1976, characterized these years as a period when craft disciplines were being "pushed, probed, stretched, and explored, with the vigorous excitement of the discovery of new frontiers."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, jewelry historian Toni Greenbaum cites this era of the craft revolution as having a profound impact on the field of jewelry: "Jewelers began to take a less intellectual approach, no longer regarding a piece of jewelry as an autonomous object, but viewing the body as an armature or backdrop for highly sculptural statements. Nowhere was this transformation more pronounced than in California where... jewelry was typified by a formalistic flamboyance."<sup>2</sup>

- 1 *The Creative Arts League of Sacramento Presents California Crafts XIV: Living Treasures of California, Crocker Art Museum, January 19-April 14, 1985.* Sacramento, CA: Creative Arts League of Sacramento, 1985.
- 2 Lauria, Jo, and Suzanne Baizerman. *California Design: the Legacy of the West Coast Craft and Style.* Greenbaum, Toni. "Body Sculpture: California Jewelry." San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2005.



Hopkins's fine arts degree in Art Education from the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC, Oakland, Calif) had provided him the foundation to pursue specific fields of interest in graduate school. The announcement for Hopkins's graduate exhibition from Claremont Graduate School (CGS) in 1958, in fulfillment of the MFA degree, stated he exhibited painting, ceramics, and jewelry.<sup>3</sup> Although it is documented that Hopkins trained in the ceramic arts during graduate study at CGS with the illustrious ceramist Paul Soldner, it is not known where he acquired the necessary skills to become a jeweler; however, at some point in the 1950s Hopkins decided to start down the long road of technical investigation and learn the art of jewelry, specifically casting as this technique became his dominant method.

It is conjecture that Hopkins may have acquired the knowledge and practice of the lost-wax, centrifugal casting process for metal jewelry during his undergraduate years (1947-1950) attending CCAC. The notable Bay Area sculptor and jeweler, Bob Winston, who is credited with the revitalization of the lost-wax technique for jewelry, taught a metals class during the time Hopkins was a student, and Winston also offered private lessons to fellow

Above: Rings. Citrine stone (left), pearl (center). Silver. 1967. Hopkins Family Collection. Right Page: Ring. Finger sculpture with 14K gold, walrus tusk, ebony and pearl. c.1970. Hopkins Family Collection.

- 3 15th Annual Invitational Ceramic Exhibit, announcement. Scripps College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA. 1959.
- 4 "Northern California, A center for experimental jewelry," *Craft Horizons*. October, 1956.
- 5 Hampton, Dave. *San Diegos Craft Revolution: from Post-War Modern to California Design*. San Diego, CA. Mingei International Museum, 2011.



artists. Winston's cast jewelry was exemplary for its dramatic dimensionality and organic quality. His jewelry was visible in national exhibitions and publications, and he had a deep influence on other artists who had the inclination to experiment with casting. At the very least, Hopkins would have known about Winston's jewelry. The permeability between disciplines that was manifest during this period of California's craft evolution was uniquely encapsulated by Winston's assertion: "Jewelry and sculpture are not so separated for me—jewelry is just a little smaller."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this proclamation was at the core of Hopkins's studio practice: he moved fluidly from one medium to another, changing scale and intent with ease while keeping true to his vision and listening to the voice of the material.

Scrutiny of Hopkins's archive of over 200 images of jewelry pieces reveals much about the artist's production, preferences, and daring design decisions. Hopkins had begun teaching as an assistant professor in the fine arts department at San Diego State University in 1960 (continuing until retirement in 1991) and had built a separate studio at his home property in Spring Valley in which to do his artwork. It was a heady time for jewelers in the San Diego area

in the 1960s when Hopkins decided to concentrate on jewelry production. The now-acclaimed leaders of studio jewelry—Arline Fisch, James Parker, Svetozar and Ruth Radakovich—were establishing their careers and beginning to exhibit their work in the San Diego area and other locales throughout the state and national venues. Hopkins's innovative jewelry was exhibited alongside works produced by these key jewelers in exhibitions organized by the Allied Craftsmen of San Diego, a group to which Hopkins belonged from 1962–1966. During this time, he gave demonstrations, lectures and workshops in jewelry and pottery.<sup>5</sup>

Hopkins began documenting his jewelry as early as 1964. From the very start, Hopkins's jewelry showed a distinct design sensibility and embraced the unconventional. Two white gold rings with diamonds (from 1964 and 1965) are classically elegant and graceful but the asymmetry of the prong positioning and the negative space that defined the design lend an exotic flair to the pair.

Necklaces appear in 1965 and 1966: they are forged collars of silver and gold, one with ivory and ebony inlay, and the other with a pearl-in-shell motif. Hopkins must have been fond of the gold collar



Ring bracelet combination. 14k gold.  
1967. Hopkins Family Collection.

with pearl/shell combination as he made several variations of this necklace, and an early version was exhibited in *California Crafts III* at the Crocker Art Museum (March 15–April 28, 1963). Curiously, in this chronological grouping, there is a rough hammered-silver pendant necklace with a dangling squiggle terminating in a disc; this neck-piece resonates more with Bronze Age implements than with contemporary ornament. More curious is a finger-to-wrist, ring-to-bracelet combination constructed of cast elements linked to a forged cuff. The ring-to-bracelet combo takes its form from East Indian and Thailand; it highlights the cross-cultural influences of global indigenous traditions that impacted contemporary jewelry design in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking through the lens of hindsight, the unusual necklace and ring/bracelet can be evaluated as the outcome of the artist sound-testing the different tones of his aesthetic to find his authentic voice.

During this same two-year period, 1965–1966, Hopkins veered into vessel making and created two extraordinary perfume bottles. Fabricated of silver and ebony, they showcased Hopkins's design at its most refined level: the dark, warm ebony plays off the cold, metallic silver producing two

distinct tactile responses, and the attenuation and stretching of the forms created movement and fluidity. It seems that Hopkins was striving to animate these sculptures to the level of character studies—dancers in step with one another or in full-leap could be possible interpretations—whilst cleverly designing the “appendages” to serve as the three points on which the bottles sit. The overall attitudes of the perfume bottles presage the designs of Hopkins furniture forms that possess the same quirkiness and eccentric geometry.

By the late 1960s, Hopkins had hit his stride. Preferring casting over fabrication methods, and specializing in rings, his jewelry demonstrated a strong sculptural and organic approach that, in many ways, was a direct outcome of the process: carving in malleable wax allowed for free-form sculpting as one worked through the design, and engendered dimensionality and a spontaneous relationship with the material. Hopkins's production flowed in two directions: as a maker of custom engagement and wedding ring sets that he executed on commission, and as creator of boldly-daring and imaginative “finger sculptures” that he made as artistic challenges. Three rings that clearly show





Ring. 14k gold with gray baroque pearl. 1969. Hopkins Family Collection.

6 Begley, Ann. Interview with Jo Lauria. Telephone interview. October 19, 2016.

Hopkins's expressive freedom and embrace of new ideas are "Finger Sculpture" (1967) of gold, jade, and silk thread; "Finger Sculpture" (1968) of gold, walrus tusk, ebony, and pearl; and "Anti-Ring for 4 Fingers" (1970) of gold, citrine, pearl and laminated wood. The scale, shifting planes, and vertical thrust endow these rings with a compelling physical presence. Further, they illustrate Hopkins's attempt to find a new language for jewelry by engaging form, material, and functionality from a fresh perspective that bypassed traditional restraints—rings could embrace multiple fingers, have pivoting parts (the citrine and jade fully pivot), and incorporate unconventional, non-precious materials such as tusk, wood, and thread.

Perhaps the most refined and resolved of Hopkins's jewelry pieces are the extravagant rings that show-off faceted semi-precious stones and Baroque pearls. Following in the path of the famed San Francisco jewelry designer Margaret de Patta, Hopkins favored prismatic, brightly faceted stones. While these stones may be referred to as "fantasy cuts," they are similar to the opticut stones lapidarian Francis Sperisen cut for de Patta to enhance her architectonic designs. "Finger

Sculpture" (1968) of gold and citrine stone shows the continuous flow of the gold setting that rises elegantly from shaft to the terminus focal point, encasing a brilliant-cut citrine in a triangular frame that cantilevers over the finger. Floating the citrine stone above the wearer's finger further enriched the optical illusion created by the facets and imparted an ethereal air to the piece. In "Finger Sculpture" (1969) of gold with gray Baroque pearl, Hopkins designed a tree-like armature with twisting branches to cradle the enormous (and enormously captivating) Baroque pearl. Wearing this ring would have constituted an act of performance as the pearl seemed to have a life of its own and could hardly be contained within its setting. These two rings would have been magnificent complements to a woman's style, and when worn, would have provoked stimulating conversation about their uncommon designs.

According to Hopkins's Curricula Vitae, the last time he exhibited jewelry was in 1975 as an invited exhibitor at Humboldt State College (March), and at Pasadena Junior College (February). Additionally, his publication record indicates that the last ring to be published was in an ARTWEEK review of the Crafts Southwest '70 exhibition. Hopkins continued to accept jewelry commissions for rings until the early 1980s and made the last set of wedding rings for his son David and wife Cindy in 1986. Several factors contributed to the end of Hopkins's jewelry production, including failing eyesight which diminished his ability to work at small scale; a transference of interest in creating stack lamination furniture; and a return to painting.<sup>6</sup> Although Hopkins's jewelry career transpired over a relatively short period of time, 20 years, he nevertheless maintained a rigorous pursuit of experimentation and a curiosity to find fresh solutions to design conventions and functional mandates of jewelry. Hopkins's jewelry forms and perfume bottles exhibited many personalities and attitudes, from the elegant, graceful, and sophisticated to the daring, expressionistic, and theatrical. In the historical record, Hopkins may be remembered as an artist who re-imagined furniture, but he should also be celebrated for his contributions to the field of jewelry: Hopkins's sculptures for the body captured and reflected the zeitgeist of California's individualistic and spirited jewelry movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and they deserve an honored place on the cultural registry.

