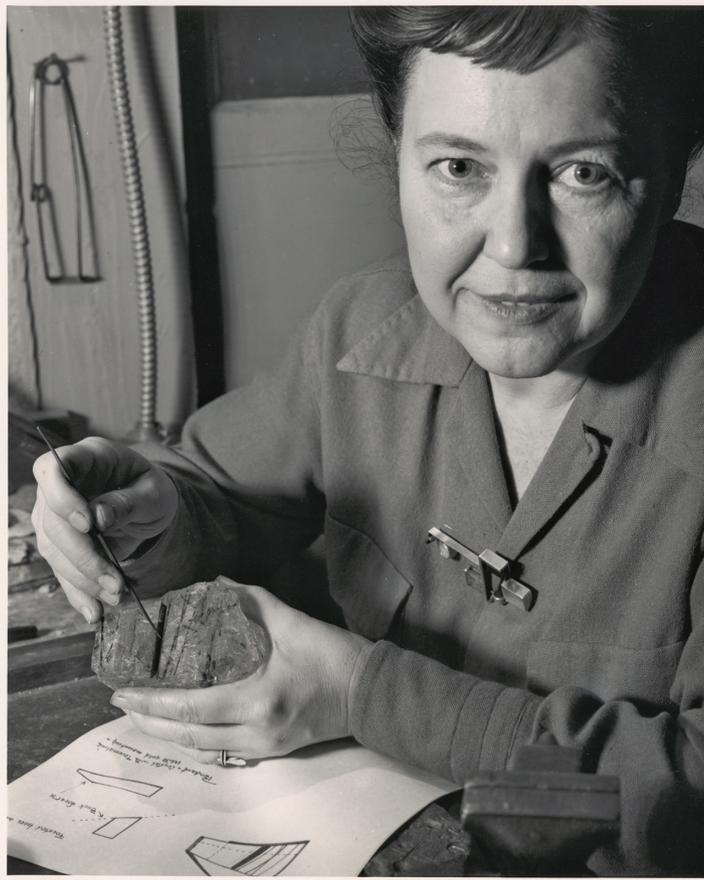


Margaret De Patta

Pioneer of Modern Studio Jewelry

"Contemporary jewelry," De Patta believed, "must characterize our times with its emphasis on space and structure, strong light, open forms, cantilever, floating structures and movements."



MARGARET DE PATTa in her San Francisco studio. *The Margaret De Patta archives, Bielawski Trust, Port Richmond, California, 1948. Photograph by George Strauss.*

Jo Lauria

Margaret De Patta was one of the first American artists to recognize the possibilities for modern design in jewelry. From the mid-1930s until her death in 1964, the role she played as innovator, educator, co-founder of the Metal Arts Guild of San Francisco, and overall social activist/art advocate helped define and guide the burgeoning American modernist jewelry movement regionally and nationally. De Patta's greatest contribution to the field of metal arts was to approach jewelry as sculpture, to treat each piece as a complex composition scaled to wearable size. The means by which she accomplished this was to apply modern art principles of abstraction and constructivism to her jewelry design, along with applying some basic tenets of architecture such as asymmetry and cantilevered form. This precipitated a move away from traditional shapes, materials and techniques in jewelry design and propelled a great leap into the unknown—a "movement forward" as longtime friend and accomplished jeweler Merry Renk explained: "Only Margaret dared to do the things she did. She was absolutely courageous. She had a need to work in a place that was unknown."

The legacy of De Patta can be assessed by viewing the exhibition currently on display at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York City, June 12 through September 23, 2012. Titled *Space-Light-Structure, The Jewelry of Margaret De Patta*, the exhibition is co-organized by the Oakland Museum of California (where it was on view February 3 through May

13, 2012) in partnership with the Museum of Arts and Design. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog with lead essays extensively researched by exhibition curators Ursula Ilse-Neuman and Julie M. Muñiz, and contributing essay by design historian Glenn Adamson.

Here is what I learned from making my own assessment, after visiting the exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California; reading the exhibition catalog; interviewing Merry Renk and Imogene "Tex" Gieling (two Bay Area metalsmiths who knew Margaret De Patta) for their insights about De Patta and her work. Pioneer of Modern Studio Jewelry is a title that should be given to Margaret De Patta as she advanced the aesthetics of jewelry and helped to position the metal arts field at mid-century to be on par with the other studio arts of ceramics, glass, fiber, wood, and furniture. "Margaret De Patta was among the artists who carried the torch of Modernism in the early 1940s," remarked Imogene Gieling, a Bay Area colleague and metalsmith of national acclaim. "Alexander Calder, Claire Falkenstein, Harry Bertoia, and De Patta. She was part of this group of cutting-edge artists who worked with jewelry on an abstract level."

Some of the strategies De Patta used that helped forge this new direction and growth in the field were the deployment of modern design rationales based on art/design theories that resulted in complex jewelry constructions often rooted in constructivist principles. Typical would be compositions that

played with the polarities of light and dark, transparency and opacity, positive and negative, textural and smooth, and kinetic and static. Other advancements included De Patta's use of nontraditional materials such as stainless steel mesh screen, plastics and beach pebbles and new techniques in gem-cutting and stone-setting.

Characteristic of other artists who have achieved success in their lifetime, De Patta was deeply rooted in expressing contemporary culture and issues in her art. She rejected out-of-hand jewelry designs that were uninspired and did not represent their time or place. "Contemporary jewelry," De Patta believed, "must characterize our times with its emphasis on space and structure, strong light, open forms, cantilever, floating structures and movements," she stated in her writings. This philosophy De Patta had, no doubt, developed over time, but it was a similar belief system that prompted her to design her own wedding ring in 1929 for her impending marriage to Samuel De Patta. What she saw in the marketplace at the time was a "lack of creativity in traditional wedding rings" and she could not find one that suited her contemporary taste. So with purposeful resolve, she apprenticed herself to the jeweler Armin



PIN of sterling silver, moss agate, onyx; 2.5 x 3.2 x 0.6 centimeters, 1941. Like any well-executed sculpture, this pin is a composition comprised of rhythms of intersecting lines, and plays on the drama of opposites: positive and negative spaces, and opaque and transparent stones. *Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection; photographs by Lee Faltherree, except where noted.*

Hairenian at his San Francisco Art Copper Shop to learn the necessary metalsmithing skills to fabricate her own ring. Thus began De Patta's revolt against dull interpretations of conventional jewelry, a rebellion that would last a lifetime and would shape a career of intense exploration in metalsmithing and jewelry design. This is the fork in the road where De Patta veered off the path of becoming a painter/sculptor, as she had studied the fine arts up to this point, and chose instead to chart a career in the metal arts. She abandoned the pursuit of being a painter and declared herself a jewelry designer.

Having mastered basic metalworking skills from Hairenian, De Patta went forward and sought further training in



PIN of sterling silver, beach pebbles; 8.9 x 4.1 x 1.6 centimeters, circa 1964. The positioning of the beach pebbles—held in place without any visible encasement—illustrates Moholy-Nagy's advice to De Patta: "Catch your stones in the air. Make them float in space." *Collection of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Bequest, through the American Craft Council, 1976. Photograph by Eva Heyd.*

enameling and engraving, and by her own admission read every book on jewelry in the public library, reading many of them twice. Self-directed, determined, dedicated, and impassioned, De Patta became a technically adept jeweler by 1935 and started working professionally from a small studio space in her San Francisco home. Some of her work of this period was inflected with references to ancient Turkish, Egyptian, Etruscan, Colombian, and Mayan jewelry, but some of it began to show an authentic voice that demonstrated modern constructs that had never been seen. The Amberg-Hirth Gallery in San Francisco showed this work and De Patta began to build a following.

Several milestone events occurred in the next six years—through 1941 as America prepared to enter World War II—that determined the evolutionary path De Patta's career would travel.

In 1939-1940, De Patta began a creative collaboration with the San Francisco lapidary Francis Sperisen. Together, De Patta and Sperisen worked out a new, innovative method of cutting gemstones to take advantage of their refractive properties by studying the optical principles of light transmission. These "opticults," as De Patta called them, were

especially dramatic when they were cut from large stones of rutilated crystal. As Yoshiko Uchida commented, these inclusions could have great impact as they “could be reflected, distorted, or multiplied as a controlled design component.” (Excerpted from the catalog essay of De Patta’s 1976 retrospective exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California.) Depending on how the stone was cut, the inclusions would produce sloping lines along the facets that would create prism-like patterns with the movement of the wearer and the faceted gems could even appear to alter their shape depending on the viewer’s perspective. This artistic partnership produced advanced stone-cutting methods and original concepts in gem-setting. De Patta and Sperisen began to receive recognition and praise for these signature gemstones. Hence, the synergy between jeweler and stone-cutter elevated the creativity of both.

In the summer of 1940, De Patta enrolled in a summer course at Mills College taught by László Moholy-Nagy, the acclaimed Hungarian-born, Bauhaus master-artist, and then director of the Chicago School of Design (now part of the Illinois Institute of Technology). Moholy-Nagy, along with other renowned faculty of the School of Design, were invited to teach studio courses in fine art, industrial design and craft

in conjunction with the New York Museum of Modern Art’s traveling exhibition *The Bauhaus: How It Worked*. Courses were offered in drawing, painting, photography, weaving, paper-cutting, metalwork, modeling, and casting. According to co-curator Ursula Ilse-Neuman, De Patta’s experience studying with Moholy-Nagy at Mills was a revelation, and a reaffirmation of her design direction: “Moholy-Nagy recognized that De Patta’s work with transparent stones altered visual perception and exemplified his own concept of ‘vision in motion.’ He told her that she was already putting into practice many Bauhaus and Constructivist principles, as can be seen in her works of the late 1930s and early 1940s.”

De Patta continued to expand her critical learning during the school year of 1940-1941. Having been inspired by Moholy-Nagy’s teachings, and seeking more formal training, she decided to travel to Chicago to attend the School of Design and enroll in photography and sculpture classes. It is during this critical year of study with Moholy-Nagy that he uttered to De Patta the now prophetic phrase: “Catch your stones in the air,” he had said to her, emphasizing his constructivist concepts of light and motion. “Don’t enclose them. Make them float in space.” De Patta obviously thought about the



PIN of sterling silver, quartz, epoxy enamel paint; 4.8 x 9.5 x 1.3 centimeters, 1956.



WATCH of sterling silver, onyx; 6.4 x 5.4 x 2.5 centimeters, 1960-64. For the design of this watch, De Patta looked to the Art Deco movement for inspiration. Stylistically, this can be seen in the sleek and elegant lines of the silver bracelet that holds the onyx in which the watch-face is inset, and also in the palette choice of silver and black.



PIN of gold, topaz, peridot; 7.6 x 6.4 x 2.2 centimeters, 1960.



PRODUCTION PIN #4 of sterling silver; 1.9 x 2.5 x 1.9 centimeters, designed 1944, in production 1946–57. In 1948, De Patta participated in the group exhibition *Modern Jewelry Under Fifty Dollars* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she showed nine rings and four pins from her production line. Although De Patta's production line—named *Designs Contemporary*—was well received by museums and gallery dealers, the line was not as profitable as anticipated and De Patta and husband decided to discontinue it in 1957.

essence of Moholy-Nagy's statement when she began to set beach pebbles and stones in her more casual brooches, which she endearingly referred to as "sweater jewelry." De Patta felt the beach pebbles should appear free, as she found them in nature, and should not be encased in a metal bezel. To structurally allow the pebble to float in space, De Patta drilled a slot in the back of the stone and filled it with epoxy as a means to attach it from the backside to an unseen metal support. Hence, from the face of the pebble a floating illusion is maintained.

The year 1941 also proved to be a volatile one for De Patta's personal life and living situation. De Patta had met Eugene Bielawski, an industrial designer and instructor at the School of Design, and there was likely some connection between them. When Margaret returned to San Francisco she and Samuel De Patta decided to divorce. Following the divorce, De Patta put into practice her design training and her natural affinity toward architecture when she resolved to start a new beginning by renovating the craftsman-style house she and Samuel had purchased together in 1936. In De Patta's deft hands, the woodsy bungalow on a hilltop in San Francisco underwent a complete transformation, re-emerging as an International-style concrete and glass-block residence. For the interior, De Patta designed all the furnishings and had them custom-made, including the furniture, draperies and upholstery. In totality, exterior and interior, the house paid homage to the Bauhaus ideologies of well-designed objects existing within a beautifully designed space to create an appealing, fully functioning and organic whole.

The postwar years brought notoriety, success, fame, failure, and disappointment to De Patta in varying degrees. What can be gleaned from factual information contained in the catalog Timeline is the following:

1. De Patta's jewelry was featured in the most important high profile museum exhibitions during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s including *Craftsmanship in a Changing World* in 1956 (Museum of Contemporary Crafts; predecessor to the Museum



PENDANT of sterling silver, stainless steel screen, quartz; 10.2 x 7.6 x 3.2 centimeters, 1950. This pendant shows De Patta's imaginative use of stainless steel screen, an unconventional material never before used in jewelry.

of Arts and Design) and the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. De Patta was most honored in 1961 when she was invited by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London to participate in the groundbreaking International Exhibition of Modern Jewelry, 1890-1961. From the eight pieces of De Patta's selected for the exhibition, Goldsmiths' Hall purchased a crystal pendant with inset diamonds for their permanent collection. This was a tremendous acknowledgment of De Patta's accomplishment as a jeweler; she had achieved international stature.

2. De Patta always seemed to have more commissions than she could possibly execute, which meant her work was always in demand.

3. De Patta took the plunge and committed to a fourth marriage to Eugene Bielawski on December 26, 1946.

4. De Patta held several teaching positions at various art and design schools, including the California Labor School in San Francisco, where De Patta was the chairman of the Basic Design Workshop. During her time there, the Senate of the State of California released a report charging several faculty members of conducting un-American and Communist activities and they were blacklisted. The names of De Patta and

Bielawski were on this blacklist. Eventually the school closed in the late 1940s.

5. De Patta and Bielawski, as jewelry and industrial designers, engaged in the noble experiment of creating a reasonably priced limited-production jewelry line—Designs Contemporary—that lasted twelve years from 1946 through 1957. De Patta decided to close the business because she learned from retailers that her avant-garde designs were too forward-looking for the general public and the line was not selling well enough to make it profitable.

6. On March 19, 1964 Margaret De Patta took her own life. If one reads between the lines, there was a fair amount of angst in De Patta's life. She never seemed settled. Like her floating stones, she was unanchored. She and Bielawski moved frequently, relocating from San Francisco to Napa and converting a farmhouse into a modern residence, and then moving from Napa to Oakland into a joint tenancy situation with another couple. As a dedicated artist, of whom it has been said was very protective of her studio time, it must have been extremely difficult for De Patta to be continually uprooted. It may be as simple as what Merry Renk suggested: "Margaret

PENDANT of white gold, ebony, faceted quartz; 9.5 x 2.5 x 6.4 centimeters, 1959. This pendant showcases an 'optical' stone: large and multifaceted to emphasize the broken line effect of the ebony bar set behind the stone. Blind areas in the stone hide the metal structure holding the stone from the back.





EARRINGS of sterling silver, white gold, rutilated quartz; 6.7 x 2.4 x 2.0 centimeters, circa 1955. These earrings are exemplary of De Patta's progressiveness and daring in design. By contemporary standards, to create a pair of unmatched earrings is *au courant*, but in 1955 it was nothing short of avant-garde. Further, they are extraordinary in their size—two elongated slices of rutilated quartz; their settings—stones suspended from wires; and their hand-designed ear fittings. They are truly master works of wearable adornment. *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Lilliane and David M. Stewart Collection, Gift of Paul Leblanc.*

RING of sterling silver, 1939. In the center, De Patta inset the design of her personal insignia.

RING of sterling silver, tourmaline, quartz; 2.5 x 0.6 x 0.6 centimeters, 1947. The cut of this quartz stone—exploiting its tourmaline inclusions—shows the collaboration between jewelry designer De Patta and gem-cutter Sperisen. When worn, the drama of the ring is enhanced as the appearance of the stone changes with varying light refractions.

didn't like getting old. She told me once that when she was standing on a bus a young man got up to offer her his seat. This offended Margaret! That meant that she was perceived as being old. Me? I would have sat down and said thank you."

Whatever the case, De Patta was at the height of her career when she died the day after her sixty-fifth birthday. De Patta's legacy is surely now writ in stone with the publication of *Space-Light-Structure: The Jewelry of Margaret De Patta*. The museum viewer who has the opportunity to see De Patta's elegant jewelry on display at the Museum of Arts and Design will understand the dramatic effect of light, line and color when imaginatively manipulated within a small sculpture. Her complex compositions that play with spatial relationships of transparencies, motion and layering will delight the eye and the senses. (Except that of touch—in the literal sense—because in a museum touching is verboten.) ☞

SUGGESTED READING

Goldstein, Doris. "Sculpture For Wearing," *Modern Magazine*, Winter 2012: 98-103.

Ilse-Neuman, Ursula. *Margaret De Patta: Pioneer of Modernism*, *Metalsmith Magazine*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2012): 42-51.

Ilse-Neuman, Ursula, and Julie M. Muñiz. *Space-Light-Structure: The Jewelry of Margaret De Patta*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design and Oakland, Oakland Museum of California, 2012.

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