



**I'm ready to say goodbye to everyone.**

**Live well. Follow your passions.**

**Enjoy your life. Learn. Love.**

**Do everything you can with it because you  
don't know where you're going. Neither do I.**

**But I ask myself: What symbol do I have to take me through?**

**And I have this picture of a very little toy-like black convertible, and in it,  
I'm sitting, a big person, that is much bigger, like a doll sitting in a toy car,**

**But the car is going, the car is moving, and I'm just waving, saying BYE.**

*MERRY AND STANLEY RENK on a tandem bicycle, 1944. Photographs courtesy of the family of Merry Renk: Bonnie and Sandra Curtis, except where noted. Merry Renk Curtis Says Goodbye posted on YouTube; published June 18, 2012; by fotoartiste1.*

# Merry Renk

## A Jewel in the Crown of Life



750 STUDIO. "Memory" watercolor painting of the Chicago gallery co-founded by Mary Jo Slick, Olive Oliver and Merry Renk (left to right). The gallery, unique for its time, featured fine art, craft and design. Watercolor photographs: Craft in America/Angela Mattioli.

### Jo Lauria

The American studio jewelry movement lost one of its pioneers and visionaries with the passing of Merry Renk on June 17, 2012 at the age of ninety. Renk, who was also a talented painter and sculptor, was a professional goldsmith for more than thirty years. She is recognized for her achievements, most notably as co-founder and Lifetime Member of the Metal Arts Guild, San Francisco (established 1951), as a Distinguished Member of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, as a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship recipient in 1974, and as an inductee in 1994 into the American Craft Council College of Fellows for mastery in the field.

But, of course Renk's life and body of work cannot be defined merely by an account of her awards and honors, as her life was rich and full of vignettes, wonder and intrigue. Ultimately these separate chapters were connected and linked together, like the modular components of the gold and silver jewelry that the artist assembled into bracelets, necklaces and crowns fabricated from the intricate interlocking patterns that she had first worked out in cut paper, and then sawed in metal. In the end, all became dynamic and organic as she moved from one connection to the next, like an electrical current traveling the wire toward its next charge, its next point of contact.



JEWELER'S HEAVEN. "Memory" watercolor painting executed in 1996. Renk said: "This painting is an expression of admiration and gratitude for the hand tools I have used as a jeweler. I have known jewelers who have thirty or forty pairs of pliers, each customized for a special function, but these six pairs of pliers were all I ever needed."





GOLDEN FOAM CROWN designed for Gerri Lanier, 1982.  
 Photograph: Merry Renk; courtesy of Craft in America.

WATERCOLOR PORTRAIT of Gerri Lanier wearing Golden Foam,  
 one of Merry Renk's custom-designed gold crowns, 1995.  
 Lanier wore this crown on special occasions, such as attending  
 the opera.

Her story began in Trenton, New Jersey. Born Mary Ruth Gibbs in 1921 she attended fine art classes at the School of Industrial Arts in Trenton while a high school student, thus revealing a talent for painting and drawing. This was also a time of personal discovery and making time for a serious relationship: she met, fell in love and in 1941 married Stanley Renk, a military officer training to fly airplane missions in World War II. During the ensuing war years, Renk actively pursued her fine art studies, only to learn in 1945 that she had become a widow when Stanley's plane crashed in the Netherlands. The formerly tentative Mary Gibbs of Trenton decided to turn the page and close that chapter of her life.

The newly named Merry Renk (note spelling of "Merry"), moved to Chicago in 1946 and enrolled in the Institute of Design, with the intention of becoming an industrial designer. "I wanted to learn how to use tools," she commented in a short documentary film produced for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (in association with the exhibition "Living in a Modern Way, California Design: 1930-1960"). Renk knew she would have to make a living, and having a toolbox and knowing what to do with it seemed like the right move.

The three electrifying semesters at the Institute of Design sparked her curiosity for learning and adventure. The powerful presence and design aesthetics of the Constructivist painter and sculptor Moholy-Nagy, then the director of the Institute of Design, permeated the classrooms. Renk recalled in a personal interview that she was "very influenced by my

training at the school: non-objective and constructivist ideas pervaded and I swallowed them and used them whole." Writers assessing the qualities of Renk's jewelry have consistently hypothesized that it was her industrial design training at the Institute that formed the basis of her approach to jewelrymaking: the infrastructure was frequently visible and served as the main design element—such as the interlock or the fold; pieces were often comprised of simple, strong elemental shapes—such as the "V" or the sphere; and the jewelry pieces were always functional—highly wearable in their size, weight and tactility. These principles would have been the standards an industrial designer would have followed when conceptualizing a product design.

Although Renk was at the Institute of Design for a relatively short time, starting in 1946 and leaving in the autumn of 1947, she was able to forge some remarkable relationships with professional artists because she was a partner-dealer in 750 Studio, located at 750 N. Dearborn Street, a gallery dedicated to showing fine art, craft and design. The other two students attending the Institute of Design who were involved in the gallery venture were Mary Jo Slick and Olive Oliver. With Renk as the requisite third partner, the trio lived in the back of the building and converted the storefront area into a gallery space. 750 Studio showed the non-objective paintings and sculptures of Moholy-Nagy as well as work of other professors of the Institute of Design, the watercolors of Henry Miller, the production jewelry of Margaret De Patta, and her own

jewelry designs when she found time to make them. Through experimentation with techniques and materials, Renk taught herself enameling and other metalsmithing skills. However, the demands of managing a gallery were becoming increasingly burdensome. In time, she was able to sell her interest in the gallery and move on. She exited Chicago for San Francisco; the year was 1948.

In every good narrative, there are certain defining moments, things that happen to the main character that must be told because they change the arc of the story; such is the case with Renk at this juncture. In 1950-51, she left San Francisco and embarked on a trip to Spain and Morocco with the now legendary weaver Lenore Tawney. She also traveled to Paris, spending a year painting in oils. In the spring of 1951, Renk met the great artist Constantin Brancusi in his Parisian studio. Brancusi had open studios on Sunday and he invited young people for the purpose of checking to “see if they had art talent.” Renk recounted the revelatory meeting she had had with Brancusi: the venerated sculptor would look at the hand of each young person under a magnifying glass and then make some pronouncement; when Brancusi scrutinized her hand under the glass he pronounced “you have the potential.” Merry was very affected by this experience. It was a reaffirmation of her choice to become an artist. Based on this occurrence, Renk

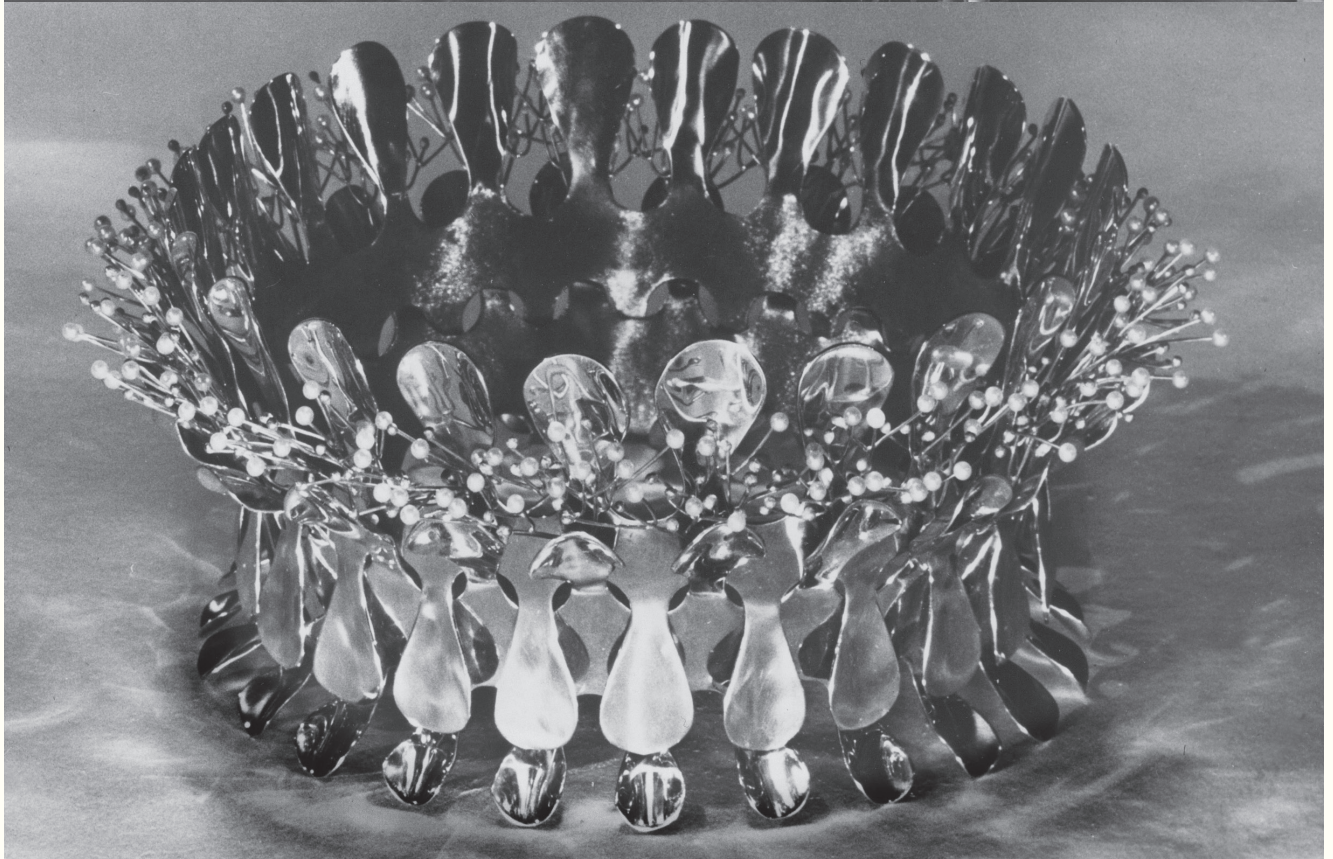
made a watercolor painting titled Brancusi’s Oracle. This launched a series of “Memory” paintings, watercolors in a typical scale of eighteen by twenty-four inches although a few are larger; most containing words that become part of the composition and serve a narrative purpose. Renk used these paintings as memory markers to imprint the experience for her, her children and grandchildren, so precious were the moments that she did not want them to fade.

The next and final chapter of Renk’s life involved a hilltop house in San Francisco, a potter and life-long companion/ husband, two daughters and grandchildren, multiple wedding crowns, and museum collections. Once she returned to San Francisco from her travels in Europe, Renk became deeply involved in the arts community, and met and married the talented potter Earle Watt Curtis in 1958. Merry and Earle started a family and soon had two daughters, Bonnie and Sandra Curtis. Renk continued to work in her home-studio, taking on small private commissions and specializing in hair ornaments, and engaging in the art of enameling, “just for the love of it.” It was not until 1969, when the “Objects: USA” exhibition commissioned her to make Wedding Crown, a fourteen karat interlocking gold cirlet with an encircling “bush” of two hundred fifty pearls, that Renk received international recognition for her virtuosic craftsmanship.



GRAPHITE DRAWING of designs for a sterling silver Owl Ring, commissioned by Marian Norberg, 1978. OUR BABY BONNIE. “Memory” watercolor painting of Merry Renk holding baby Bonnie in a sling while at work making wedding rings. It commemorates the birth of Renk’s eldest daughter Bonnie in 1959.





MERRY RENK constructing a wedding crown in her San Francisco studio, 1969. *Todd Bryant Photography*. WEDDING CROWN of fourteen karat gold sheet and cultured pearls, 1968. *Joseph Del Valle Photography*. This wedding crown was included in the "OBJECTS: USA" catalog and featured in the accompanying exhibition that began its tour nationally in 1969 and traveled extensively throughout the nation for ten years.





SOLDERING WEDDING CROWN 1969. "Memory" watercolor painting of Merry Renk creating her iconic wedding crown design that is based on a system of interlocking patterns cut from gold sheets and formed in a circlet.

Stylistically, her jewelry now had a signature look of organic abstraction, and generally, the design incorporated some element of movement.

Renk's legacy as a pioneer studio jeweler and a contemporary artist of her time was further validated when in 1981 the California Crafts Museum in Palo Alto, California, organized the exhibition, "Merry Renk, Jeweler: Visual Biography and Retrospective." This retrospective showcased over one hundred jewelry and decorative arts objects, and also included examples of her graphics and watercolors. Renk's career momentum of the 1980s raced forward into the next decade, and her jewelry began to be collected by major museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Museum of Arts and Design, (New York), Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, D.C.), Chicago Art Institute, Oakland Museum of California, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

She also began to be identified as the designer of beautiful fantasy crowns, and both her daughters walked down the aisle wearing exquisite Renk custom-designed gold and gem wedding crowns. In her long career as a professional goldsmith, Renk had placed a few other crowns with jewelry collectors. I think Merry would be pleased if ever the idea of the wedding crown could usher in a style-revival in nuptial headpieces.

Like her memory paintings, she has left us with imprints of ways to remember her. There is her lovely and heartfelt "Say Goodbye" on YouTube; her website, where one can watch a video of her making her crowns, and listen to narration of poems she wrote to elucidate each crown's title; and the oral history interview conducted by distinguished jeweler Arline Fisch for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, and which can be accessed online.

We can wave goodbye to Merry in her black convertible. I imagine her racing upward, riding atop the clouds as in her memory painting, "Jeweler's Heaven," where the jeweler's hand tools—the needle nose, the round nose and bird nose pliers, all ascend to the most sacred of heights, floating among the fluffy cumulus, leaving behind the gravity of earth. So, this is how it should be. Merry Renk has been reunited with her tools. ☞

#### SUGGESTED READING

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

**Greenbaum, Toni.** "Constructivism and American Studio Jewelry, 1940 to the Present." *Studies in Decorative Arts*, Bard Graduate Center, 1998/1999 Fall-Winter, Vol. VI, No. 1: 68-79.

**Watkins, Joan Pearson.** "Opulent And Organic, The Jewelry of Merry Renk." *American Craft Magazine*, April/May 1981: 32-35.

**Archives of American Art:** [aaa.si.edu](http://aaa.si.edu).

**[craftinamerica.org](http://craftinamerica.org)** for information on Merry Renk and other craft artists.

**<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/california-design-lacma/>** for a free download to iTunes that will include the documentary on Merry Renk.