

# THE DARING ART OF Jewellery

By Evra Taylor



Gloria Bass

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is the definition of art jewellery.

Quebec has traditionally been known and celebrated for its avant-garde sense of style in all aspects of art and design, from furniture to the plastic arts. When it comes to art jewellery, the same holds true. Art jewellery is traditional jewellery's alter ego.

Canada is home to several internationally known jewellery designers who dare to break the rules, some in more startling ways than others. In the exercise of discussing what is art jewellery, one must keep an open mind. The juxtaposition of, for instance, very *outré* Montreal designer Barbara Stutman—whose work has at times portrayed controversial images of childbirth and rape—with the classic fine jewellery pieces of Gloria Bass reveals just

how expansive the definition of art jewellery is.

Difficulties in defining art forms are not exclusive to jewellery. In fact, in the art world, says Stutman, "Some critics hold that true art—sculpture, for example—must conform to the formula of the artist conceptualizing the work, then having it executed by someone else." Art jewellery has been described as sculpture one can wear, or wearable art. A cross-Canada check up of some of the top names in the field reveals a cornucopia of tastes, style and vision, from daring activist statements to more refined craftings made simply for their beauty. The bottom line is art jewellery is highly interpretive. This is not your mother's jewellery—unless you have a very funky mother.



Barbara Stutman



Barbara Stutman

that have a certain value, a look Stutman describes as "Glorious gaudiness." "In their culture," she says, "their jewellery symbolized their wealth and power. By using coloured wire sparkling with hundreds of seed beads instead of actual stones, I'm saying that stones are not necessarily what make a piece valuable." Here, as in previous series, Stutman's work is informed by her early beginnings and interest in anthropology, painting, knitting and crocheting. The crochet technique was borne of her childhood love of knitting and her study, in the 1980s, of textile techniques at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. "Why park all your other interests?" she asks. "That would be absurd. When creating, why not incorporate other ideas besides the pursuit of 'beauty' and the display of wealth into wearable metal objects? My work has impact because people don't expect these things in jewellery. That's its power," she states. Stutman's "Royal Jewellery" creations range from \$800 to \$4,500; other pieces are priced around \$500.

Canadian art jewellers enter the scene where traditional lines drawn between art and jewellery blur. Stutman typifies this foray, and is one of the most "out there" among this collection of artists. Over the last two decades, she has "bent" the genre to suit her own sensibilities (isn't this the job of an artist?). Stutman, who specializes in textile techniques using metal, states, "There are other things of value besides gold and stones. You can take humble materials and make them spectacular."

Her pieces are based on concepts and messages; her work is perhaps best described by the name of the Los Angeles gallery that carries it, Sculpture to Wear. Several years ago, Stutman developed a series of political commentary jewellery as a reaction to what she considers advertising sexist toward women. Here, women's body parts such as legs and breasts found their way onto brooches, neckpieces and rings crafted of crocheted gold and coloured wire. "I felt the images of women I saw in these ads were demeaning to me. At best, they showed that women have a very limited role, which revolves around their identity as sexual objects."

Currently, Stutman is developing a series called "Royal Jewellery," beginning with the lavish, in-your-face adornments of the maharajas of India. This time, royal jewellery is interpreted using unusual materials such as vinyl lacing and coloured wire embellished with seed beads and tiny pearls. The jewellery worn by these Hindu rulers featured stones

On the more "fine art" end of art jewellery, Montreal designer Gloria Bass's work falls into two categories—a limited production line and custom pieces. The latter are often organic, using fluid, sculptural forms.

What makes Bass "arty" is her classic yet daring sense of style. One pair of earrings, for instance, features different-coloured stones on each ear for an element of

surprise. "The stones themselves inspire me," she says, "along with nature and the geometry of architecture. I like my pieces to have an unexpected touch. The women who buy my jewellery are self-confident and know what they want. On the whole, Montrealers are more willing to take risks in expressing themselves through their jewellery than they used to be," she states. Bass insists on high-end craftsmanship and only the best of materials, yet she works within people's budgets to keep her jewellery affordable. Her prices for original pieces run from \$1,000 to "the sky's the limit." A particularly eye-catching brooch, for example, features a butterfly with four-inch-wide gold wings set with coral cabochons and yellow sapphires. It is, in fact, a flight of fancy few jewellers are able to envision or physically craft. As she says, "My work is not designed to make a fashion statement. It's something lasting."

Those who wear a custom-designed Gloria Bass piece are guaranteed one thing—there will be no one else walking down the street wearing that particular piece, and there is no chance the woman sitting next to you at a cocktail party will be wearing a duplicate! Clients have often told Bass anecdotes of being approached at social events, with the exclamation "That's a Gloria Bass piece, isn't it?"



Gloria Bass