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ART & DESIGN

'Little Dreams in Glass and Metal' Spotlights Enameling

Antiques

By EVE M. KAHN DEC. 17, 2015

Few museums reserve gallery space and budgets for enameled objects. Bernard N. Jazzar and Harold B. Nelson, curators and collectors in Los Angeles, set out to rectify that by creating the nonprofit Enamel Arts Foundation in 2007. It owns about 1,000 of these works — from specks of jewelry to panels as tall as six feet — made of colored glass fired onto metal.

Mr. Nelson and Mr. Jazzar have pulled about 120 pieces from the foundation for a traveling exhibition, "Little Dreams in Glass and Metal: Enameling in America, 1920 to the Present" (with a catalog from the University of North Carolina Press). The show, which opens on Jan. 24 at the Craft & Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, includes jewelry, boxes, vessels, plaques and sculptures. Their motifs are abstract or in the form of stylized marine creatures, birds, scarabs, flowers, fruit, forests, biblical scenes and human genitalia. The surfaces are textured with seams, cracks, gold spheres, glass shards, pearls and diamonds.

The foundation's goal, Mr. Nelson said, is "to increase visibility for this field that we feel has been overlooked and neglected for too long."

It has works by hundreds of enamellers, and has paid a few hundred dollars to over \$10,000 apiece for works. The title of the book and show was adapted from a

quotation from Karl Drerup, a German enameler who had fled Nazi persecution with his wife, Gertrude, and settled in New Hampshire. Mr. Drerup (1904-2000) drew inspiration from jewel-tone medieval church windows and painters like Paul Klee and Georges Braque. In 1956, he told some buyers how delightful it was to know they enjoyed his products, considering the long hours spent “making these little dreams out of glass and metal.”

A handful of dealers have focused on enameled pieces, including Rena Rosenthal in Manhattan and Mobilia Gallery in Boston, but hardly any collectors specialize in the material. “That has kind of mystified us,” Mr. Nelson said.

Descendants of enamelers, including Mr. Drerup’s, have donated documents to the foundation, and more museums are taking enameled holdings out of storage. Among the institutions that now show works by the artists included in the “Little Dreams” exhibition are the Newark Museum, the Yale University Art Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Boston museum displays ridged and gnarled enamel vessels by June Schwarcz, who died in August at the age of 97. In 2017, the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington will present a survey of her work, and Mr. Nelson and Mr. Jazzar are working on a monograph about her.

“Even until her final days she was constantly inventing new forms,” Mr. Nelson said.

After Los Angeles, the “Little Dreams” exhibition will move to the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento and then the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock. Mr. Nelson said he would like to arrange overseas loans, too.

“We have big dreams for our ‘Little Dreams,’” he said.

Piecing Together a Life

The Parisian artist Alix Aymé had little interest in keeping meticulous records for her paintings on canvas, silk, paper, lacquer and glass. Sometimes she did not

even sign them. She was finishing what would be her last piece on the day she died in 1989 at the age of 95.

Collectors, dealers, filmmakers and historians are tracking down her works for books, shows and a documentary, and they are piecing together the story of her international travels and recovery from wartime trauma.

Pascal Lacombe, an author of an Aymé monograph published in 2012, said that boxfuls of paperwork from her apartment were accidentally incinerated after her death. Surviving records show that before World War II, she trained with Symbolist painters, and lived, taught, painted and exhibited in China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

After divorcing her first husband, a literature professor, she married an army officer, Georges Aymé, brother of the writer Marcel Aymé. She had two sons, one with each husband. The family stayed in Hanoi during the war. Japanese soldiers tortured Georges Aymé, who died a few years later. Vietnamese rioters killed her older child, Michel, who was 19.

Ms. Aymé's prewar paintings include portraits of Asian peasants and servants, especially women with infants, and scenes of ruins and covered markets with bursts of sun between columns and stacks of produce. Her postwar works sometimes depict Michel as a martyr.

Joel L. Fletcher, an owner of Fletcher/Copenhaver Fine Art gallery in Fredericksburg, Va., which specializes in Ms. Aymé's work, said the tragedies did not embitter her or quash her creativity. She experimented with lacquering on gold leaf and painting on glass and fabrics.

"Her art really saved her," he said.

He and his partner, John A. Copenhaver, are working on a catalog of her paintings with Mr. Lacombe and Guy Ferrer, the co-author of the 2012 book. Paul Lewis at Subterracon Films in Fredericksburg plans to make a documentary about Ms. Aymé. Relatives have surfaced in recent months who may be interviewed for

the film.

The research team will also follow her trail in Asia. Her murals of Laotian scenery, which survive at a palace museum in Luang Prabang, need some restoration: “The backs of the paintings have been damaged by termites,” Mr. Lacombe said.

The film will include images of her still painting in old age, her fingers gnarled.

“You can feel the whole life of work just looking at her hands,” Mr. Lacombe said.

Forgotten paintings and fragments of her correspondence have turned up at auctions and in museum warehouses; in 2011, a batch of her postcards sold in France for about \$1,100. Fletcher/Copenhaver will be exhibiting at antiques shows in Washington and Charleston, S.C., early next year, with Aymé paintings priced from about \$5,000 to \$50,000.

The dealers recently sold her watercolor-on-silk portrait of two children sleeping. It had belonged to a Canadian diplomat who fled Shanghai on foot in 1949, leaving behind a houseful of possessions but making sure to take that painting home.

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