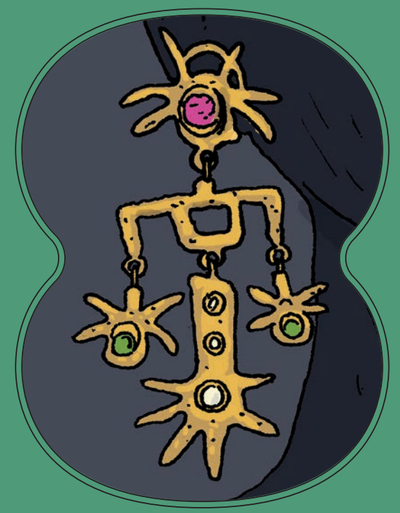
Chapter Eight



The Secret History

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A tight-knit group of women uncovered a little-known pocket of the art world. As the Norton Museum of Art celebrates *Artists' Jewelry: From Cubism to Pop, the Diane Venet Collection*, we sit down with the guiding light of the show.

MASK: "OPTIC TOPIC," 1974, BY MAN RAY. EARRING: "MOON," 1971, BY FAUSTO MELOTTI. NECKLACE: "UNTITLED," 1968, BY LUCIO DEL PEZZO. BROOCH: "ELICA VERMEIL," 1992, BY GIACOMO BALLA. BRACELET (ON LEFT WRIST): "HULA HOOP," 2017, BY PABLO REINOSO. BROOCH (IN LEFT HAND): "MONDAY," 2012, BY UGO RONDINONE. BRACELET (ON RIGHT WRIST): "UNTITLED," 1940s, BY GINO SEVERINI. RINGS: "UNTITLED," 1984–1986, MERET OPPENHEIM, AND "ACCUMULATION DE CLOUS ET VIS," 1967, BY ARMAN. CHAPTER IMAGE: EARRINGS, "UNTITLED," 1950S, BY AFRO.

DIANE VENET WEARS NECKLACE, "VASE FLEURI, LIERRE," 2022, BY WANG KEPING, AND RING, "UNTITLED," 2023, BY PHILLIP KING. FOLLOWING SPREAD: HAIR BROOCH: "MONTRE PETITE CUILLÈRE," 1957, BY SALVADOR DALÍ. EYE BROOCH: "L'OEIL," 1991, BY NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE. LIP BROOCH: "UNTITLED (LABBRA)," 2012, BY JANNIS KOUNELLIS. EARRINGS: "UNTITLED," 1950s, BY AFRO. RING: "UNTITLED," 1940s, BY ALEXANDER CALDER. BROOCH (IN RIGHT HAND): "CUCUMBER," 2014, BY ERWIN WURM. NECKLACE (IN RIGHT HAND): "HOPEAKUU (SILVER MOON)," 1970, BY TAPIO WIRKKALA. BROOCH (ON GROUND): "CRAWLING BABY," 1989, BY KEITH HARING.

The desire to wear jewelry is one of humankind's oldest forms of self-expression. It's no wonder that over millennia, jewelry has evolved into a dazzling array of styles and meanings. In its infancy, it consisted of simple necklaces, headpieces, and bracelets crafted from shells, flowers, and twigs, celebrating nature's bounty. As time progressed, jewelry became a symbol of wealth and power, worn by kings and queens, and governed by strict sumptuary laws in the Western world.

With the advent of new skills, technologies, and materials, jewelry continued to metamorphose. By the 19th century, it had become accessible to both the wealthy elite and the average person, categorized into an exciting tapestry of types: precious, semi-precious, costume, everyday, symbolic, royal, fashion, and, by century's end, a true expression of art.

Fast forward to the artistically energetic midcentury, when a conviction that all forms of art are created equal ignited a revolution in jewelry-making. Visionaries like Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Lucio Fontana, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, Georges Braque, and Niki de Saint Phalle jumped into the fray, viewing jewelry as an extension of their artistic practices. This marked the intersection of art and adornment, where each piece became a bold statement, reflecting the era's dynamic spirit.

Although several renowned artists ventured into the realm of wearable art, artist-made jewelry—that is, jewelry made by artists known for other mediums—is quite uncommon. Most existing pieces are owned by a select few, deeply tucked away in private collections. Frequently, these items are personal gifts or family heirlooms. They remain largely unknown to the public; in fact, there are very few places where people can go and see artists' jewelry. If you visit London, you could encounter it at Didier Ltd or Louisa Guinness Gallery; in Paris, at Galerie MiniMasterpiece. If you went to one of the great art fairs you could run into Didier Ltd there: Design Miami in Florida, The Winter Show in New York, or TEFAF Maastricht in the Netherlands. Museums that show jewelry might have a piece or two on view, but generally do not have generous displays in which visitors can educate themselves.

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Diane Venet, who possesses some of the most exceptional artists' jewelry in existence, presents a unique opportunity to experience this art form in breadth and depth. Her new exhibition, *Artists' Jewelry: From Cubism to Pop, the Diane Venet Collection*, will be on view at the Norton Museum of Art from April 12 through October 5. It will showcase over 150 pieces of artists' jewelry, created by approximately 140 of the most prominent artists from the 20th and 21st centuries, displayed alongside their paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and photographs. Venet has shown her collection more than a dozen times since she began her journey as a collector in the late 1980s, with her jewelry previously exhibited across Europe, Asia, and North America. "Sharing my passion is my happiness," she wrote to me from her home in Paris. "I hope that the visitors will understand that they have entered a new world and an intimacy with the artists. These works are rare, and they are precious only because of their symbolic content, which is at the origin of their creation."

Venet's fascination with jewelry began in childhood, sparked by the bracelets and medals she received, which captured her imagination. As a teenager in Paris, she developed a penchant for distinctive jewelry, favoring large costume pieces that others were often hesitant to wear. In the 1960s, at an opening of a Roy Lichtenstein exhibition in New York, she purchased her first piece of artists' jewelry: a brooch by the artist, for just $3.

Years later, in the mid-'80s, the French sculptor Bernar Venet proposed to her with a thinly rolled piece of silver he had fashioned into a ring, and her passion for artists' jewelry was born. They married and moved to New York, where she mingled with his artistic circle. Among them was the esteemed collector and gallerist Joan Sonnabend, whose husband, Roger Sonnabend, was part of the real estate group that owned Sonesta Hotels, including the Plaza Hotel. From 1973 to 1977, Sonnabend operated an artists' jewelry gallery out of the Plaza, "Sculpture to Wear," which showcased works by celebrated artists such as Alexander Calder, Jean Arp, Man Ray, Pol Bury, and Picasso. This gallery played a pivotal role in establishing the market for artists' jewelry that continues to flourish today. Venet admired Sonnabend's discerning taste, and the two quickly became close friends, with Sonnabend also serving as mentor. Venet acquired numerous pieces from Sonnabend, forming the foundation of her growing collection. Venet also met GianCarlo Montebello, who, along with Teresa Pomodoro (sister of sculptors and goldsmiths Arnaldo and Giò Pomodoro), was a key figure in the artists' jewelry scene. Between 1967 and 1978, Montebello and Pomodoro operated a business under the name GEM Montebello, focusing on creating jewelry editions by artists and collaborating with more than 50 leading figures of the time, including Fontana, Jesús Rafael Soto, César, Arman, Ettore Sottsass, and de Saint Phalle. Sonnabend had the rights to sell GEM's creations in the United States, providing her clients with invaluable access. With these connections, Venet found herself at an epicenter of opportunity for amassing the best pieces of artists' jewelry in the world.

There are a variety of ways in which artists can engage with the jewelry medium: by making their own pieces (as Calder and Harry Bertoia did); collaborating with makers (Georges Braque with French jeweler Baron Heger de Löwenfeld; Picasso with French goldsmith François Hugo, great-grandson of Victor Hugo); making designs for multiples (de Saint Phalle with GEM), and within multiples, collaborating on prototypes, editioned works, or unlimited editions. While Venet collects them all, she favors the unique works that an artist or friend has given just to her. "[John] Chamberlain made only one brooch, which he gave me, and [Frank] Stella, after being convinced by Bernar, also gave me his first-ever necklace! These are such friendly gestures... I

keep thinking that I own (in miniature of course) the contents of a contemporary art museum all by myself!"

Indeed, considering the high prices commanded by these artists for work in their primary medium, a piece of jewelry designed by them can be a more budget-friendly option. For example, one can experience the imaginative spirit of Calder's mobiles by wearing one of his kinetic necklaces (1930s and '40s); Fontana's Spatialism by gazing at his ring, "Elisse Concetto Spaziale" (1967), or marvel at Dalí's Surrealism by taking in his "Lèvres en rubis et dents en perles" brooch (1949), which features plump ruby lips and pearly teeth. The artists' mark is there, wearable in three dimensions, with the value in the meaning of the work.

The advent of artists' jewelry can be traced to the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and to René Lalique, a key figure in Art Nouveau at the turn of the 20th century. An artist, designer, and goldsmith, he created stunning brooches, necklaces, and diadems inspired by nature and made by hand, most notably for his patron, the British-Armenian businessman Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian. Today, these can be viewed at Gulbenkian's eponymous museum in Portugal. In London, via Italy, Carlo Giuliano and his two sons, Carlo and Arthur, laid the groundwork for jewelry-makers as artists, their work highly sought-after. In the early 20th century, goldsmith Hugo worked not only with Picasso, but also with Arman, Arp, Jean Cocteau, André Derain, Jean Dubuffet, Ernst, Jean Lurçat, Roberto Matta, Sidney Nolan, and Dorothea Tanning. Several of these artists were part of well known artistic groups, such as the Dadaists, Surrealists, Constructivists, the Bauhaus, and De Stijl, and with the influence of Hugo and later his son, Pierre, designed jewelry became a part of their intellectual approach. American-born Calder began making jewelry for his family and friends in the 1920s (completing approximately 1,800 pieces during his lifetime), and Bertoia, in the 1930s. After World War II, the Italian jeweler Mario Masenza began working with contemporary artists to make artists' jewelry.

Through collector Peggy Guggenheim and later Sonnabend, the U.S. proved fertile ground for artists' jewelry, with several exhibitions raising its profile. In 1946, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented *Modern Handmade Jewelry,* which included the work of Calder, Bertoia, Jacques Lipchitz, and Richard Pousette-Dart, among others. In 1948, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis organized *Modern Jewelry Under Fifty Dollars,* presenting the work of 32 well known sculptors, designers, and architects. A similar show was mounted at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, with jewelry displayed alongside modern painting, sculpture, and design.

London and Paris later followed suit, with Goldsmiths' Hall partnering with the V&A in 1961 to launch *International Exhibition of Modern Jewellery 1890–1961*. This groundbreaking show, designed to encourage creativity, displayed around 1,000 pieces of jewelry, with loans from more than two dozen countries. Virtually all the artists mentioned above were included, along with the important additions of Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Gargallo, and Alberto Giacometti. The following year, in 1962, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris opened *Antagonismes 2, l'Objet*, where jewelry was shown alongside furniture, pottery, and fashion.

In the later 1960s and '70s, several exhibitions of artists' jewelry were held, serving as important references for provenance today. Notable events include MoMA's *Jewelry by Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* in 1967; *Atelier François Hugo Sculptures d'Or et d'Argent* at Le Point Cardinal, Paris, in 1967; *Multiples: The First Decade*, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1971; *Sieraad 1900-1972*, at the De Zonnehof Museum, the Netherlands, in 1972; *Aurea*, at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, in 1972, 1974, and 1976; and *Jewelry as Sculpture as Jewelry* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 1973. (While this list is not exhaustive, along with Galerie Sven in Paris (opened in 1972), GEM, Sonnabend's Sculpture to Wear in New York, and Artcurial in Paris, these are the events to authenticate artists' jewelry, along with signatures and other documentation.)

The jewelry scene was relatively quiet until the 1980s, when Didier Haspeslagh of Didier Ltd stumbled upon a treasure trove of artists' jewelry in Florida. Initially focused on Arts and Crafts and designer pieces, he began frequenting the Original Miami Beach Antique Show, where he occasionally uncovered hidden gems—literally—like a Picasso or Dalí creation lurking at the bottom of diamond merchants' shelves. His curiosity piqued, Haspeslagh would inquire about gold Picasso medallions, only to see dealers dismissively weigh them for sale at a mere percentage above their scrap value. "I couldn't believe my luck! Acquiring pieces from such prestigious names for a fraction of their other artworks' auction prices felt like a dream," he recalls.

Over the next two decades, Haspeslagh and his wife, Martine Newby Haspeslagh, transformed their inventory to focus on artists' jewelry, a captivating field that had yet to secure the attention of the broader market. With every piece signed by the artist, attribution was never a concern. Among their first notable customers was Venet, and the story of their inaugural sale together—a stunning Gino Severini bracelet sourced from an Argentinian dealer at one of the Miami shows—was transformative.

Collectors like Venet created a surge of interest, and prices started to escalate. By the 1990s, the original generation of collectors began to pass away, which resulted in more pieces entering the marketplace. During this time, societal norms evolved as well; working women, with their own financial resources, prioritized unique jewelry over traditional styles. As Haspeslagh observes, "[Today, there is] a shift in spending, with independently wealthy women, not expecting to have husbands and boyfriends buying their jewels (always bling), buying to their own taste, which tends more toward artists' jewelry."

The artists' jewelry market has grown exponentially, and auction houses such as Sotheby's have gotten into the game with sales organized in 2022 by specialist Tiffany Dubin, and in Milan, in 2024. Artists' jewelry galleries are adding new inventory by inviting living artists to make pieces. Louisa Guinness Gallery, for example, works with artists such as Anish Kapoor to create contemporary works, as does Galerie MiniMasterpiece, owned by Esther de Beaucé, Venet's daughter. Much like her mother, de Beaucé enjoys working with artists but, in her case, it's by facilitating new creations: "On several occasions, an artist with whom I collaborate has used his or her reflections on the creation of a piece of jewelry to feed back into a more monumental work. It's quite logical when you think about it, because designing a piece of jewelry for an artist always means thinking up a small sculpture, and therefore a work of art."