

Antiques

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Celebrating an Artist Who Was Also a Craftsman

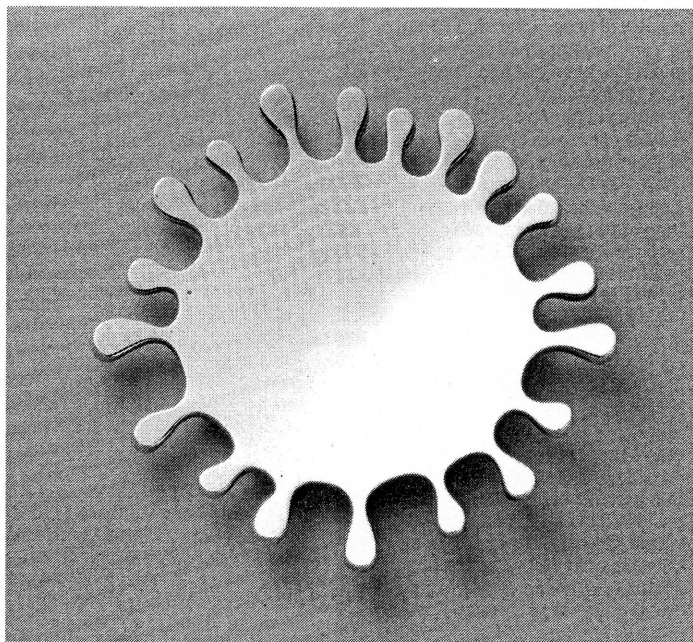
New York women really love their jewelry. Last week, more than 200 of them turned up for the opening of "Georg Jensen Jewelry," the new exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan. Proudly wearing their Jensen confections, the guests included two of Jensen's granddaughters and several collectors, among them Susan Weber Soros, the founder and director of the center and one of the authors of the 350-page catalog (Yale University Press).

Americans are familiar with Jensen silver, especially the flatware, which has been sold here since 1915. Today there is a huge market in antique Jensen silver: a silver brooch with inlaid semiprecious stones can sell for as much as \$30,000, and this spring a single-owner sale of vintage Jensen at Christie's reached record prices.

The Bard show traces the work of the company through the 20th century (it's still in business), with Jensen's sketches, signed and unsigned, his and his fellow artists' design books, and more than 300 pieces of jewelry borrowed from Georg Jensen Ltd., several museums, private individuals, Drucker Antiques of New York and the Silver Fund, a London gallery that specializes in antique Jensen silver. People who know little or nothing about 20th-century Danish silver jewelry will be impressed by the variety of the designs and the craftsmanship. Connoisseurs may be surprised by ultra-modern pieces that resemble Arp sculptures.

Georg Jensen (1866-1935) grew up in the countryside outside Copenhagen; a nature lover, he recalled his family's property as "a paradise on earth." When he was 14, the family moved to Copenhagen, and he attended art school, which involved a four-year apprenticeship with a goldsmith. After graduating, he tried — and failed — to earn a living as an artist. The show, which is laid out chronologically, opens with some of the early pottery Jensen was unable to sell and a plaster bust of his father.

By 1895 Jensen was married, the father of two children and in need of money. He took a job as a foreman in an art-metal workshop. In his spare



Bard Graduate Center

A silver brooch designed by Bent Gabrielsen for Georg Jensen in the early 1970's is on display at the Jensen exhibition in Manhattan.

time, he made silver jewelry ornamented with botanical motifs, and it sold. In 1904 he opened his own workshop with a few apprentices and a lot of ideas.

"When he came in the morning, he pulled a number of drawings from his pocket," Henry Pilstrup, his first apprentice, later recalled (quoted in the catalog by the show's curator, David A. Taylor, who has studied the Jensen company for 30 years). "The drawings were on any kind of paper he had held in his hand at the time — sometimes the drawings were on a torn-off piece of wrapping paper."

The bracelets, brooches, belt buckles and hair combs he fashioned by hand soon won acclaim. In 1904, one critic wrote, "Unlike anyone else, Georg Jensen has created something radically new in awakening the beauty of silver, which has until now been asleep." The jewelry was praised for its well-balanced compositions, its broad palette of colors and the evident mastery of its cutting, filing, soldering, stone setting and polishing. ("I think that has been my great advantage: that I was a craftsman first and an artist second," Jensen once said.)

Mr. Taylor discusses Jensen's singular skills in the catalog. "The re-

finement, depth and balance of Jensen's designs clearly reflect his training as a sculptor," he writes. "At the same time, the high quality of the craftsmanship put into the jewelry reflects his training as a metalsmith and his intimate understanding of the plastic properties of silver. This was a rare combination of skills, and it set Jensen apart from other Danish jewelers."

In the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement, Jensen felt his jewelry should be affordable, so he used silver, instead of gold, and semiprecious stones like agate, amethyst, carnelian, coral, lapis and opal, rather than diamonds and precious stones. Bard has displayed some of his jewel-encrusted brooches next to chunks of the raw unpolished stones.

Jensen liked to combine materials; the show, for example, has an overscaled, showy tortoiseshell hair comb he decorated with tendrils of silver and cabochons of coral.

At first influenced by Art Nouveau, Jensen took organic forms and abstracted them. He never tried to depict flowers, leaves or birds accurately. "An object must be to create joy," he said. No photocats for him.

From the beginning, Jensen went to outside artists for new designs. In

1909, for example, he hired the avant-garde Danish painter Johan Rohde, who created what became the company's most popular flatware pattern, the Acorn. Rohde's jewelry designs combined lacy filigree with open spaces to emphasize the delicacy of the silver. (Examples and sketches are on view.)

Part of Jensen's success was due to his willingness to collaborate and give credit to others. This kept the supply of designs fresh and contributed to the viability of the company long after its founder's death.

In 1909 Jensen hired his brother-in-law Harald Nielsen, a modernist like Rohde, whose style was so different from his own. Nielsen added clean, geometrically shaped jewelry to the mix and served as the artistic director of the company from 1958 to 1962.

In 1930, after the stock market crash, the company hired another modernist, Sigvard Bernadotte, the second son of King Gustav VI of Sweden and a designer who openly disdained the Jensen style as too ornamental (he called it "klunkestyl," or tassel style). Bernadotte was committed to pure, minimal shapes. On display in the show is a streamlined bracelet he designed in 1938 with 10 silver squares connected by interlocking tabs. It is as chic, sophisticated and glamorous as any 1930's jewelry made in Paris.

After World War II, Henning Koppel, a Danish sculptor and watercolorist who had been in wartime exile in Sweden, joined Jensen. He introduced biomorphic forms in hollowware and jewelry. The show includes his 1946 bracelet with six zigzag links of various sizes, which has become an icon of mid-20th-century design.

Jewelry designed for Jensen in the 1950's by Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe (whose talent Picasso promoted) is equally revolutionary. It is body jewelry, sculptured to trace the line of the neck and back.

Bent Gabrielsen's work for the company from the 1970's is also striking. A flat, roundish brooch he designed that is in the show looks like a silvery drop of water that has just landed in a puddle, its outline a series of irregular loops caused by hitting the surface.

The show concludes with a series of innovative designs from the later years of the 20th century. This is when, as the modern jewelry specialist Toni W. Greenbaum aptly observes in the catalog, "Scandinavia became the apotheosis of good design." Amen.