

Matthew Drutt

Sandy's Jewelry Collection



The jewelry component of the Grotta collection is, numerically, the most robust aspect of their holdings. Comprised of nearly 300 works by more than 80 artists, designers, and architects, ranging in date from the 1950s to the present day and emanating from locations across the United States, Europe, Scandinavia and Asia, Sandy's acquisitions of modern and contemporary jewelry began as much of the couples collecting activity had: intuitively, spontaneously and, ultimately, purposefully, with an abiding passion and personal interest in the artists they have been patrons of. In meaningful contrast to other major private collections in this field, which first evolved in earnest beginning in the 1960s, the Grottas did not set out to build an encyclopedic group of objects that would document a history of studio jewelry. Instead, like everything they have acquired, from art to architecture, their interests have been driven by a combination of personal taste, intellectual curiosity and, with many of the artists whose works enrich their lives, cherished friendship.

By and large, those personal relationships have led them to acquire more than one example of an artist's work. This group includes Allan Adler,



Giampaolo Babetto, Gijs Bakker, William Clark, Georg Dobler, Eva EEisler, Laurie Hall, Nels Linsen, Charles Loloma, Fritz Maierhofer, Pavel Opočensky, Kiff Slemmons, Christina Smith, Tone Vigelund, Lela Vignelli, Denise Wallace, Barbara Walters, David Watkins and literally dozens of works by Wendy Ramshaw.

There has never been anything arbitrary about the way the Grottas collect. Indeed, Sandy, who is an interior designer by profession, has always applied a keen and determined visual acumen in orchestrating what to have installed at the house and what she routinely chose to wear. As Lou said to me, “Sandy dressed the house and she dressed herself.” The earliest acquisitions reflect the prevailing interest in Scandinavian design that took hold in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. The earliest artist of some significance to enter their collection first with jewelry and later with flatware, was Allan Adler, the Los Angeles-based designer who was known in his day as the “silversmith to the stars.”⁷¹ “We were on our honeymoon and I wanted to watch a football game, so Sandy went to Allan Adler’s and bought a ring,” Lou remembers. While inherently commercial, Adler’s work nonetheless has a distinctive character, influenced by the Scandinavian temperament on the

one hand, with engraved forms that seem inspired by indigenous American culture on the other. The Grottas developed a camaraderie with Adler over the following years that resulted in more works entering the collection, foreshadowing both how they would work with other artists as their tastes matured, and establishing a foothold for jewelry in their collection that either directly or indirectly embodies an ethnic or tribal disposition.

In 1972, Sandy and Lou viewed the landmark exhibition, *Objects USA: The Johnson Collection of Contemporary Crafts* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York. Composed of 300 works by 240+ American craftspeople working in ceramics, glass, enamel, fiber, jewelry, mosaic and plastics, the show’s original categories. *Objects USA* traveled widely across the United States and Europe between 1969 and 1973. The book of the same name, *Objects USA*, which accompanied the exhibition, introduced them to Charles Loloma’s work. Loloma was a Hopi-American artist of great distinction. Based in Arizona, he also worked in ceramics, painting and sculpture, and can be credited with elevating his ancestral cultural heritage above the market-driven wares that saturated tourist destinations throughout Western America. Sandy contacted Loloma and





he shipped her a sterling silver bracelet inlaid with turquoise, writing that if she didn't like it, she could send it back. She did like it, however, and once again, what started with one acquisition, turned into several over the years, opening up a lasting connection between the Grottas and Loloma.

The Grottas also sourced work by other Native American and Western United States artists. Chief Don Lelooska, the noted Northwest Coast woodworker, introduced them to his sister, metalsmith Patty Fawn, who is represented in the collection by an exemplary ring that both reflects her Kwakiutl heritage and embodies a sense of modernity. On a visit to Seattle, the Grottas found work in galleries by jewelers influenced by noted professor, Ramona Solberg. Solberg was responsible for mentoring several generations of students, including friends Laurie J. Hall and Kiff Slemmons, whose jewelry that Sandy went on to acquire in depth (13 and nine objects, respectively). Through these acquisitions, one gets a sense of the artists' output over an extended period of time. Both artists' oeuvres exemplify the tendency towards narrative or figuration that distinguished West Coast American jewelry from other practices in the US and abroad in that period. The Grottas went on to purchase objects from Hall

directly, including the 1980s neckpieces *K.O.* and *Perception*, which show Hall's signature practice of combining several individual elements into an overall composition. Sandy commissioned Hall to make *Puzzled Solution* in 1986, to wear to a fundraiser at the American Craft Museum for which she was a co-chair. It was one of a series of works Sandy commissioned from jewelers and wearable art makers to highlight artists' work at Museum events.

Kiff Slemmons' work entered the collection at the same time, though commissions by her were more elusive than those by Hall. "I always appreciated their interest in my work," she says, "and they acquired a number of pieces over the years, including way back when I did a show called *In the Name of Friends*, an early portrait series." This body of work was a precursor to the brooches from her *Hands of the Heroes* series, represented in Sandy's collection by the two works illustrated on p. 286. Other objects by Slemmons either gifted on birthdays or by other means, again reflect Sandy's personality, while still later acquisitions, including the column of paper bracelets (p.154) by her bed, illustrate Slemmons' turn to working in handmade paper in a tribal idiom.

The Grotta's gradual and deep immersion in the work of artists working in the eastern United States and

Europe was a result of their baptism into the higher episcopacy of international studio jewelry through the tutelage of gallerist and educator Helen Drutt. Drutt, whose eponymous gallery was first in Philadelphia in the mid-1970s and later in New York during the late 1980s and early 1990s, was a passionate advocate who elevated an evolving group of select American and European craft artists. Through Drutt, many of them had their first solo exhibitions in the United States and would move on to global recognition as a result. Additional sources, particularly for American jewelers, were other galleries – of which there were many more in the 1970s and 1980s – *American Craft* magazine and museum exhibitions.

A bridge between Europe and America can be found in the work of Eva EEisler and Pavel Opočensky. Both artists were trained in their Czech homeland and immigrated to the United States in the early 1980s to escape their country's political climate, returning home in the 1990s after its transition to democracy. Their jewelry is exemplary of the postwar, abstract aesthetic found in the work of artists from Bratislav, Brno and Prague, with Modernist precepts of muted geometric form translated into objects that, in EEisler's case, exploit the Bauhaus' dictum of intelligent efficiency and in Opočensky's case, adopt a





of his silver *Grotta Brooch* (p.286), a Calderesque portrait of Lou, to his neckpieces and brooches that incorporate photography, such as his celebrated *Adam* neckpiece (p.285), *Sportfiguren* brooches and a whimsical, intimate double portrait of Sandy and Lou sharing an ice cream cone (p.286).

A very different aesthetic is espoused by Norwegian master metalsmith Tone Vigeland, represented here by a large blackened silver collar shown displayed on the wooden stand for it made by Thomas Hucker (p. 153). Her work from this period, like a smaller ring from the same period in the collection, are made up of repetitions in muted, truncated linear forms whose fabrication drifts away from the modernist idiom of earlier postwar Scandinavian attitudes. She embraces instead a more trans-historic, Nordic aesthetic resonant of the Viking period, thus creating a dialogue between European and American works in the collection concerned with a pre-modern aesthetic.

By far the most important dimension of the collection is composed of the couple's holdings of works by Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins, which are more extensive than those of any other artist, especially in the case of Ramshaw with 48 objects, and which veer towards the encyclopedic. It testifies to the deep and abiding friendship the two couples have





enjoyed since meeting in the late 1980s. The Grottas encountered their works at Helen Drutt Gallery, whose founder had been Ramshaw's and Watkins' American champion since organizing their landmark joint exhibition at the Philadelphia chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1973. On a trip to London with the Collector's Circle of the American Craft Museum, they visited their home and studios. Sandy purchased a dress and matching necklace by Ramshaw on that trip, both made of fiber. As Watkins recalls, the couples initially connected through food, since the Grottas are dedicated epicureans who seek out new eateries on their travels. He and Lou share a love of jazz from the 1950s, as well as modern architecture. In the 1960s and 1970s, Watkins worked as a jazz pianist and film special effects model maker, writing *Its So Easy*, which Andy Williams made a number 13 hit in the UK in 1970, and designing model spacecraft for Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Watkins appreciates architects Sullivan, Lloyd Wright ("my 'genius of the century'") Kahn, Meier and I. M. Pei. "I have an abiding image of Lou striding through MOMA, New York, flinging his arms out wide and asking, 'what do you think of this, David?' He didn't always approve." In Wendy and Sandy's case, they simply fell down the rabbit hole of a loving friendship, one that included weekly transatlantic phone calls between them for many years.

While the many examples of Watkins' work that Sandy assembled do not include his breakthrough objects in acrylic and gold from the 1970s, he is well represented by numerous later neckpieces composed of different segments fitted together that are architectonic and, in some cases, reminiscent of interstellar vehicular design, carrying titles like *Voyager*, which allude to the subject. Ramshaw's works, by comparison, include nearly every major phase of career, with perhaps the exception of her paper works from the late 1960s. Chief among the examples of her pioneering accomplishments are the signature stacking ring sets that established her as a major voice in British crafts when they first appeared in a show at Pace Gallery, London in 1970. Presented on sculpted, banded stands in acrylic and nonprecious metals, they distinguished her from her peers, establishing a signature vocabulary that she continued to push in different directions for many years. The ring sets, when displayed, are incorporated into their support, thus presenting a unified sculptural object that the wearer can, in turn, reconstruct in a variety of configurations on the hand, according to preference. As Ramshaw noted later: "Most of my jewelry is made in parts or sections, so that the owner can share in the way the piece is worn."² At one point,

Sandy asked Wendy to make her everyday earrings she could wear differently for each day of the week. Ramshaw ended up making her seven different pairs.

Today, these works, like so many others, adorn the Grotta's home. Ramshaw's works quietly dominate its more intimate spaces, like Sandy's dressing room (pp. 300-301), a bittersweet epitaph to a friendship that ended only at the end of 2018 when Ramshaw passed away after a long illness. But the current chapter of the Grotta's life, articulated in the many pages of this book, is a fitting opportunity for them to thank and celebrate the many artists and creators who have enriched their lives.

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1 Mary Rourke, "Allan Adler, 86; Crafted Beauty Queens' Crowns, Silver Pieces for the Times," LA Times Online, December 5, 2002

2 Matthew Drutt, "Wendy Ramshaw: Obituary," The Guardian online, December 2018.

Note: Artist and collector quotes in this essay are from conversations and correspondence with the author in April and May 2019 and correspondence with Helen Drutt in March 2018.

