

irena brynnner

1917-2003



historical masters
WRITTEN BY KAITLYN BRASS

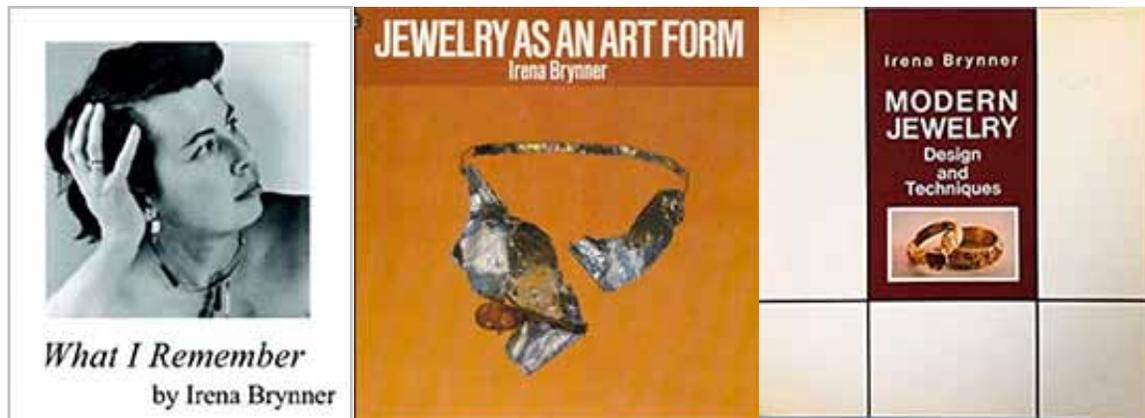


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Irena Brynner was an internationally recognized artist-jeweler. Developing her personal style within the context of international art jewelry in the post-World War II era, Brynner played a significant role in American jewelry design. The author of three books on jewelry making, she was an influence on a generation.

Born in Vladivostok, Russia in 1917, Irena lived there until she was 11 years old, in a two-family household under one roof. In addition to her parents, the home was shared with her aunt and uncle, each a sibling of her respective parents, who were married to each other, and her double cousins. Her cousins were the actor Yul Brynner, as well as his older sister Vera Brynner, a classically trained lyric soprano who sang with the New York City Opera in the 1940s and 50s and fifties. Vera and Irena were close, having been

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raised like sisters, and were buried next to each other. Vera actually shared her love of art and music with Irena.

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Vera, who in addition to being an artist and jeweler in her own right, was also an accomplished mezzo-soprano. A video of her performing may be seen on <https://youtu.be/stfzd0SOYvQ>

Irena's mother was a psychiatrist and her father a lawyer, who owned a shipping business with his brother, the last private business in Soviet Russia. In 1931, they escaped Russia by taking a fishing boat out to meet the last barge her father had shipped. Brynner's father moved both families to Dairen, China, where he set up a prosperous business with his brother.

Irena Brynner would begin studying art in Dairen and Harbin, China, where she was taught in English as well as Russian. Recognizing her talent as an artist, in 1936 Brynner's parents sent her to study art and sculpture at the Cantonale School of Design and Applied Art in Lausanne, Switzerland. By 1939, Brynner and her family were forced to return to China due to the war, which prevented Brynner from graduating. She began teaching children at the MaryKnoll Mission in Dairen. She also taught private classes

in painting and sculpture. When the bombing of Pearl Harbor happened, her father became a Swiss consul. Once the war started, they asked him to be a special delegate to protect British and American interests. He was instrumental in 1940 in providing the safe evacuation of the personnel of both the American and British consular offices and for feeding the Maryknoll Missionaries while they were interned.



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Following the sudden death of her father in 1942, Brynner and her mother found themselves in a very precarious situation. Posthumously, the Japanese government denounced her father as a spy since he represented British and American interests in China during the war. This caused Brynner and her mother to flee to Peking in 1944, where they stayed until 1946.

Following the end of World War II, Brynner and her mother left China and moved to San Francisco at the encouragement of their friends who had already settled in the area.

“Since we had left behind everything we owned in China, I had to begin to consider how I would earn my living. I had been rather spoiled until then,” she said. “I tried giving sculpture lessons in three different Catholic schools because they were private schools and I had no teaching credentials. But the schools had practically no facilities nor tools. I was earning so little and had such difficulties

that I started seriously thinking about doing something besides sculpture. I had painted portraits, so I could have chosen to be a society portraitist and probably earn a very good living, but it



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did not appeal to me. So I started looking in the crafts.” “(1) Seeking more creative fulfillment, she continued her studies in sculpture under WPA veterans and sculptors Michael Von Meyer and Ralph Stackpole. Having already been trained in



the classical tradition in Switzerland, Brynner was introduced to modernism and abstract art in California. She made small maquettes (the French word for a scale model) in clay and began for the first time working in stone. She described the sculpture she carved in stone as “figurative, but really quite abstract.” (1)

During this time, Brynner was trying to figure out ways to earn a better living. A Catholic, Brynner consulted a priest who told her, “You do sculpture! Well,

that’s marvelous. People always die, so just learn to do lettering.” She did not follow his advice but instead enrolled at the California Labor School, where she took drawing and ceramics. Brynner thought ceramics would be a viable medium for her, however, she later felt that it was too restrictive. While at CLS, she discovered Claire Falkenstein’s jewelry which fascinated her because it was so much like

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sculpture. She said, "I felt here, finally, was an area where I wouldn't have to compromise. I would make sculpture in relation to the human body instead of sculpture in relation to space or in relation to architecture." (1) This realization set Brynner off on her journey toward becoming an artist-jeweler.

In 1949, she could not afford to take jewelry making lessons,

so she started working with Carolyn Rosine as an apprentice. She worked with her for two months in the mornings and taught in the afternoons. "Working for her involved much tedious sawing out and polishing which did not teach me anything." Then Brynner was introduced to Franz Bergman, a jeweler and ceramist, who needed help making his jewelry orders while he was doing ceramics. "I began to work for him and he showed me step-by-step the whole process. He worked next door on his ceramics and left me to do the entire jewelry piece. He paid me half of what he would get for his things, which was also very rewarding. This contact with him taught me a lot about working in silver and making



jewelry." (2)

In January 1950, she began taking adult education classes to garner technical expertise. This included taking a course with Bob Winston at the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she learned the process of wax working. Due to limited funds, Brynner set up her studio with repurposed equipment, including an ironing board used as a soldering

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bench, a washing machine motor for polishing, and a Bunsen burner and small alcohol torch for a source of heat.

It was through this trial and error that Brynner learned the art of jewelry making. Three months later, Brynner was selling work at a local furniture and craft shop. Shortly thereafter, she began selling her work at Nanny's, a contemporary jewelry store in San Francisco. Brynner's early works were made of silver sheets and wire in simple forms and shapes, but as her

work progressed, it became more sculptural and abstract. She referenced architecture as her inspiration. Around this time, Brynner attended a meeting that would lead to the formation of the Metal Arts Guild (MAG).

It was during a 1952 College of Marin silversmithing class for MAG artists that Brynner discovered forging. Brynner recalled: "In 1952 or 1953 a group of us from the Metal Arts Guild got together and decided to have a seminar in silversmithing on large hammered-out, or forged, hollowware pieces. That was a great experience. I learned

how, in the process of forging, one can force metal to stretch and shrink. I soon began applying this experience to my own jewelry making." No longer limited by the gauge of wire and sheet, she could now shape metal into new forms. Brynner's insight into this new technique expanded the scope of her design options and led her to develop a new direction in jewelry.



"Margaret De Patta was our guide. And we would meet and we would discuss the designs and how you come to the designs. And sometimes, we disagreed completely, you know. Taking Margaret De Patta, Bob Winston, and myself and Merry Renk, we're all very different. But we were all just the young ones, you know. We didn't have such a strong voice as Margaret had. But she initiated us to start doing some forging and hollowware. And really those seminars of hollowware gave me this idea that, you know, I want to hammer things and I want to forge things. And we were really like a family. And all those art festivals, you know, where



we all got together to organize, to build the whole thing, to put together the jewelry."

Although Brynner respected De Patta as a mentor and as a resource on modernist design, Brynner developed her own aesthetic based on the notion that jewelry was a sculpture for the body. Their view differed when it came to the theoretical approach to design.

"Margaret was very much a Bauhaus school person. And she always said, 'Well, you know, if you put a circle here and you put a triangle there, you have to be able to explain why you are doing that.' (Brynner) said, 'I can't, Margaret. I live by intuition. I do my work by intuition. I can't explain. I feel that's where it belongs. That's why I do it. That's all I can explain.'" This intuition led Brynner to develop her unique ideas about jewelry, and she was able to make innovative contributions to the modernist American studio jewelry movement. Brynner believed in simplicity of line and form, however,

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she wanted to express femininity and the organic nature of the material. Her jewelry enveloped the body. Brynner believed that modernist jewelry should be functional, but it should also augment the attractiveness of the wearer.

Frequently, her work features unique or surprising combinations of mineral specimens, specially cut or

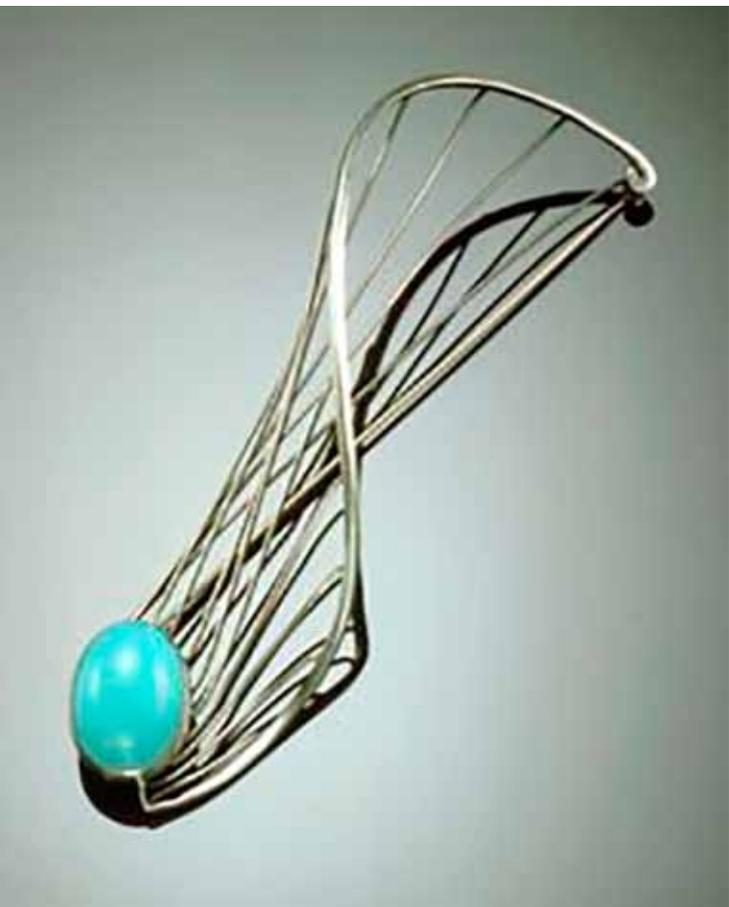
polished semi-precious stones, and found objects, such as tree bark or fragments of ethnographic artifact. Her works are also highlighted by unusual treatments of clasps and closures. She developed her own unique type of earrings with sinuous shapes that caress and embrace the shape of the ear itself. She also developed a style of earring for those that do not have pierced ears. The artist viewed her work as a



logical extension of her early interest in sculpture. "I did not compromise my work when I stopped doing large sculpture; my jewelry is sculpture that relates to the human body." For commission pieces, she felt that her drawings were simple, almost primitive, and would create a wax for approval. Sometimes she painted the wax gold so they would have a good visual image.

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When asked about her designs, she said “Jewelry should enhance the person.” I think that it should be a part of the person. I don’t think that when you walk in, you just see the jewelry and you don’t see the person. You really should see the whole thing. And it’s very important that it somehow responds to your nature. It shouldn’t be a foreign thing. I think



that the person has to enhance the jewelry, as the jewelry has to enhance the person.”

By 1957, Brynner went to New York just to find a place to have a show of work, I was very brazen. First of all, I went to the Museum of Modern Art, and I said, two years that I’m doing it.” She then heard of a gallery just for jewelry, Walker & Eberling. It would be where she had her first show. “They didn’t have modern jewelry. They had ordinary, traditional, expensive jewelry. They gave me stones. I had a 64-carat gem, a green tourmaline that I made a ring with. It was wonderful to work on that show. It made me move to New York.”

She loved the energy of the city. She and her mother moved to Manhattan, where she would open up her shop a year later. It was a small space inside the lobby of her apartment building with a window on the street. However, the move not only changed her scenery but changed the direction of her work. New York City’s fire codes prevented Brynner from using oxygen as fuel for her torch, so she had to use alternate sources and methods to make her jewelry, so she turned to wax casting as a solution. Her wax

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technique was to use soft wax and build it up, rather than use wax to carve-out the desired shape.

That same year, Brynner saw the retrospective exhibition on Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí at the Museum of Modern Art and began appropriating Gaudi-like forms into her jewelry. Brynner's work went from being geometric, contemporary, and architectural, to organic in shape.

It was not until 1969 that Brynner found a new piece of equipment to solve her torch issue. She discovered the Henes Water Welder for electric soldering. The tool allowed her to work directly with metal, with results reminiscent of

lost-wax casting, that is, lacy patterns, soft rolled edges, and melted forms. Consequently, her style became even more sensuous and fluid, often connoting plant life. Such work became an Irena Brynner signature. "Water welding and wax are very similar techniques, only one in a very low-temperature level, the other in a very high level. You melt the edges, you fuse together. It's very similar. With the water welder, you don't have to heat the whole piece when you solder. You can spot solder, spot weld, so the piece does not anneal. Also, by having a thicker melted edge on 24-gauge metal, it also gives a stability so that the whole thing can be sturdy and yet be very light."



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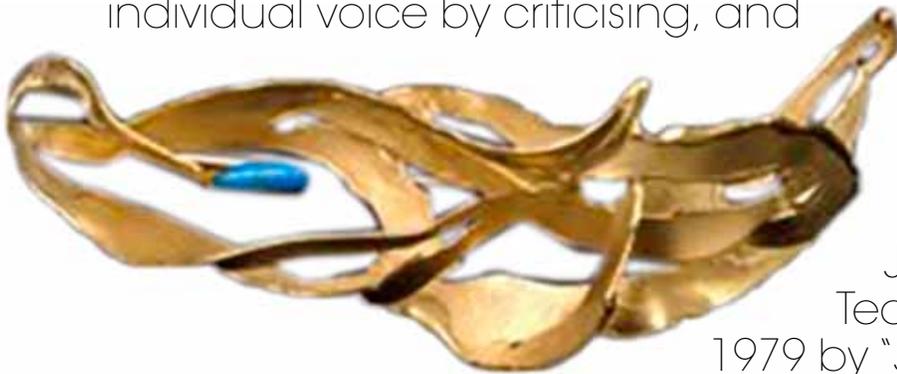
Between 1958 and 1964, Brynner's career exploded. Her work was in a solo exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York. She participated in the International Exhibition of Modern Jewellery 1890-1961 at Goldsmiths' Hall in London, and her work was accepted into the Brussels World Fair for the American section.

She was personally invited by Victor D'Amico, Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), to teach metalsmithing and jewelry making at the Institute of Modern Art at MOMA. She also taught at the Crafts Student League and lectured throughout the United States and abroad.

"I always want to share whatever gives me pleasure. And I enjoyed tremendously sharing my knowledge and whatever I had. She was strongly in favor of encouraging a student's individual voice by criticising, and

suggesting what was right and that was wrong.

In 1967, she published "Modern Jewelry—Design and Techniques," followed in 1979 by "Jewelry as an Art Form."



These volumes revealed many of the special techniques developed by Brynner over the years.

At an ACC show in connection with SNAG in New York, she was approached by a fan. "I stand there and there is a handsome young man with long hair, rushes to me, takes me in his arms, and said 'Oh, Irena, your book, I owe everything to your book! You were such an influence!'" It was master metalsmith, Bob Ebendorf.

Continuing to be recognized for her work, Brynner was awarded the Gold Medal, Bavarian State Prize at the

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International Handicrafts Fair in München, Germany, in 1963. Over the years, she participated in many solo and group exhibitions including 25 Worldwide Known Artists, National Museum of Darmstadt, Germany (1964); American Craftsman, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York (1965); and Objects U.S.A., Various National and International Venues (1969), among others. Her work continued to be recognized at exhibitions in the United States as well as in Japan, Switzerland, Russia, and France.



When asked whether she found being a female artist was difficult she responded. "No. I'll tell you, in America, I never felt it at all. Never even came to my mind. In fact, all those women artists and so on, I always said, Why? I never felt it here. Maybe the first time I felt that I have to show that I can be just as rude and just as businesslike as anybody else was when I had

my show at Walker & Eberling. Mr. Walker was – you know, it's a family that has the gallery, and Eberling was purely a

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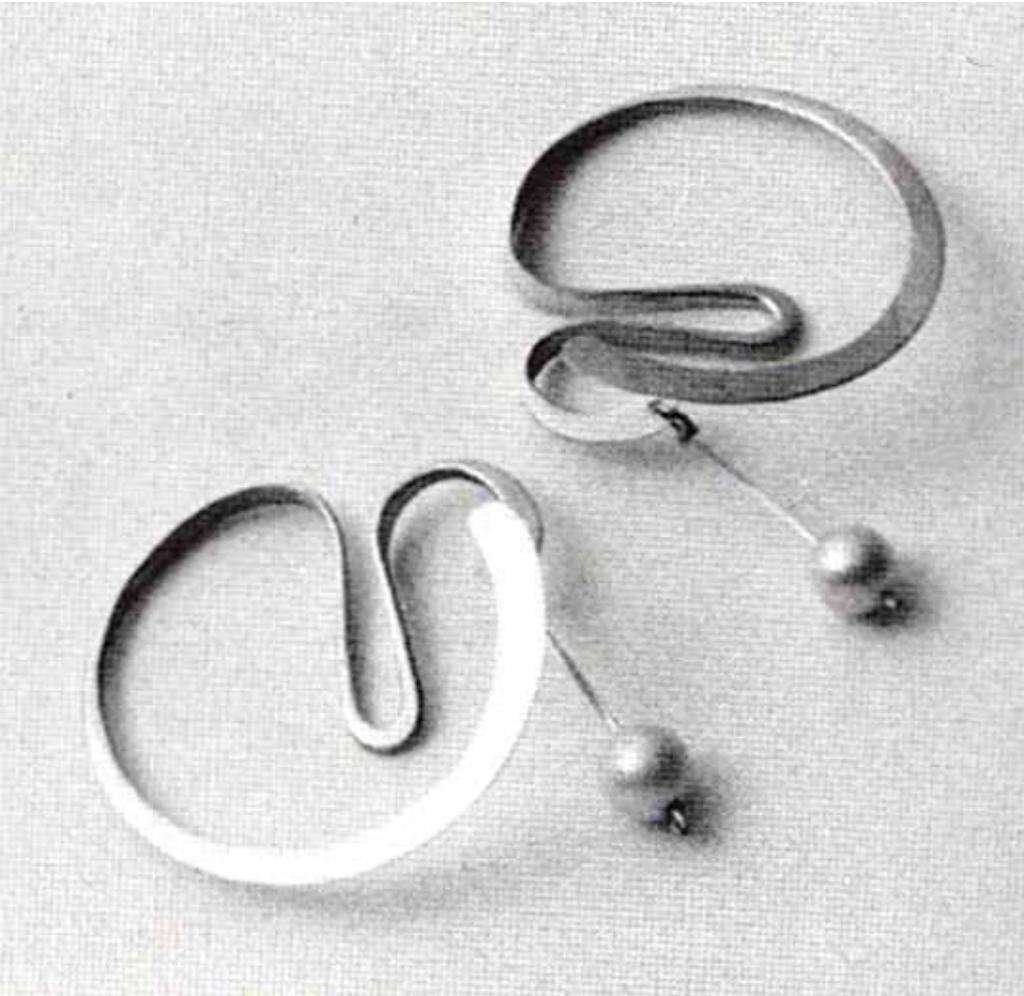
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businessman. And I can remember the first time I came and he said, Well, show me your merchandise. I said, Show you what? Your merchandise. I said, I don't have merchandise, I have pieces of art. And every time he would talk with me in this tone, I answered him exactly in the same tone. And that is the only time where I felt that I have to prove to him that

I'm not just a little woman that you can push around."

While Brynner's work was acknowledged within the arts, she was also a darling of the gold and diamond industries. Her work was highlighted in the International Gold 79 Corporation's publication, *Aurum*, in 1983 and 1984. She also won several

Diamonds International awards. In fact, in a letter dated October 6, 1967, from the jewelry firm N.W. Ayer and Son, Inc., Donald C. Thompson congratulated Brynner on her fifth award since 1958." Like Macchiarini and De Patta, Brynner developed her own views regarding the relationship between industry and art. She believed that industry needed the



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crafts person more than the crafts person needed industry. However, if there was to be a partnership then the crafts person should be appropriately compensated. Not wanting to abandon the industry altogether, Brynner fought for a balanced business relationship. She said, "Costume jewelry firms are aware that their public is tired of old traditional unimaginative designs and so they have turned to craftsmen for new creativity. It would seem that this coming together is a great achievement. However, in truth the industry is experimenting with new designs at the expense of the craftsmen. Designs are purchased at a nominal fee without any credit given to the craftsmen for the creation. For \$100 or \$200 the industry has any choice it wants of good contemporary designs. I think it is time for craftsmen to



agree and stand firm on a code of ethics dealing with industry/craftsmen relationships." It is

evident that such views were a product of her involvement with the Metal Arts Guild.

Although Brynner reached international acclaim early in her career, her biggest achievement is the contribution she made to the American studio jewelry movement. She was not the first to consider jewelry as miniature sculpture. However, Brynner made the body a functional component of her jewelry. In doing so, she redefined the meaning and aesthetic of modernist jewelry for a new generation of artists. And with this legacy behind her, she passed away peacefully in 2003 at the age of 86.

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Footnotes:

(1) Oral history: Arline Fisch interviewing Irena Brynner at her home and studio in New York City, 2001 April 26–27, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

(2) From Irena Brynner's book, "Jewelry as an Art Form," published by Van Nostrand Reinhold in 1979 Cover, left photo: Wrap Around earrings. USA, ca. 1959



The influence of Brynner's earlier classical training is notable in the example of these "wrap around" earrings. While sculptural in form, the draping, lace-like elements also read as painterly, meandering brush strokes. These forms were created through the process of lost-

wax casting, in which each earring is first rendered in wax and then used to create a reusable mold from which multiple forms may be cast. Though made in multiple, these earrings are also hand-forged, with each pair tailored to the individual wearer. In an interview, Brynner speaks about the design of these earrings stating, "Lots of people that saw my things wanted to copy it, and then they come and they say, 'It doesn't work. People can't wear it.' Because if it is not fitted exactly to your ear, the wire will start pressing a little bit somewhere in the back. You can't stand it. It really hurts."

Text for photo, page 15: Brooch, 1969, 18k gold and Egyptian faience by Irena Brynner



This brooch is an example of electronic soldering using the Henes water welder. The machine concentrates a large amount of heat in a very small flame, allowing a jeweler to manipulate the metal

with great precision. Irena Brynner favored the soft, rolled forms that one critic likened to plant life. The accenting blue stones are faience, or earthenware decorated with colored glazes. ■