



WINNIFRED
Whason
1912-UNKOWN

mason continued

“History is written by the winners.” It’s a statement that most people have heard at least once or twice in their lives, and as much as historians want to argue, there is truth in this statement.

History is supposed to be the story of all of us and how we got here, but the past has not always been a fair place to live. For centuries in America, anyone who was not a straight, white male was often pushed out of the spotlight of society and left off the pages of our history books. This was especially true for female minorities, no matter how talented they were. However, history never forgets. It just makes us work harder to uncover their stories. This is the case for Winifred Mason, a talented African-American jeweler known for her fabulous works with copper and bronze in the 1940s.

Winifred Mason was born on January 31, 1912, in New York, the youngest of three daughters of Edward and Susan Mason. Her family appeared to be solidly middle class. Her father worked as a private chauffeur while her mother worked as a waitress. They earned enough to help at least their two youngest daughters head off to college to get their degrees. In fact, Winifred



Mason not only got her B.S. in English Literature from New York University in 1934, she then remained in school to get her Masters in Education in 1936. She would go on to teach at the Children's Aid Society in Harlem. This was quite a feat for a woman of color at the time. To put it in perspective, when she graduated with her degree in English, it was thirty years before Martin Luther King, Jr., would stand and give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech that would rock the nation and give the Civil Rights movement a huge push. It was also amazing that she would head out into the workforce right after graduation since at the time most women were housewives. In fact, Winifred Mason was a woman quite literally decades ahead of her time.

It is not clear what influenced Mason to begin making jewelry, but her first pendant was created in 1940 in her personal studio. It was made out of copper, bronze, and silver,



which would become her materials of choice throughout her entire career. Apparently, her first piece caused a lot of buzz amongst her friends, who soon began putting in requests for similar pieces, and she began publicly crafting jewelry. Her pieces were inspired by the culture of the West Indies and also by abstraction.

The difference in her work compared to others at the time continued to be a part of their charm that would draw people to them like moths to a flame. Each piece she crafted was unique; in fact when she began to grow in popularity and would receive requests for mass orders she would insist that each piece had to be at least slightly different from one another. One of her most stunning pieces was actually a part of a set. The necklace, bracelet, and earrings were made of overlapping leaves made of copper and brass linked together.

Each leaf is linked together on the back, hiding not only the clasp but all of the closures as well, making the pieces seem completely seamless. Each leaf is slightly different, not in shape, but in the details in the leaf work.



By 1943, her work had become so popular, she was forced to seek help, which she found from Art Smith (*featured in our Summer 2017 newsletter*), who would go on to become one of the leading jewelers of the modernist style and one of the few Afro-Caribbean artists to reach international recognition for his work. The two ended up opening a shop together in Greenwich Village. The jewelry that the two created together became available in exclusive department stores in New York City such as Bonwitt Teller, and Lord & Taylor. All of this was during a time when women were discriminated against in the jewelry field (which may account for Art Smith's fame vs. hers).

Yet, what adds another flavor to Winifred Mason's work is the unconventional techniques and tools that she used. In fact, in an interview she once said, "A lot of jewelry that comes out of my shop is



made with a simple ball peen hammer and other improvised tools, and it is because we depend so much on improvised tools and methods that our products have not been restricted to standard effects and designs.”

It was perhaps this charm that got her work so much attention.

In 1946, Billie Holiday, a famous jazz singer, was photographed for “Ebony” magazine wearing one of Mason’s pieces. This photo was also accompanied by an article titled “Copper Christmas” that featured Mason’s work, and how these pieces were all unique gifts for the holidays.

A year before the article in “Ebony,” Mason was given a Rosenwald Foundation Award to travel to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to “gather folk



material and basic art patterns used by the West Indians and to express these feelings in jewelry." It was during these travels that she would meet her husband, Jean Chenet.

Chenet was the director of the Art Center in Haiti but he was also an artist himself since he was often

contracted by the government to create street murals for special events. Before he met Mason he traveled to Mexico City to learn how to make jewelry himself. They were married in 1948 and settled in Queens.

Eventually, the two moved back to Haiti and opened a shop together called Haitian Bazaar. They created a line of jewelry called Chenet d'Haiti, which is also how Mason began signing her work after her marriage. This work would have traditional designs that Mason had discovered in her travels. This particular line of work would become available in New York jewelry shops.

As remarkable as Winifred Mason's life story is, it does not seem to have a happy ending.

In 1963, Jean Chenet was



murdered by the Tonton Macoutes, which was a terrifying police force engaged in controlling the rebellion against Haiti's dictator at the time, François Duvalier, also known as Papa Doc. No one is certain why Chenet was killed, since he was not part of the rebellion and did not seem to have any type of political agenda. It is possible that his death was more of a warning to scare the other wealthy families against becoming a part of the rebellion, or out of jealousy since he was a powerful businessman in the area. Either way, after his passing, Mason fled to the American Embassy, disguised herself for the rest of her time in Haiti, and eventually returned to New York. It's possible that she continued her work in jewelry making, but the rest of her life is a mystery; even her date and location of death is unknown. However, there is no doubt about the value of her legacy that continues to impress jewelry artists today.

