

Five notable artists share their passion for the medium, describe their unique pathways to professional success, offer good advice for others who dare to succeed . . .



## Perfecting the accessory



**M**ARY WALES LOOMIS takes her accessories very seriously. When faced with not finding the right shoes for many of her out-

fits, she learned how to make her own. She became so good at it that others who saw her handiwork (and appreciated her sense of style) spurred her to put her know-how down on paper. Before long, Mary was an author, penning *Make Your Own Shoes* and teaching others how to create custom footwear.

Similarly, when Mary began working with wire in the '70s, her curiosity and innate talent led her to design unique jewellery pieces. She saw San Francisco street vendors working with wire, and the way they bent and manipulated it intrigued her.

"I had to try it for myself. I bought brass wire from a hardware store and was on my way." At first the designs were rather simple, but once Mary began embellishing them she knew she was hooked. A friend prompted buyers at Saks Fifth Avenue in San Francisco to see her work (even though she was not a production artist or known jewellery entity), and she was invited to show and sell her one-of-a-kind creations to a very fashionable audience.

"They sold hundreds of my necklaces over a period of several years," she notes, "mostly made from 10- to 20-gauge brass wire." But the physical nature of the work was hard on the artist. "I developed tennis elbow from the pounding and calluses on my hands. I finally had to stop."

Recently Mary came back to the jewellery creating she loved in the past. Now designing in softer, more easily manipulated gold-filled and silver wire, Mary creates unique compositions that are neither born from a pattern nor copied from a model. "At first I thought

I would be intimidated by the fact that gold was more expensive than brass, but I have not found that to be so," says Mary. Each piece incorporates many individually-crafted components, and the level of detail is apparent in each piece. "I make a lot of little curlicues," Mary admits, "but they're necessary. All of my jewellery is kinetic – it moves as you wear it." It's an important fact to Mary, and one that sets her pieces apart.

Paralleling design components and techniques from ancient Italian, Egyptian and Greek jewellery crafters, Mary creates her pieces completely by hand, making all chains and findings herself. "I don't use any manufactured parts – I think it spoils the look of it – and I don't use solder. The clasps and jump rings aren't any harder to make than the other pieces in the design. I

rarely use beads or other additions. My work is all my own," she says, and it shows. Mary uses few tools, and likes it that way. A couple of pairs of pliers, a few files, good cutters, an anvil on a stand, and a heavy hammer are all she needs to get impressive jewellery and design results in her Northern California workspace.

"To me, creating the jewellery is like an extension of drawing," says Mary, "and it dictates its own outcome. Often while I'm working on one piece, the idea for the next piece comes to me." Mary credits her late husband, a professional illustrator, for giving the best advice she ever received. "He told me art school would have ruined me. He encouraged me to do my own thing." She adds, "I'd give the same advice to anyone who wants to work with wire: Just do it. You will learn from experience how the wire works for you when you work with it."

Mary is often stopped when she's wearing one of her originals. "People ask me where I bought it, and I tell them I made it myself. I'm not currently selling my work, so it's encouraging to get positive feedback." When asked about her motivation, Mary is happy to explore the possibilities. She's currently making a collection of 10 or so gold and silver pieces before she decides how to move forward with marketing or offering her work for sale.

"I have had offers from a jeweller and an art group already, but I haven't decided," she admits. "I do know I don't want to become a production line," says Mary, but that's an unlikely outcome from a woman whose individuality and strength are apparent in every endeavour she undertakes. "I'm aware that wire art is more popular than ever," she acknowledges. "I intend to keep making jewellery as long as I have strength in my hands. I'm not sure where it will take me – I just like doing it!"

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This excerpt is part of a much larger article, *Why Wire Works*, written by Lyn Sutton that was provided (with permission) by *The Wire Artist Jeweller* magazine.

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