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Oral history interview with Merry Renk

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
General.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	1
Scope and Contents.....	1
Biographical / Historical.....	1
Names and Subjects	2

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Merry Renk
Identifier:	AAA.renk01
Date:	2001 January 18-19
Extent:	49 Pages (Transcript) 1 Item (sound file (4 min. 15 sec.) Audio excerpt; digital)
Creator:	Renk, Merry, 1921-2012 Fisch, Arline M. Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Language:	English .

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Biographical / Historical

Merry Renk (1921-2012) was a jeweler, painter, and sculptor from San Francisco, California. Arline M. Fisch (1931-) is a metalsmith from San Diego, California.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Merry Renk conducted 2001 January 18-19, by Arline M. Fisch, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Renk's home and studio, San Francisco, California.

Scope and Contents

Renk speaks of her family background; growing up during the Depression; her father's creativity and encouragement; early inspiration from "the structure of nature"; attending the School of Industrial Arts in Trenton, N.J., and later the Institute of Design in Chicago; student life at the Institute of Design; establishing a studio and gallery, 750 Studio, at 750 North Dearborn, in Chicago, in 1947, with two

other students, Mary Jo Slick [Godfrey] and Olive [Bunny] Oliver; managing 750 Studio and organizing exhibitions of Harry Callahan, Henry Miller, Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, Warren and Ethel MacKenzie, Doris Hall, and others; working with enamels; early "primitive" spirals; decision to be a jeweler; the importance of the "wearability" of jewelry; moving to San Francisco in 1948; living in Paris, 1950-1951; relationship with Shinkichi Tajiri; visiting Constantin Brancusi; traveling with Lenore Tawney through Spain and Morocco; settling in San Francisco; friendship with sculptor and neighbor Ruth Asawa; learning about Josef Albers from Asawa, resulting in experiments with folded metal; meeting her second husband, potter Earle Curtis on Halloween 1954; purchasing and remodeling their home; teaching part-time at the University of California, Berkeley and in workshops; her children, Baunnie and Sandra; managing motherhood and jewelry making in a two-artist household; drawing as a form of inventory; the influence of Lee Nordness; learning the plique-à-jour technique of enameling through trial and error; early influence of Doris Hall's work; working with wire; use of natural forms and interlocking forms; the process of making Wedding Crown (1968) for the exhibition Objects USA; making wedding crowns for her daughters; her shift from non-objective art to portraiture and symbolic imagery in the early 1970s; making large-scale sculpture in 1974, then "drifting back" to jewelry; importance of working independently; her "memory paintings" in the 1980s; evolution of her name from Mary Ruth Gibbs to Merry Renk Curtis (married Stanley Renk in 1941); her involvement with local guilds such as the Metal Arts Guild of San Francisco and national organizations such as the American Craft Council (ACC); lack of critical writing about her work; the value of exhibitions; various pieces in museum collections; early ACC conferences; her long friendship with photographer Imogen Cunningham; posing for Cunningham; becoming an ACC fellow; her jewelry tools; the process of painting compared to jewelry making. She also mentions Kenneth Bates, Trude Guermonprez, Irena Brynner, the Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her mentor Margaret de Patta.

General

Originally recorded on 3 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 6 digital wav files. Duration is 3 hr., 9 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Decorative arts
Enamel and enameling
Enamellers -- California -- San Francisco -- Interviews
Jewelers -- California -- San Francisco -- Interviews
Jewelry making
Painters -- California -- San Francisco -- Interviews
Sculptors -- California -- Interviews
Sculptors -- United States -- Interviews
Women artists

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

750 Studio

Albers, Josef
American Craft Council
Asawa, Ruth
Bates, Kenneth F. (Kenneth Francis), 1904-1994
Brancusi, Constantin, 1876-1957
Brynner, Irena
Cunningham, Imogen, 1883-1976
Curtis, Earle
De Patta, Margaret, 1903-1964
Godfrey, Mary Jo Slick
Guernonprez, Trude, 1910-1976
Hall, Doris.
Institute of Design (Chicago, Ill.) -- Students
Metal Arts Guild
Mobilia Gallery
Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Nordness, Lee
Oliver, Olive
School of Industrial Design (Trenton, N.J.) -- Students
Tajiri, Shinkichi, 1923-2009
Tawney, Lenore
University of California, Berkeley. Department of Art -- Faculty