



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Heikki Seppä

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Heikki Seppä
Date:	2001 May 6
Identifier:	AAA.seppa01
Creator:	Seppä, Heikki (Interviewee) Herman, Lloyd E. (Interviewer) Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Extent:	76 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Heikki Seppä, 2001 May 6, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Heikki Seppä, 2001 May 6, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

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

Heikki Seppä (1927-) is a jeweler and metalsmith from Bainbridge Island, Washington. Lloyd Herman (1936-) is a former director of the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery and from Seattle, Washington.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Heikki Seppä conducted 2001 May 6, by Lloyd Herman, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in the artist's home and studio, Bainbridge Island, Washington.

Scope and Contents

Seppä speaks of his early childhood in Finland and being placed in a children's home (twice) in the Karelian Isthmus; his mother's move to Canada; his parents' divorce; his educational background including his course of study at the goldsmith school in 1940 and 1941, at age 14, and his lack of role models; the postwar growth

of the metal industry; his participation in an exchange program with Denmark; his athletic accomplishments, especially kayaking; his service in the Finnish Army; his employment in Helsinki; producing objects for Georg Jensen; the state of Nordic decorative arts in the 1950s; his marriage and move to British Columbia; working with refrigeration systems; obtaining Canadian and American citizenship; teaching metalsmithing in a community center; winning prizes for metal pieces in Canadian national exhibitions; attending Cranbrook Academy of Art; introducing reticulation to Cranbrook; and his Cranbrook classmates Stanley Lechtzin, L. Brent Kington, Leslie Motch, and teachers Richard Thomas and Alma Eicherman. Seppä describes in detail the history of and process for producing a reticulated surface; he refers to crimping and spraying metal; teaching at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1965 to 1992; the origin of his spiculum and shell forms; his books, "Form Emphasis for Metalsmiths" (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1978) and "From Silversmith's Workshop" (1996 or 1998); commissions; his gradual withdrawal from juried and competitive exhibitions; his use and limitations of preliminary drawings; the silversmith as a maker of expressive objects; and repairs he made to silver pieces made by metalworkers who did not understand silver. He discusses a difficult period marked by his early retirement in 1992, his wife's death in 1993, and declining commissions.

Scope and Contents

He talks about becoming reacquainted with metalsmith Laurie Lyall in 1997 and moving to Bainbridge Island, where he now lives with Lyall. SNAG (the Society of North American Goldsmiths), its founders, membership, and five-year dormancy are discussed as is the organization's revitalization. Seppä speaks about stylistic influences; technique and style; his work-related travel; and his admiration for Jack da Silva's sculpture. He comments on the homogenization of the arts; the difference between jewelers and metalsmiths trained in art schools and vocational schools; the distinction between art and craft; the desire of craftsmen to be called artists; the function of critical writing and the lack thereof; Metalsmith magazine; Bruce Metcalf as critic; his commissioned ecclesiastical pieces, including a triangular chalice for an Episcopal church in St. Louis; metalsmiths and manufacturing companies; Fabergé-trained metalsmiths; reticulation at Fabergé's shop; enamel and enamelers at Fabergé; and gemology. Seppä also speaks about his future pursuits and artistic contributions; silver as an expressive medium; and silver as a material for utilitarian objects. He recalls Eero Saarinen, Aline Saarinen, Loja Saarinen, Nellie Peterson, Alma Eicherman, Robert Ebendorf, Michael Good, David Jaworski, and others.

General

Originally recorded on 4 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 8 digital wav files. Duration is 3 hr., 51 min.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Decorative arts
- Jewelers -- Washington (State) -- Seattle -- Interviews
- Metal-work
- Metal-workers -- Washington (State) -- Seattle -- Interviews

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Sound recordings

Names:

Cranbrook Academy of Art -- Students
Fabergé (Firm)
Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Society of North American Goldsmiths

Occupations:

Silversmiths