

Silversmithing

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I've always enjoyed making things with my hands. Tiny clothes for celluloid jointed dolls were among the first attempts I remember at fashioning something with my hands. The clothes were crude and unsatisfactory, but I was not discouraged from a continuing effort to find something I could make. When I was a teenager I returned to the doll-clothes effort to make clothes for my little sister Ruth's Barbie doll. Using scraps from her own clothes plus a few exotic pieces I found on remnant counters at yard goods stores, I satisfactorily concocted a wardrobe copying some of Ruth's clothes and some imaginary evening finery for a surprise Christmas present. After I was married, I made most of my clothes, taking a tailoring course that taught me how to make suits and top coats for myself, some of the most satisfying sewing I ever did.

However, I needed something beyond working with commercial patterns. I found that I couldn't design and fit clothes without taking courses that I wasn't much interested in taking. I tried a number of crafts, including macramé and small-loom weaving, but I kept wanting to do something more inventive. I've knitted since I was seven or eight and still do. When the children were little, I read about silver- and goldsmithing and promised myself that when Roland started to school I would find a way to learn to work with metals. As such ambitions go, I didn't do *too* badly; when Roland entered the fourth grade, I read about a silversmithing class being offered at the YWCA.

I enrolled but almost backed out when I attended the first class: I was the only newcomer among some ten veterans to the craft. Albert Valentine, the teacher, was a superb artist who had made outstanding silver pieces for the altar at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd. He was only a moderately good teacher, finding it easier to finish some of our projects for us, when we should have had the experience of doing them ourselves. Our first assignment was to use the lost wax process, a process perfected by dentists in the production of dental crowns. After using wax of several different hardnesses to form the positive image of, say, a ring, the craftsman adds a sprue, a kind of handle, to the jewelry form and invests the resulting wax image in a heat-proof plaster. The sprue is a column leading from the ring to the outside wall of the plaster. Then the plaster is put into a kiln and heated until the wax is melted from the interior of the plaster. That produces a mold into which you can cast your silver or other precious metal. The plaster form is put into a centrifuge, with the hollow sprue fastened to a conduit for molten silver. With the centrifuge twirling at high speed, the silver is flung into all parts of the negative form in the plaster mold. After cooling, the mold is broken away from the silver, the sprue is removed, and the silver piece is finished and polished.

The process looked interesting, but I was unexpectedly intimidated by the process of modeling the wax. My classmates merrily brought in such existing objects as grasshoppers and chicken wishbones, cast them in silver, soldered pin backs on them, and wore them proudly home. That idea didn't appeal to me at all, so I persisted at making my own creations until I finally produced the free form wax model of a ring which I thought I'd like to have. Mr. Valentine, as was his habit with all the members of the class,

invested the wax form and by the next class brought in the silver ring with its sprue still attached. I was delighted with my first silver product. I shakily sawed off the two sprues which were necessary because the ring had an undercut design. Then I sanded away the rough parts of the ring, polished it mostly by hand, and applied a bit of acid in order to darken and emphasize the design. I had now lost most of my inhibitions in my pride in the resulting ring and was energized to make a number of similar rings as gifts.

Paul admired my ring, but since he wasn't interested in wearing one, I designed a belt buckle in a companion design. That forced me to do my first work with silver wire. For the tang of the buckle, I chose a heavy square wire, a form of silver with which I promptly fell in love. There was something immensely satisfying about annealing the wire and hammering it into shape. I resolved to learn to work with sheet silver and wire. That Christmas, Paul gave me a sample of every kind of silver wire he could find, most of which eventually found its way into pieces of jewelry. It is startling now to recall that the amount of silver I put into a piece would cost as little as twenty-five cents, seldom more than a dollar.

Mr. Valentine, it turned out, was a professional astrologer, just doing the art class as a sideline. After looking at my rings and belt buckle, he asked me my birth date. He immediately replied, "You're wrong. You couldn't have made those pieces if you had been born on that date. What time of day?" I told him, after checking with my mother. "She's wrong," he insisted, "this work is too good to have been done by someone born under that sign."

I thought I had disabused him of that notion when I asked him for help on my next project. I had been intrigued by the design some yarn made as it puddled on the floor while I was knotting a sweater. I asked Mr. Valentine how I could convert the wool into a waxen material that could be invested in plaster and burned out for a piece of jewelry. He rather impatiently said it couldn't be done; it was impossible. But I found the patterns the wool made were too inviting to be abandoned. I did a lot of experimenting with saturating the yarn with the various waxes the class used in modeling. The result was a soft mass that couldn't withstand the crush of the plaster investment. Finally, I tried paraffin canning wax. It hardened so fast that the yarn was unwieldy. Nevertheless, I did take one heap of paraffin-ed yarn in to Mr. Valentine who became more cooperative than before, suggesting that I cast the whole mess and then cut away any silver that detracted from a satisfactory design. He cast the waxed yarn for me, I hesitantly cut away several distracting strands and eureka! I came out with a design that somewhat resembles a classic love knot, which I liked. I had to accept that, anyway, because I'd finished my sweater and had no more yarn. Polishing the remaining silver was difficult because of its irregularity, but, after I had darkened some of the curly-cues with acid and had polished the highlights, I was pleased with the result and have worn the resulting pin with pride ever since.

My study with Mr. Valentine ended when Paul took a sabbatical in Oak Ridge, but there I found another silversmithing teacher who had different teaching techniques. He had us play with copper wire and learn to solder findings such as pin backs on the copper, before

we moved up to silver. We had to do *all* the work! Manipulating and soldering sheet silver and wire was a different experience from working with the easily modeled wax, but it was possible to make rings, pins, and pendants in which we could set stones. I particularly enjoyed knowing a fellow classmate, a Japanese statistician who was a real artist. She liked to capitalize on her Japanese accent when she described her work, such as a gorgeous rutilated (“rutirrated”) quartz pendant she made. I learned as much watching Kimi work as I did from the very able teacher. Kimi also told me when I picked her up one time that I had gone the “rong” (long) way.



I had one further teacher when we returned to Dallas and I took a course at SMU, a real academic course in the School of the Arts, although I did take it as an auditor and did not have to fear exams or, worse, a review of my work. The course filled in many of the gaps in my techniques and introduced me to many more techniques, such as sweat soldering, a technique I used in making my favorite ring. I prefer silver, but I’ve had several commissions for work in gold, a medium I found delightful to work in, in many ways easier than silver. I’ve found that to hold a stone or a piece of silver wire is the best inspiration for devising a piece of jewelry or a decorative piece. I haven’t made anything in several years, but I guess I’d still like to try my hand at some more work in the medium. The sensuous nature of a piece of silver evokes all sorts of dreams of what could be made of the material. To raise a sheet of silver by hammering it into a useful shape or to bend a piece of wire into a pleasing object is almost as fulfilling in the mind as it is in the action.