

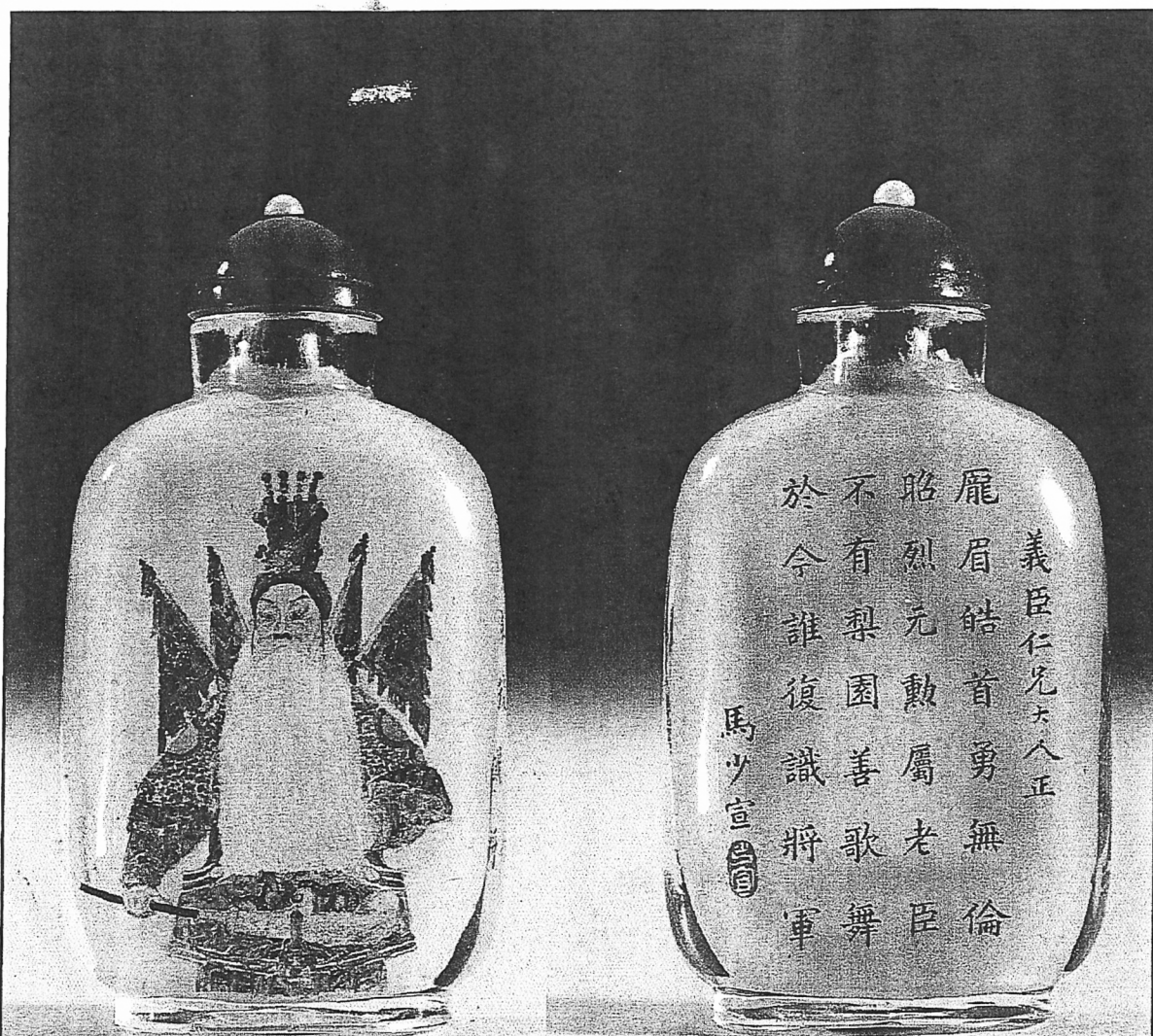
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Adornment

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Inside-painted snuff bottle by Ma Shaoxuan, c. 1899.

Photo courtesy: Christie's. See article on 19.

The Cloisonné Enameled Landscapes of Toni Strassler

By Yvonne Markowitz and Jeannine Falino

As an enamelist, Toni Strassler follows the path of jewelers and goldsmiths who, for centuries, have enlivened metal surfaces with color. Inspired by Byzantine enamels, medieval manuscripts, exotic lands, and nature, Strassler has applied her considerable skills into creating miniature landscapes from seemingly intractable materials—metal, powdered enamels, and the occasional use of hard stone. The result is an extraordinary body of work that transcends the realm of adornment.

Background

Enameling is a difficult, labor-intensive process whose origins can be found in the great river civilizations of the ancient Near East. It was here that artisans first applied color to metal by inlaying metal with semi-precious stones carved into thin slices and then secured to spaces cut into the metal. Brightly colored stones, such as carnelian, turquoise, and lapis lazuli were the stones of choice, prized as much for their durability, rarity, and symbolism as for their color.

An important step in the evolution of enameling occurred during the third millennium, B.C., when stone fragments were glued to a metal surface divided into discrete spaces by flat wires (*cloisons*) soldered to the base. Nearly the entire surface could be covered by color since the *cloisons* were solely visible along their top edges. This technique, developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt, spread rapidly to the Levant and Aegean where it became part of the jewelers' repertoire.

The use of enamels in lieu of stones was a result of experiments with glass, a medium popularized in western Asia around the middle of the second millennium B.C. Unlike colored stones, which were often difficult to obtain, the basic ingredients of glass—silica, salts, lime, borax, and metallic oxides colorants—were ubiquitous. Some of the earliest glass items produced include beads, pendants, and core-formed vessels. Its use as an inlay material, where the ground glass was fused by heat into the metal structure, came later—about 1200 B.C. The art of enameling truly flourished under the Hellenistic Greeks, although the color range of the various glasses used was somewhat limited. Red, in particular, was difficult to manage since it tended to turn brown during firing. To avoid this problem, ancient enamelists sometimes used cinnabar instead of red glass.

Some of the world's most extraordinary cloisonné enamels were produced during the Byzantine Empire, particularly between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Technically sophisticated and exquisitely rendered, these works recreated in miniature the iconographic works found in larger mosaics. Later, during the sixteenth century, the Limoges School in France developed a technique of using enamels without *cloisons* that resulted in a painterly effect. The earliest images created with this method were devotional in nature, followed by portraits and secular scenes. Many of these "painted

enamels” were set into frames while others were used as decorative insets on walls and in *objets d’art*. The fabrication of these artworks involved the application of a layer of grounding and counter-enamel on a base made of copper sheet. A multi-stage painting of the picture ensued, using powdered enamels and lavender oil applied by brush, as well as successive firings in a kiln.



Fig. 1 Autumn Landscape (1998)



Fig. 2 Alford Pond, Massachusetts (1980)

Cloisonné landscapes

Toni Strassler received her B. A. in art history from Oberlin College and studied Romanesque art as a graduate student. During her studies, she was deeply affected by the expressive power of Byzantine reliquaries, especially those she saw at the Morgan Library in New York. This strong aesthetic response, and a growing interest in jewelry-making, eventually led her to investigate the practical aspects of the craft through classes held in the 1970s at the Jewelry Arts Institute in New York, a group founded by artist Robert Kulicke. The Institute was especially keen on providing instruction in ancient techniques, including granulation, chain-making, and enameling. Among the faculty were Kulicke—a painter and enamelist—Duny Katzman, Strassler’s first teacher at the Institute, and noted jeweler Jean Stark. It was under Stark’s tutelage that she learned the subtleties of shading with enamels. It was not long before she began to create the richly-colored landscape miniatures for which she has become recognized.

Although pictorial effects are more readily achieved using the Limoges method, Strassler employs the *cloisonné* technique of enameling to create her jewel-like landscapes. The scenes themselves are small, averaging about 3cm x 4cm. The artist begins with a precious-metal base of fine-silver sheet. The dividing strips, called wires (*cloisons*), are either 24-karat gold or fine-silver strips milled to a thickness of .002-.005mm. As thin as tinsel, this extraordinarily fine wire allows her to generate more detail in the composition. However, the delicacy of the wires requires the use of a clear enamel (flux), rather than solder, to secure the wires to the base.



Fig. 3 Point Judith, Rhode Island (1992)

The flat wires used in *cloisonné* enameling are typically smooth partitions that divide the enamel-filled spaces. This segmentation of the surface is especially suited to flat, geometric designs and patterning. To offset the static contours, Toni Strassler occasionally crimps the *cloison* ribbon, producing a “nervous wire” more sympathetic to the organic forms found in the natural world. She also varies the height and thickness of the wires, creating visual interest while defining foreground and distance in the landscape (fig. 1). In essence, Strassler uses wire in her enamels to achieve different atmospheric and three-dimensional effects. In this respect, it is similar to the way other artists employ graphite on paper.

To achieve a wide color and tonal range, Strassler employs a combination of translucent, opalescent, and opaque enamels. The translucent powders are the most painterly, performing like transparent watercolors. They are used directly over the metal base, on top of foils, and over opalescent and opaque enamels. They are also used to create shading effects and color changes, a crucial component of the artist’s landscapes (see the reflective water in fig. 2). When a more luminous color surface is needed, opalescent enamels are selected. They appear softer than the opaque powders and can be utilized to produce atmospheric effects (see clouds in fig. 3). Finally, the opaque enamels are employed in those areas where saturated color is desired since light does not pass through but is reflected from the surface. It is also possible to achieve texture effects when opaque colors are mixed. Strassler usually fires each landscape 12 to 16 times in order to achieve the results she seeks.

When polishing the surface of her enamels, Strassler does not use stone abrasives typically used by most artists. She prefers to use wet and dry abrasive papers in an increasingly fine grit, and finishes with a chromium oxide powder. The result is quite brilliant without the glassy appearance often found in a flash-fire finish. Once the polishing is completed, the landscape is ready to be set in either a pendant or brooch mount. These are all hand crafted by the artist. The base of the setting is typically fine or sterling silver, while the bezel is either fine silver or 22-karat gold. The use of nearly pure metal for the bezel is deliberate since unalloyed metals are more malleable and there is less risk of chipping the landscape. Her intentionally simple bezels serve as a framing device for the image and allow the viewer to concentrate on the landscape rather than the mount.

Subject Matter

Toni Strassler's landscapes take several forms. Some evoke the beauty of the natural world and have their origin in the immediate environment. For example, one brooch, entitled *Alford Pond, Massachusetts (1980)* is a scenic view in the Berkshires, where the artist has a home (figs. 2, 4). Here, the miniature is alive with the dramatic play of light and color in a setting that is idealized and romantic. More subtle atmospheric conditions prevail in *Point Judith, Rhode Island (1992)*, where land, ocean, and sky are bathed in a soft mist largely created through the expert use of transparent enamels (fig. 3). In *French Vineyard (1999)*, the landscape is punctuated by the sharp geometries of a building enmeshed in a riot of brightly colored foliage, while a serene note is evoked by a mountain range that lies in the distance (fig. 5).

Another recurring theme in Strassler's landscapes is that of the village or urban scene. These urbanscapes are often inspired by personal travel, photographic reproductions of interesting locales, and travel brochures. For *Maisons Provençal (2003)*, a small, travel advertisement for the Provence region of France provided the visual spark for Strassler. The pendant/brooch created from that source feature gleaming white buildings with pinkish roofs, a surrounding green countryside, and foil-backed windows that beckon, and invite the viewer to sample French culture (fig. 6). Another urban scene, *Winter in Rome (2002)* is a lively portrayal of a city street where the building facades are awash in color and sway with hidden energy—all under a periwinkle-blue sky (fig. 7).

Some of Strassler's landscapes are both fanciful and imaginary. One example of this type, a pendant entitled *Medieval Scene (1995)* has mystical overtones. The jewel is based on a 1320 rendition of *The Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle*, a marvelous illuminated manuscript in The Cloisters (fig. 8). An excerpt from the artist's preparatory composition includes sketches of the landscape and the mount, information on the *cloison* wires, and a detailed list of the enamels used (fig. 9). The completed enamel features two trees nestled between three sandy hillocks under a deep-blue, luminous sky (fig. 10). The trees have an enchanted, anthropomorphic quality, while a solar eclipse, whose form is echoed by a pendant black opal, suggests strange happenings. The whole is framed within an arched, window-like enclosure that draws the viewer into this otherworldly scene.

In addition to creating cloisonné landscapes, Toni Strassler fabricates delicate still life scenes. She also enjoys exploring ways of using enamel to mimic other techniques, such as Celadon ceramics and, more recently, Japanese lacquer in enamel. But what gives her the most satisfaction is working in miniature, where real-life or imagined subjects, reduced to fit in the palm of the hand, are all the more precious for their size. To own one of her extraordinary enamels provides the opportunity to wear an outstanding work of art.



Fig. 4 View from artist's home in the Berkshires



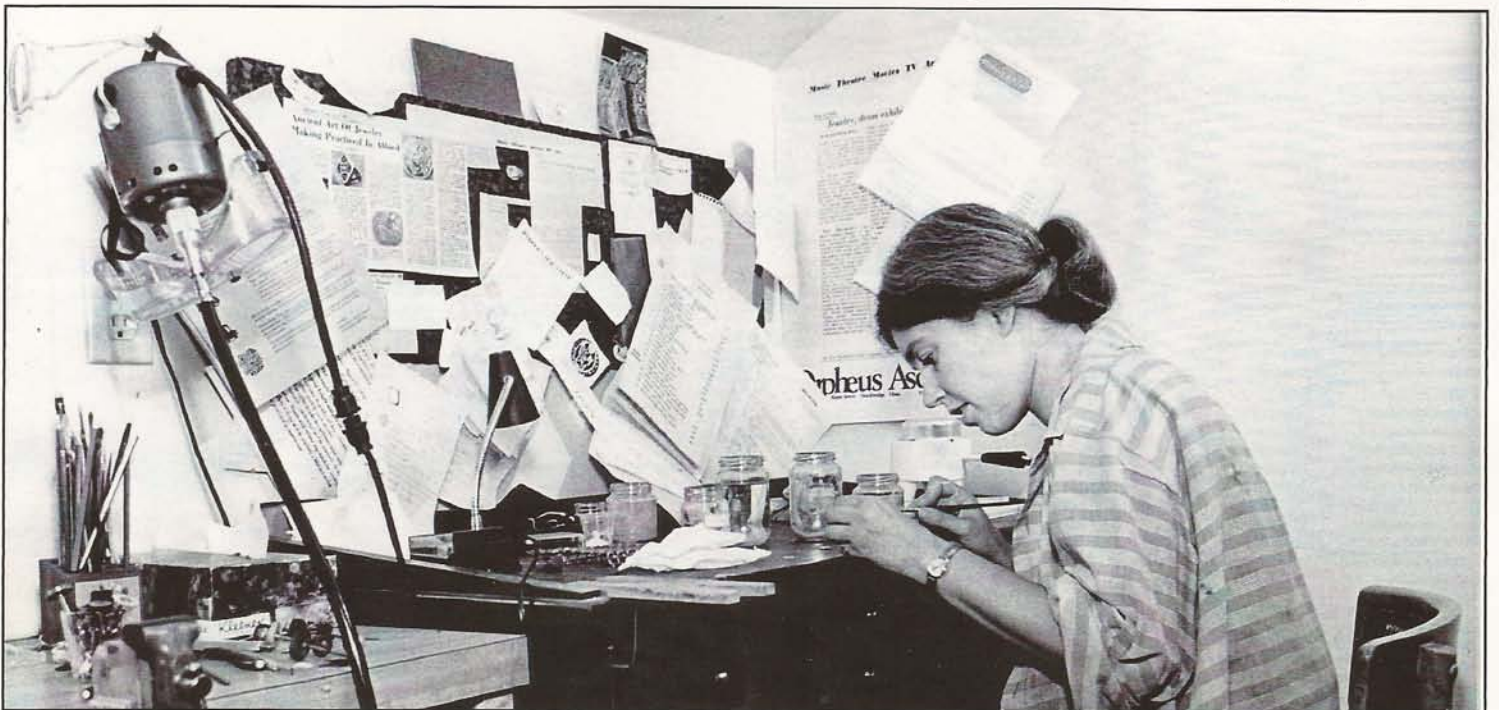
Fig. 5 French Vineyard (1999)



Fig. 6 Maisons Provençal (2003)



Fig. 7 Winter in Rome (2002)



Toni Strassler at work in the 1970's



Fig. 8 The Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle, 1330, The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 9 A page from one of Toni Strassler's notebooks.

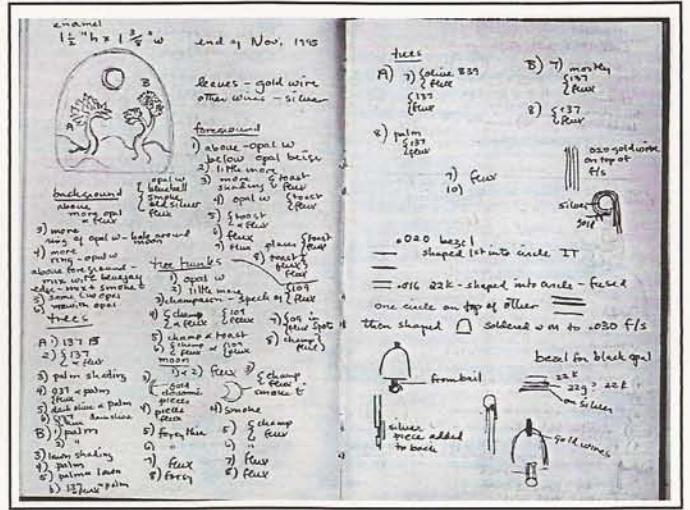


Fig. 10 Medieval Scene (1995).