

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS
FREE FORM: 20TH-CENTURY STUDIO CRAFT

2020 Vision exhibition celebrates the work of pioneering ceramic, embroidery, and jewelry artists

BALTIMORE, MD (November 12, 2019)—The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) presents a focus exhibition of modern craft from its collection in *Free Form: 20th-Century Studio Craft*. On view from December 18, 2019 through June 7, 2020, the exhibition includes more than 20 examples of ceramics, embroidery, and jewelry created during the 1940s to 1970s by American artists Betty Cooke, Maria Karasz, Gloria Balder Katzenberg, and Gertrud and Otto Natzler.



“The BMA is committed to celebrating the innovation, creativity, and individuality of a wide range of artists typically underrecognized in museums,” said Christopher Bedford, BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. “Craft artists from this period shared with painters and sculptors a vocabulary centered around an embrace of nature and self-expression and the outstanding examples in this exhibition are a testament to their creativity.”

In the mid-20th century, artists across the field challenged the historical divide between fine art and craft as the production, exhibition, and recognition of American craft blossomed in the post-war era. These artists focused on the use of line, color, texture, and form in their work, reflecting a shift away from an emphasis on the functional aspect of craft towards an avant-garde engagement with abstraction, which was enhanced by found materials and new fabrication techniques. Artists featured in the exhibition are:

- Betty Cooke (b. 1924) is a nationally acclaimed Baltimore metalsmith and jewelry maker and an alumnus of Johns Hopkins University and Maryland Institute College of Art. After graduating in 1946, she set up a metalsmithing studio in a small Baltimore row home where she hammered, cut, and soldered hand-crafted jewelry. Cooke and her husband, artist William (Bill) O. Steinmetz (1927-2016), opened The Store Ltd. to sell her jewelry alongside works by other designers working with similarly organic and geometric aesthetics. Cooke continues to design and create jewelry at this location today.
- Mariska Karasz (1898-1961) was a Hungarian immigrant to the U.S. who moved away from her established business as a women’s clothing designer to focus on embroidery as an artistic practice. She was enmeshed in the New York Abstract Expressionist scene during the late 1940s and 50s, and from 1948 to 1960, her works were featured in more than 50 solo exhibitions at venues such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, and The Baltimore Museum of Art in 1957.
- Gloria Balder Katzenberg (1923-2015) was a Baltimore-based needlepoint artist, designer, and author who studied with Mariska Karasz and was inspired by her spontaneous approach to embroidery. Her works often evoke gardens, ponds, fireworks, or celestial scenes with unconventional materials such as driftwood, glass, plastic beads, and sequins.
- Gertrud (1908-1971) and Otto (1908-2007) Natzler fled Nazi-occupied Austria and founded their own ceramic workshop in California in 1938. Gertrud threw her remarkably thin-walled vessels on a potter’s wheel and shaped the clay into smooth, curving outlines to produce pieces with strong proportions and visual weight.

Otto created his innovative glazes through controlled experiments with fire, often playing with chemical reactions to produce colors and textures that evoke natural elements like craters, crystals, and lava.

Programs such as Black Mountain College (1933-1957) educated artists and craftspeople together, and exhibitions such as the *Good Design* shows, held annually from 1950 to 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, offered exhibition opportunities for American craft in a traditionally fine art setting. *Free Form* alludes to the shared focus on spontaneity, open-ended process, and organic abstraction, and was also the title of one of Jackson Pollock's very first "drip" paintings from 1946.

Free Form: 20th-Century Studio Craft is part of the BMA's year-long *2020 Vision* initiative highlighting women artists and leaders. The exhibition is curated by Virginia Anderson, BMA Curator of American Art, and generously supported by Susan B. Katzenberg and Carol D. Macht, in memory of Gloria Balder Katzenberg.

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA's internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation's finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000-square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20th-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

VISITOR INFORMATION

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org.

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Image: Gertrud and Otto Natzler. *Bowl*. 1944. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Alice Morawetz Bequest Fund. BMA 1944.61