

## All Is Possible – Mary Ann Scherr’s Legacy in Metal

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Thomas J. Cabaniss Historic Residence

Mary Ann Scherr (1921-2016) was a pioneer in industrial design, commercial illustration, and many other design fields, but early in her career she turned to teaching metalsmithing and making jewelry as a pursuit that offered endless possibilities for learning, experimentation, and innovation. By 1989, when she moved from New York City to Raleigh, she was already an internationally renowned metal designer who had chaired the Crafts Department at Parsons School of Design in Manhattan, innovated new metal techniques, and pushed the boundaries of new materials such as stainless steel, aluminum, and titanium. From the moment she arrived, Scherr enriched the arts and life of her new home state of North Carolina.

Scherr taught metals at the Penland School of Crafts, north of Asheville, for over forty summers. In the Triangle, she taught at Duke, Meredith College, and at NC State’s Crafts Center, while continuing to experiment with metals well into her nineties. “I enjoy teaching,” she said, “because I enjoy the effort, and what happens with people when they discover the possibilities.”

Her passion for metals, zest for life, and dedicated mentorship are best communicated in the exhibition title, All is Possible — a message that appears on two of the silver cuffs on display. Scherr gifted one to a mentee and former studio assistant, and made the other for a fellow artist who needed encouragement to continue making her art.

Scherr believed that jewelry was not only personal adornment but an art form in itself, imbued with power and meaning. Much of her work reveals a deep knowledge of a rich array of cultures and traditions, including Japanese aesthetics, African designs, and ancient Greek and Roman metalworking techniques.

But while she honored and celebrated the past, she also looked to the future. Fifty years before Apple Watches and Fitbits became commonplace, she broke new ground with her biomedical pieces, creating body monitors that aimed to improve health and save lives while remaining beautiful examples of functional jewelry. They still look ingenious and innovative today. In an unpublished interview from 2015, Scherr reaffirmed that what kept her going was the process of discovery. “That’s what keeps me alive,” she said, “whole new ways of looking at something.”

All is Possible: Mary Ann Scherr’s Legacy in Metal is her first museum retrospective. It was made possible by the support and involvement of the greater Raleigh community and especially by the many friends and admirers who own, proudly wear, and have generously lent examples of Scherr’s work to the Gregg Museum so they could be shared with and appreciated by others.

—Ana Estrades, guest curator

Born in Akron, Ohio, on August 3, 1921, Mary Ann Scherr (néé Weckman) studied graphic design and illustration at the Cleveland Institute of Art. During WWII, she quit her undergraduate classes to work as a cartographer and illustrator for the Goodyear Aircraft Corporation, creating graphic posters to support the war effort. By 1945, Mary Ann had begun dating industrial designer Sam Scherr, a fellow student from the Cleveland Institute who was then working at General Motors in Detroit.

That same year, Mary Ann was hired as one of the first female automobile interior and accessory designers at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan. After getting married in 1947, the Scherrs left their jobs in Detroit's automobile industry and moved back to Akron to open their own industrial design firm with Bernard James McDermott, another classmate from the Cleveland Institute. Scherr & McDermott International developed commercial products for many leading corporations, including Acme, Dominion Electric, General Electric, Tappan, and Hoover. In 1963, Scherr & McDermott creations were featured in a landmark exhibition of the one hundred best designs of the century at the Louvre in Paris.

Through Scherr & McDermott, Mary Ann designed a line of one-piece maternity dresses, forerunners of late 1950s tent dresses. Feeling comfortable in her own skin was important to Scherr who, after two pregnancies wearing unattractive two-piece maternity clothes, felt motivated to design a number of chic, more comfortable dresses for her third and last pregnancy. Her mother, an accomplished seamstress, translated these designs into prototypes that were then sold to Lord & Taylor in New York City.

### **Product Design**

After getting married in 1947, the Scherrs left their jobs in Detroit's automobile industry and moved back to Akron, Ohio, their hometown, to open their own industrial design firm with Bernard James McDermott, a fellow student from the Cleveland Institute. Scherr & McDermott International served many leading corporations, including Acme, Dominion Electric, General Electric, and Hoover.

The firm's many successful household products included the Hoover Suitcase Vacuum, the Dominion Oven-Broiler (which could bake, roast, broil, and toast), and the Hoppity-Hop bouncing toy they created for Sun Rubber. But among their most popular items were Mary Ann's nursery rhyme cookie jars. The first of the series, "The Cow Jumped Over the Moon," became famous years later as part of Andy Warhol's collection.

After Scherr & McDermott dissolved in the late 1970s, Mary Ann and Sam continued to collaborate professionally to develop products under their own label, "The Scherr Collection." Beyond Scherr's production jewelry, they designed and marketed other gift items, such as bookends and candelabra. This gold-plated candle holder set was designed by Sam in the shape of the Hebrew letter Chai, a symbol for "life."

In 1974, Mary Ann Scherr received a commission from the Aluminum Company of America to promote aluminum use in national magazines. She chose to sculpt figures from classical mythology (Vulcan, Apollo, Diana and the Phoenix) because it allowed her to explore the surface, texture, and design

potential of aluminum. “In doing these projects, I rediscovered aluminum myself. I have always known about the metal, but never understood all of its possibilities until I worked with it,” she said afterwards.

While she honored and celebrated the past, Scherr also looked to the future. Fifty years before Apple Watches and Fitbits became commonplace, she broke new ground with her biomedical pieces, creating body monitors that aimed to improve health and save lives while remaining beautiful examples of functional jewelry. They still look ingenious and innovative today. In an unpublished interview from 2015, Scherr reaffirmed that what kept her going was the process of discovery. “That’s what keeps me alive,” she said, “whole new ways of looking at something.”

In the late 1960s, two experiences inspired Mary Ann Scherr to begin designing jewelry that could also serve a medical purpose. In 1968, while teaching at Penland School of Crafts, she met an artist who was hiding a tracheotomy scar on her neck with a scarf. Mary Ann offered to design a “trach” necklace for her that might adorn the scar instead of concealing it.

The following year, Scherr found herself making a costume for a Miss Ohio beauty pageant while the first Apollo moon landing dominated the television channels and began wondering: What if we could track vital signs the way the heart, pulse and breathing of the astronauts were being monitored by their space suits? Before long, she began designing and making decorative devices that could also serve to warn of adverse conditions like air quality and monitor the wearer’s vital signs.

Scherr continued to work on these devices when she moved from Ohio to New York in the 1980s. While she received international recognition for her pioneering research and work in biomedical wearables, almost four decades would pass before a San Francisco-based tech company would begin producing one commercially.

Scherr could easily be described as visionary. In a 1982 article she said that, “The time will come when life-monitoring jewelry will be as commonplace as wristwatches, and no one will think of leaving home without a heart or air monitor. I can already envision a bracelet or ring that would be a time-piece, a body monitor, and a telephone.” Decades before today’s Fitbit (2007), Smartwatch (2012), or Apple Watch (2015) was her “Heart-Pulse Sensor Bracelet,” which she developed in the late 1960s and patented in 1977. An electronic light indicates the heartbeat rate, and a signal sounds when there is a change in the wearer’s activity level.

#### FRAMED PHOTO:

Mary Ann Scherr Demonstrating Oxygen Supply Pendant, New York City, ca. late 1970s

Photo courtesy of the Scherr Family

Primarily designed for individuals suffering from asthma, the pendant could detect poor air conditions that might induce an attack, and included a portable facemask with a ten-minute oxygen supply that would allow the wearer time to seek help or escape the polluted area.

## Titanium

Titanium, a flexible and lightweight material successor to aluminum, came to the fore as a new wonder metal after WWII. It played a key role in the Cold War, with both the US and the USSR using titanium in military and space exploration settings. Scherr pioneered its use in jewelry while living in New York City in the early 1980s, and after she moved to Raleigh (in 1989), titanium workshops became some of her most popular classes at Meredith College and the Crafts Center at NC State. She enjoyed demonstrating how the metal could be altered through a method called anodization, in which electricity is used to create a range of vivid colors.

### *Caption:*

Mary Ann Scherr teaching titanium at NC State's Crafts Center in 2012

### *Center and bottom right:*

Two Cuffs with Pattern, ca. 1990s

Titanium

Private Collection, Raleigh

## Major Commissions

Scherr became a renowned expert in etching on metal, which combined her passions for both drawing and metal design. Etching involves selectively removing metal through acid corrosion to create patterns, designs, texture. The amber and silver necklace with a hand-etched architectural design was Scherr's demonstration example in her chapter on etching for Oppi Untracht's *Jewelry Concepts and Technology* (1982).

Reed & Barton, a Taunton, Massachusetts-based manufacturer of silverware (1824-2015), commissioned Scherr to design five jewelry prototypes, to be sold in major stores as the "Signature V Collection." The production pieces were photo etched, a process that produced precise multiples with fine details. Four of her five designs for Reed & Barton are reunited here.

In the late 1990s, ceremonial medallions were commissioned for two of North Carolina's pioneering female academic authorities. In 1998, Scherr designed a medallion with NC State's Belltower seal for the university's first female Chancellor, Marye Ann Fox. The chain displays stylized laurel leaves, as an ancient Greek and Roman symbol of triumph, and the year 1887, when the university was founded. It has been worn by Fox's successors at every Commencement ceremony.

In 2000, Mary Ann and her daughter Sydney, who followed in her mother's footsteps as a metalsmith and educator, collaborated in creating the iris medallion for Meredith College's first woman president, Maureen Hartford. The iridescent enameled iris at the center is a symbol of the college, while the acorn with garnet at the bottom refers to Raleigh, the "City of Oaks." Mary Ann and Sydney had previously collaborated in creating a university medallion and mace for Parsons School of Design while they lived in New York in the 1980s.

## **Jewelry Sets**

Because Mary Ann Scherr's formation and early career were in the fields of illustration as well as design, dimension and shape are important design principles always present in her jewelry. Her design ingenuity is worth noting, from the simplicity of the "V" shaped necklace to the Scales Cuff and Bib which resemble a cheese grater, or the set of interlocking circles and squares, textured by hammering the metal directly on pavement. Besides being wearable, the modern lines in these works still look as fashionable today as when they were first created some twenty years ago.

Movement is a primary element in many of Scherr's jewelry sets: from the dangling metal strips in pieces she designed for Bloomingdale's Inc. to the "infinite loops" choker and bracelet, or a "waterfall" series that emulates the fluid movements of water. The latter involved stringing minute tubes of soldering silver and beads onto nylon-coated wires to mimic splashing water. All demonstrate Scherr's broad knowledge of long-standing jewelry techniques as well as the versatility of her work in silver from the late 1960s to the 1990s.

## **METALWORK**

The creativity and vast range of Mary Ann Scherr's work becomes most apparent when her jewelry is organized by type: earrings, rings and pins, chains and chokers, large necklaces, cuffs and bracelets. It can be hard to believe that the same person came up with the concept and design, as well as fabrication process, for each of these pieces. Scherr had assistants but was always the designer in charge and would never ask them to work in a technique she had not already perfected.

"Like a kid in a candy store," was how one Raleigh customer described feeling during a visit to Scherr's home studio and showroom. Scherr never ran out of ideas. She applied her creative imagination equally to humorous pieces, like a multi-strand necklace made from brass light-pulls or a cuff photoetched with the portrait of her eldest son as a historic figure on a thousand dollar bill; intricate and functional works like signature rings with symbols relating to the wearer or an ornate bracelet with a compartment that could serve as a handy ashtray; bold designs like an ostrich egg ceramic bracelet she made for Perry Ellis or an African-inspired chain corset; and delicate or minimalist pieces like her oval-in-square cuff series, meteorite necklace, or silver biomorphic drop earrings.

Endlessly eclectic, Scherr's style is recognizable by the breadth of her imagination and by her constant willingness to innovate and respond in a fresh way to everything she encountered.

## **Necklaces**

Across cultures, wearing the proper form of adornment tells a story while imparting a much-desired quality to the wearer, whether power, courage, or a part of one's history or heritage. Among the Asian style pendants on display, this is more readily apparent.

On business trips for Scherr & McDermott in the 1950s and 1960s, Mary Ann and her husband traveled to Korea a number of times to help develop the country's design industry.

But it was the Japanese aesthetics of simplicity and fantasy that impacted Scherr’s work the most. Following her 1986 study tour to Japan with Parsons, Scherr designed a line of jewelry to feature the Japanese antiques she brought back from this trip. A long pendant necklace made of Noh masks is a tribute to “Noh” theater, a classical Japanese dance-performance that integrates masks and costumes. Another pendant with choker includes antique ornamentation from a Samurai sword scabbard, called fuchi, with hanging disks cast in sterling and bronze. A pair of Samurai warrior pendants is also stunning: one angry and one smiling, the two have protective gear, helmet (kabuto) and facial armor (mempo). The mustache and thick eyelashes in the “angry” samurai are meant to make the wearer appear scarier in battle.

### **Cuffs and Bracelets**

“A showcase of my pieces looks like twenty different people,” Scherr once said. The cuffs she made throughout her career prove her point, for they are far from repetitive and certainly not dull. The range of ideas they express—through special techniques like niello, appliqué, reticulation, and instant etching on silver, stainless steel, aluminum, gold, copper, or brass in a wide variety of styles (minimalist, modernist, psychedelic, ethnic, ancient, classical, tribal)—speaks of a mind constantly experimenting and innovating, but also able to realize its visions through ceaseless dedication to mastering her craft. Among all the eclecticism of her work, the cuffs bearing the messages ALL IS POSSIBLE and HELL YES take on deeper meanings. Metal was Scherr’s chosen “canvas” and the catalyst for her can-do-all attitude toward life and work.

Designed by MAS for Perry Ellis

The Scherr Family Collection

*2nd shelf:*

*Case:*

### **Chains and Chokers**

A well-traveled artist with a passion for the history of jewelry and metalwork, Mary Ann Scherr found much of her stimulus in past cultures and traditions. Inspired by Egyptian pectorals, tribal corsets in West Africa, and Japanese netsuke, the chokers and body chain displayed here reveal her ability to respond in an original way to diverse and rich traditions.

Her vast knowledge is evident in the minutest details. The lapis lazuli she employed in the clasp of the pectoral, for example, was a favorite stone in ancient Egyptian jewelry, valued for its rarity (it had to be imported from Afghanistan) and its deep blue color. The classic shape of the rounded choker in vermeil (gilded silver) may look simple to make, but involves patient and precise hammering to transform flat metal into the double inward curve of its three-dimensional form (known as synclastic forming in professional metalsmithing).

## **Signature Rings and Pins**

Scherr often taught her students how to make cuffs, necklaces, and earrings but never finger rings, because “identity” or “signature” rings were a mainstay in her business. Commissioned for weddings and other special occasions, her rings featured a combination of personalized symbols, numbers and characters.

On the top row are Scherr’s sons’ rings, alongside two of her own, well-worn personal rings. The long shield ring spells out her initials vertically. Dimension and texture in nearly all her rings were achieved with etching and metal appliqué techniques that involved soldering at least two layers of metal together, often 14k gold and sterling silver. Final touches were added by personally hand-engraving details with a vibrating etching tool.

## **Earrings**

In an oral history interview recorded in 2001, Scherr said that in Raleigh her work became “more introspective and, of course, less related to popular sales considerations.” Indeed, from 1990 on, she worked less often on creating production line pieces, and instead focused much more on personal commissions. Several examples of these are in this case.

Especially notable are a pair of initial earrings with reddish-orange carnelian set in the letters S and A (for Sissy Ashby), and a pair of gold and lapis lazuli drop earrings that Scherr ingeniously transformed from lapis lazuli cufflinks for her friend, the art historian Blue Greenberg. Scherr rarely used semiprecious stones unless they were given to her as part of a commission.