

ART REVIEW

Lustrous enamel, past and present, on view at Fuller



PHOTOS BY JAIRO RAMIREZ/COLLECTION OF ENAMEL ARTS FOUNDATION

Fred Uhl Ball's "Envelope" (1980).

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 01, 2015

BROCKTON — Do not underestimate the allure of the shiny. Many of the works in “Little Dreams in Glass and Metal: Enameling in America, 1920 to the Present,” a big, often seductive exhibition at the Fuller Craft Museum, have shine, depth, and translucency, a cocktail mixed for visual pleasure.

“Little Dreams,” a traveling show put together by the Enamel Arts Foundation of Los Angeles, kicks off its tour at the Fuller, the exhibition’s only East Coast venue, opening on Sunday.

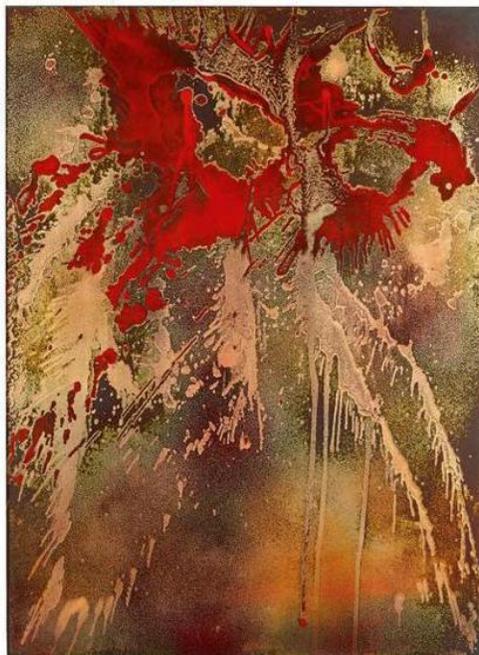
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Enamel, the craft of fusing ground glass to metal in a kiln, has a spotty history over the last century. From the 1930s to the 1970s, the medium had a lively following and was collected by major museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts. But in the 1970s, it fell off the map.

One reason, co-curator Hal Nelson offered in an interview, could have been the direction art was taking at the time: toward minimalism and conceptualism, and away from opulence. Also, the medium may have slipped between the taxonomical cracks. Once considered a branch of ceramics (thanks to kiln firing), art schools moved it, in the late 20th century, to their metals and jewelry departments.

Neither exactly fits, but enamel didn’t have prominent dealers, scholars, or collectors behind it to foster its very own category. Still, the medium had fans and practitioners in pockets around the country, such as Ohio and Southern California. Not so much in New England.

Nevertheless, American enamel does have some aesthetic roots in Boston. In the catalog, Nelson and his co-curator, Bernard Jazzar, point to three aesthetics that formed tastes in modern and contemporary enamel: Viennese modernism; the narrative bent of the French Limoges school, which dates to the sixth century; and the Arts and Crafts movement popular in Boston early in the 20th century.



Paul Hultberg’s “Lepidopteral Pyrotechnics” (1965).

In that last aesthetic, enamel tended to accent larger metalwork — as in the earliest pieces in the show, by Mildred G. Watkins, who began her career as a silversmith. She coated the interior of her tiny silver “Footed Bowl,” just over 3 inches in diameter, with

pale blue enamel. Looking down into it is akin to gazing into the immense bowl of the heavens — it seems to go on and on.

When we think of enamel, most of us picture small items, bits of jewelry and jaunty box tops. “Little Dreams” declares there’s much more to it.

Despite the historical focus, the curators have organized the show thematically, under headings such as nature, the figure, and abstraction. Their setup provokes brisk volleys between contemporary enamelist and their predecessors.

Karl Drerup, one of the early innovators in enamel, has a luminous mid-century piece, “Pond Life,” with rows and rows of overlapping, loose-handed imagery in green, blue, and black.

Nearby, Jean Tudor’s “Gurness Broch,” made nearly 50 years later, shares Drerup’s green-blue palette. It depicts a Scottish archeological site, an Iron Age village, with raku-fired enamel looming on a square copper plate behind the crisp silver cloisonné. The raku looks like an aerial shot of impending storms; the cloisonné, capturing the village’s rocky outlines, has the precision of a topographic map, but with the lollipop glimmer of glass.



Karl Drerup’s “Pond Life” (1957).

Raku and cloisonné, of course, are technical terms. Raku pieces are fired at low temperatures and cooled quickly. Cloisonné involves making metal dams into which ground glass is poured and isolated when it’s fired; the edges of the dams can be seen, similar to the lead contours in stained glass.

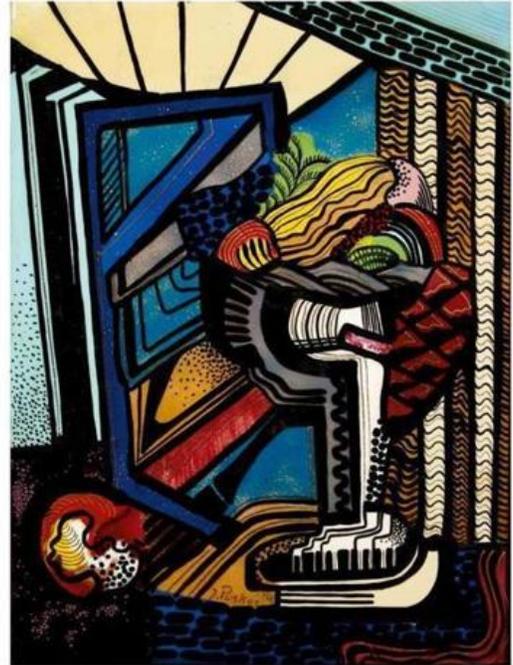
Technique is paramount in “Little Dreams,” and at times it can trump imagery; some mid-century abstractions and figurative works feel halfheartedly cubist, less interested in form than color. They don’t stand the test of time.

Not so Maggie Howe’s “Le Jazz Hot,” a rhythmic piece of that era that takes advantage of enamel’s traditional small scale. Howe places seven enamel columns, each slightly larger than a piano key, bobbing and dipping against a horizontal wooden bar. The

abstract imagery, in blue, white, and velvety red, has representational moments; it slips in and out of familiarity like a dream. From a distance, it could be modern dancers, poised on a stage just after the curtain rises.

Then there's Paul Hultberg, whose "Lepidopteral Pyrotechnics" echoes a Jackson Pollock splatter painting. Here, enamel adds another level of texture. Instead of using a kiln, Hultberg torch-fired this piece, with its wild, feathery splashes of gold and red. The ground has a fantastic, iridescent, coppery grain, as deep and luminous as Mildred Watkins's tiny bowl.

The most riveting work in "Little Dreams" is by innovators such as Hultberg and Fred Uhl Ball. Ball used to make enameled copper envelopes, which he gave away as tokens. "Envelope" imbues the mundane, throwaway form with blue luster. Think what might be inside!



John Puskas's "Interior With Still Life" (1950).

One of the largest works in the show, a 6-foot-tall untitled abstract piece by Ball, features individual strips of copper, fluted, scored, or crinkled, each covered with glossy, translucent enamel and assembled together in an eruptive flutter of angels' wings.

Ball, who died in 1985 at 40 after he was injured in a mugging, wasn't exactly working in a vacuum. "Little Dreams" shows us there have always been serious enamel artists; they just didn't have much institutional or critical support.

The Enamel Arts Foundation is working to change that. This exhibition includes contemporary artists, such as Tudor, who is in her 80s, and the remarkable June Schwarcz, still at work in her 90s. There's just a sprinkling of younger artists. A suggestion for their next show: Enamelists of the 21st century.

LITTLE DREAMS IN GLASS AND METAL: **Enameling in America, 1920 to the Present**

At: Fuller Craft Museum, 455 Oak St., Brockton,

Aug. 2-Nov. 29.