



Ring, 1992, 18 ct gold and silver, 10 x 5 x 5.5 cm



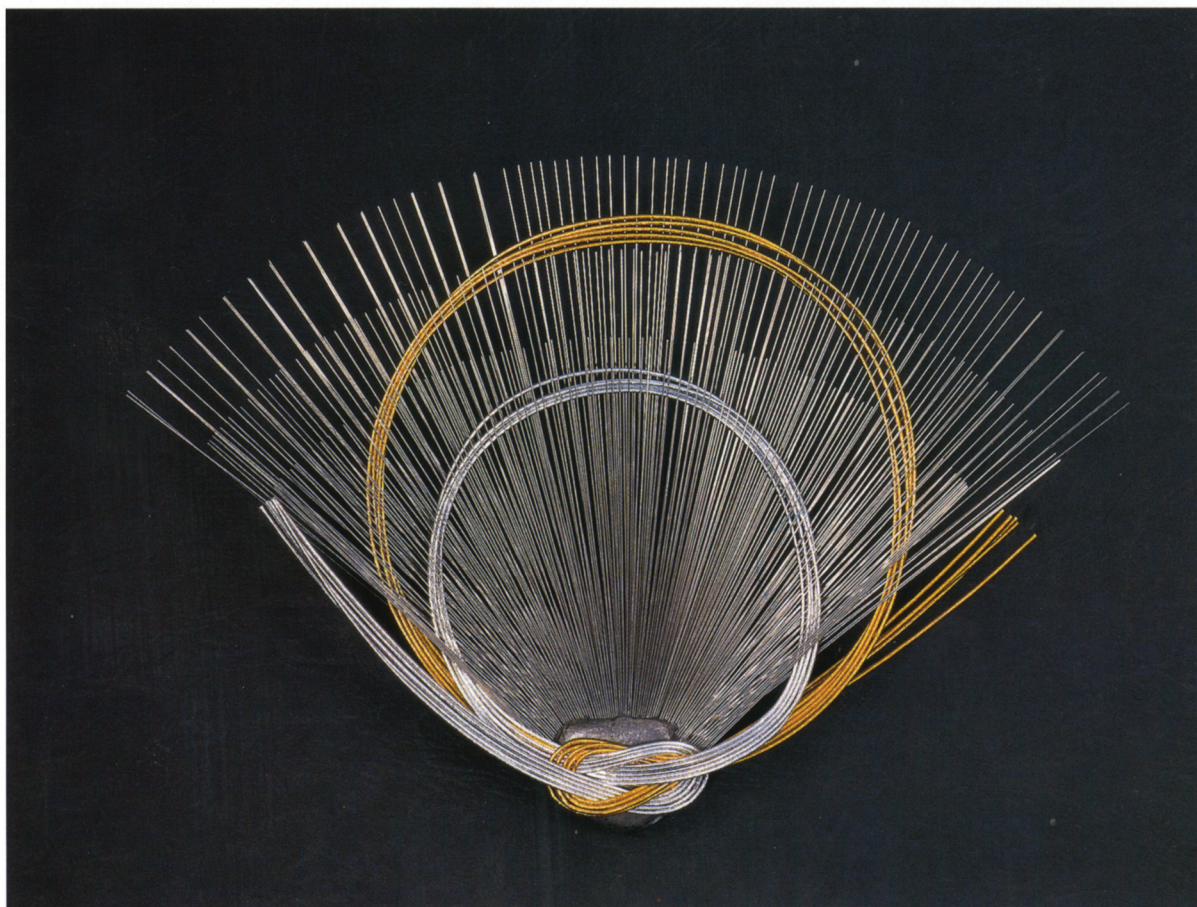
Neckpiece, 1996, stainless steel, gold leaf, 38 x 38 x 11.5 cm

## DELICACY WITH STRENGTH

The refined and evocative nuance of Emiko Suo's distinctive jewellery has brought her international acclaim, and on viewing her metalwork it is not hard to understand why. Profile by Dorothy Erickson.

THE jewellery of Emiko Suo has what the French describe as *je ne sais quoi*, which is seen in the best of Japanese design. It is subtle with her Japanese sensibility to the fore. Although made of modern materials, such as extremely fine stainless steel wire and using a minimalist palette of silver and gold, it evokes landscape elements such as mists on the mountains and shimmering water at dawn. The aesthetics of her heritage – the Japanese notion of cultivated nature – is evident even in this child of the metropolis. Emiko's father was a jeweller and she says that she

was 'brought up to the sound of an iron hammer and a file ... The work sounds made by the five or six people who were the staff of the workshop were like my nursery song'. The workshop became her favourite "playroom" and her space in it expanded as she grew up. The staff have told her that when they were making a ring or brooch, Emiko was forever at their side in the workshop watching with "insatiable" curiosity. She remembers playing at making "funny items" by hammering out metal or filing it, following their example. 'The memories of childhood fun with metal and



Ornament, 1998, stainless steel, lead, "mizuhiki", 34 x 22.5 x 30 cm



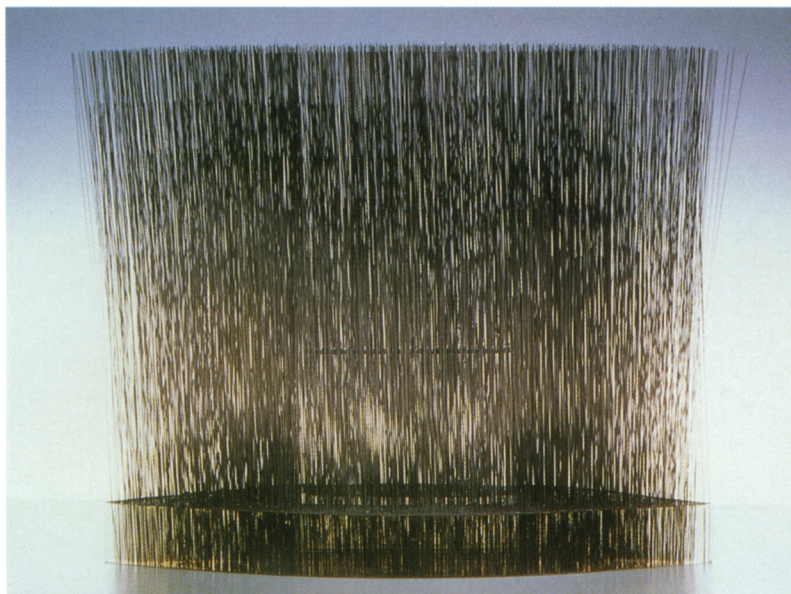


*Neckpiece, 1995, stainless steel, gold leaf and silver, 10 x 30 x 10 cm*



*Vase, 1993, stainless steel, copper, nickel plated, ht 13 x 37.5 x 37.5 cm*





*Vase, 1996, stainless steel, resin, ht 50 x 60 x 8 cm*



*Vase, 1998, copper, silver plated, tallest 100 x 15 x 8 cm*



*Rings, 1998, 20 ct gold, silver, epoxy resin, largest 7.2 x 3.3 x 3.3 cm*



*Vase, 1997, copper, silver plated, tallest 29 x 19 x 28 cm*



of a workshop as a playroom are 'indispensable for my work now,' she says. And that childhood sense of fun and wonder is clearly manifest in Emiko's work.

In 1990 she graduated from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, having undertaken a degree in the Arts and Crafts Department under Professor Yasuki Hiramatsu. She says he inculcated in her an abiding interest and understanding of a variety of different materials, enabling her knowledge to become much wider and deeper. This led to her undertaking a postgraduate course specialising in silversmithing,

*Vase, 1996, stainless steel, resin, orchids, ht 50 x 13 x 13 cm*



from which she graduated in 1992. Emiko then went on to spend the next three years designing and developing merchandise for a jewellery manufacturer, after which she became “free”, establishing her own studio at home where she still lives with her father.

Emiko began exhibiting in 1991, soon after graduating with her first degree. She also entered competitions, including the “Japanese Crafts Exhibition” in 1995, ’97 and ’98. The Japan Jewellery Association Art Competition was another regular event in which she took part on several occasions, winning the Grand Prize in 1998. Her early work was constructed in silver and gold finely drawn and bound over stainless steel armatures, resulting in a subtle organic effect.

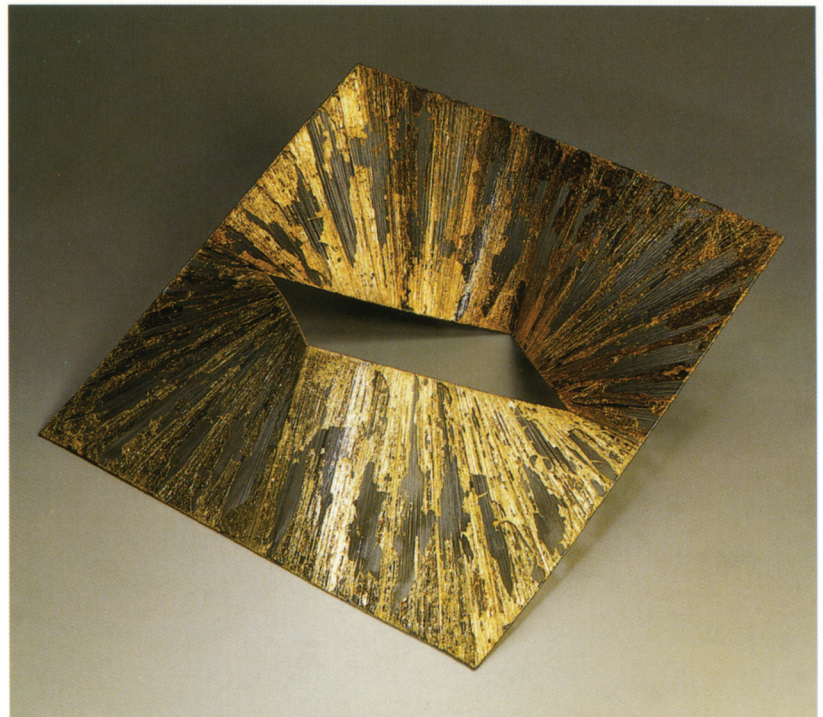
Her first solo exhibition was held in 1994, at the 100% Gallery in Tokyo, with a body of work that displayed great delicacy and, although actually quite tough and flexible, conveyed the impression of extreme fragility. In one piece from this series, fine steel wires were bound over a large ruff-like frame and layers of delicate 24-carat gold and aluminium leaf applied in a semi-random pattern until it resembled the mottled bark of a plane tree. In similar vein, a rectangular “ruff” contrasted gold leaf against the sheen of fine stainless steel wire with stunning effect. These pieces are ultra-light, deceptive in their delicacy and spectacular to wear.

In 1996, she entered the Home For Flowers (Vase) competition, winning the Grand Prize. Her vases of this time were constructed with myriad extremely fine steel rods embedded in an epoxy base. In some the water is held in the base while the flowers compete for space with the steel filaments, creating extraordinary and extremely satisfying results. Also in this style were a series of card holders in which a dense thicket of steel wires is used to support visiting cards. Emiko first exhibited in Europe in a group exhibition of Japanese jewellery in Holland in 1994–95 and was invited to submit for “Talente”, a special section for emergent artists, at the 1995 “Handwerkmesse” in Munich. At the latter she won the Talente Prize and the Bavarian State Prize and her work was acquired for the Neue Sammlung of the Bavarian Applied Arts Museum. In a hectic year, Emiko also exhibited in “Contemporary Japanese Jewellery” at the Municipal Museum of Decorative Art in Ghent and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.

The work purchased by the Neue Sammlung was a vase made of fine stainless steel wire wrapped around a steel frame containing a reservoir. The piece gives the impression of being a substantially solid construction, whereas it is actually very light.

Following this success, Emiko was invited back to Munich to exhibit in “Portrait of Masters in the Crafts” in 1996 and also in “Schmuck ’99”, again at the international “Handwerkmesse” in Munich. In 1998 she was included in the prestigious “Jewellery Moves” – an international survey mounted by the National Museum of Scotland – and in 1999 was featured in “Japanese Jewellery” at Ars Tempora in Austria.

In 1998 the vase theme of wire embedded into epoxy was extended to jewellery with a series of rings. The following year she began making different pieces using the fine steel wires, some only a quarter of a millimetre in diameter. The material was used in a more linear fashion, gathering bundles of these fine wires together at one end or in the middle and fanning the ends. Some were gold leafed, others left as shimmering polished stainless steel. Necklaces and brooches in this style are particularly striking. These pieces were extended into more geometric work with interlocking bracelets in the same materials.



*Necklace, 1995, stainless steel, 24 ct – 18 ct gold leaf, 36 x 36 x 12.5 cm*



*Vase, 1998, copper, silver plated, 8 x 41 x 7.5 cm*



*Necklace, 2000, stainless steel, silver, 16 x 60 x 2.5 cm*





*Necklace, 2000,  
stainless steel, silver,  
20 x 10 x 40 cm*

*Bracelet, 2000,  
stainless steel, 24 ct  
and 18 ct gold leaf,  
silver, 6 x 6 x 6 cm*

*Necklace, 2000,  
stainless steel, silver,  
20 x 3 x 30 cm*



In 2000, this prolific jeweller had a solo exhibition in Arai Atelier Gallery, Tokyo and two others in cities in Japan. She also showed in Germany in the invitational "Selection 2000" and in "Korean and Japanese Women Jewellery Artists", an invitational travelling exhibition featuring the work of 17 Koreans and 17 Japanese. Emiko travelled to Seoul in minus degrees for the opening and to conduct workshops. A similar collaborative group show is to follow in 2002, this time featuring artists from Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

Almost simultaneously with her recent solo exhibition in Tokyo in September, 2001 Emiko took part in a group show with Yuri Kawanabe and myself (Dorothy Erickson) in Western Australia. This will be followed by another group exhibition in London in November, titled "Contemporary Japanese Jewellery", sponsored by the British Crafts Council. This has been a busy time in a burgeoning career.

Emiko Suo has been showing her work in Australia for the past three years. She was first invited to exhibit at Quadrivium Gallery in Sydney in 1999, in "Metal Element II", the second of a series of group exhibitions featuring both Japanese and Australian jewellers. She rapidly became one of their outstanding artists and has shown also in "Metal Element III" in 2000. She is represented in Australia by this entrepreneurial gallery located in Sydney's Queen Victoria Building. Emiko Suo lives in Setagaya, a satellite city of Tokyo, which has a sister city relationship with Bunbury in Western Australia. Bunbury, the second-largest city in WA and gateway to the Margaret River wine region, is hosting an international congress of sister cities in October, 2001. To mark this event, and to coincide with the "Monet and Japan" exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries is mounting an exhibition called "Intersections: Japan and Australia", featuring the work of Emiko Suo, Japanese/Australian Yuri Kawanabe and the writer of this article, all three of whom are regular exhibitors at Quadrivium Gallery.

Bunbury Regional Art Galleries, built in the 19th century as a Convent of Mercy, was purchased by the City of Bunbury in 1980 and opened as a public arts complex in 1987. It is an adjunct to the Art Gallery of WA in Perth and the curator, James Davies, sought to mount an exhibition highlighting the interaction between the arts of Japan and Australia to coincide with the Monet exhibition in Perth. The combination of a Japanese who shows internationally (including in Australia) with a Japanese resident in Australia who also shows internationally and an Australian, another internationally exhibiting jeweller, who shows regularly in Japan, will help show the connections between the cultures. Japan does not have a history of making or wearing jewellery. This is a relatively recent development, so practitioners are not constrained by historic traditions concerning the use of materials, as is the case in some European countries. Australia, without a hallmarking system, is also little constrained from using alternative materials. Many Australians utilise Japanese sword-making materials and techniques to create unusual jewellery. All three artists employ materials that suit their needs, often combining precious with non-precious, which gives a new and at times startling ambience to the work. Emiko Suo, with her delicate touch and refreshing work, is a fitting representative of the Japanese jewellery scene to be included in this Bunbury exhibition.

**Dr Dorothy Erickson**

*Dorothy Erickson is an Australian artist/jeweller, art historian and critic who exhibits regularly overseas.*