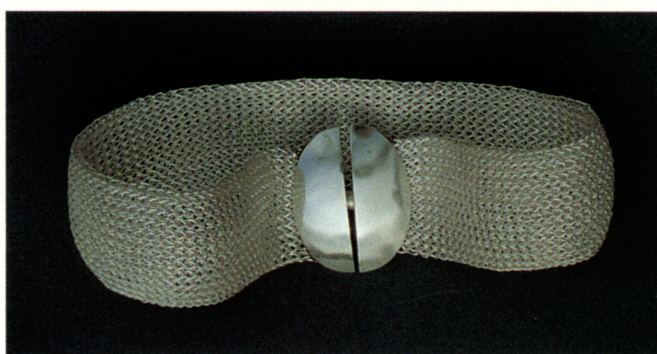


Brooch, 1996, knitted silver, anodised aluminium, 10 x 10 cm. Top inset: Jewels for "Im Blumengarten der Schmuck", that toured Europe in 1998. Lower inset: Collar, 1996, knitted stg silver set with semi-precious stone; width of knitted section 4 cm

A FORGING PASSION

In a historic building in the leafy suburb of Vienna is a jewellery school unlike any other. It is the atelier of exuberant artist-jeweller Erika Leitner. Dorothy Erickson tells her story. Photographs by Dr Rudolph Leitner.

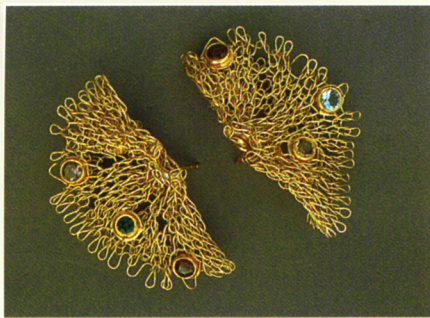
ERIKA LEITNER, whose knitted gold works have been exhibited worldwide, was one of the first female graduates in Austria to be part of the modern jewellery movement. She is still exhibiting and innovating and yet makes time to run her own jewellery school in a splendid Secession-style building in the suburb of Hütteldorf. Leitner has exhibited in several countries across Europe and in the USA, Canada, Australia and Kuwait. Her work is held in major collections in Austria and Germany, including the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, and the private collections of the royal family of Kuwait plus the many friends and associates who adore her work. A well-respected artist, she returns to her discipline as much as she has received from it. Leitner was destined to be a doctor, but the little



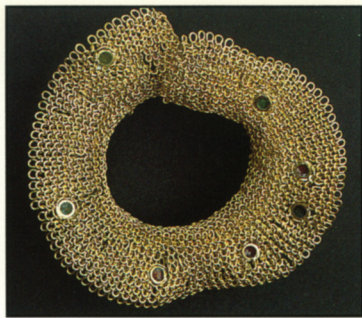
Collar, 1997, knitted stg silver with large box-clasp

girl who played in the local blacksmith's forge in Upper Austria became an artist instead. The choice was only made in the last few weeks of her secondary schooling when her class went to Vienna to visit the various institutions of higher learning. In the Jewellery School

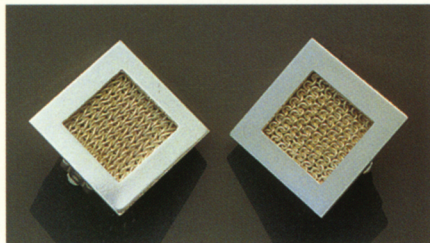
in the Akademie für Angewandte Kunst were all the tools she was used to seeing in the forge and she was fascinated. It was just as well she was familiar with the tools for only two applicants could be chosen from the 100 who sat the aptitude test. The other successful student was the now-noted teacher Peter Skubic. Her teacher, Professor Eugene Mayer, had been the assistant to Joseph Hoffmann, so the lectures and training were traditional and the skills were imparted while the students undertook compulsory and rather floral exercises.



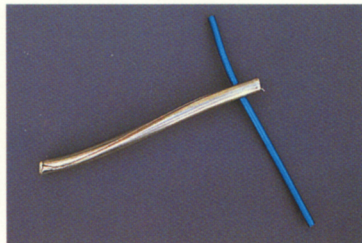
'Fan-Earrings', 1995, 18 ct gold, set with tourmaline, 2 x 3 x 3 cm. Private collection



'Bracelet', 1996, 18 ct gold, set with enamelled pallions. Private collection



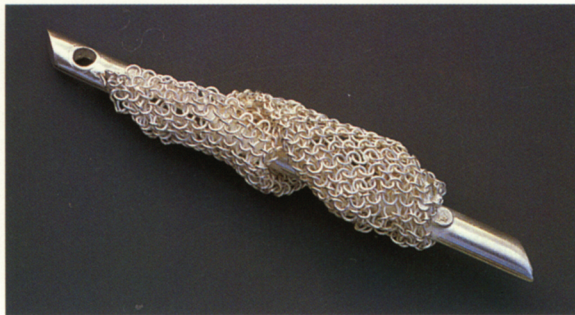
'Cufflinks', 1997, 18 ct gold, stg silver



'Brooch', 1996, stg silver, aluminium



Erika Leitner

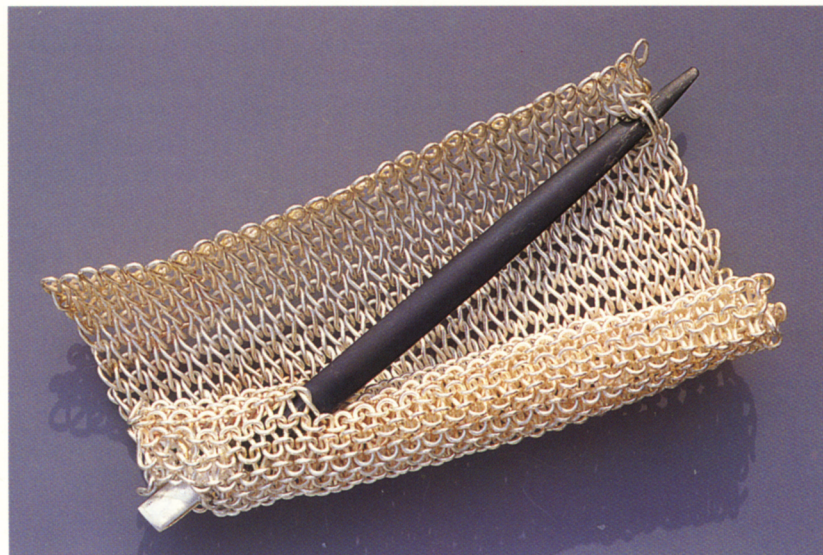


'Brooch', 1996, in tubular and knitted silver, 2 x 9 cm

'Brooch', 1996, in knitted silver with silver and ebony rod inserted, 10 x 7 cm

It is probably because of this, as well as the early interest in forging, that Leitner's designs evolve from metal experiments rather than sketches. The work grows organically as the metal is moved with hammer, pliers or drawplate. In fact, she prefers to use techniques in which the character of the tools used is evident in the end result. Forged pieces evolve and change as she hammers and works them in precious metal. Knitted sections are the same, they grow as each piece progresses. However, if she is unsure of the end result, she occasionally makes an aluminium model to test a new theory of movement.

'While working, my thoughts flow into the piece – and then back to the beholder. Instinctive processes while working are important for the tensions in the



piece because I work the metal very impulsively and directly. I respect the material's "own initiative" and throw myself and my ideas into the creative process. Tension in the right measure is art,' she says. Leitner was married during her training. Her eldest son was born a few weeks after her final exam and it required enormous determination to continue her career. This is a trait that is still evident today. After graduation in 1958, she set up her workshop and proceeded to exhibit. Four children only meant four short interruptions to her career. Larger disruptions were the moves the family made in pursuit of her husband's career with IBM. She has lived and worked in the USA, Zambia, Belgium and Kuwait. In Kuwait she managed the Arabic Cultural Institute until the Gulf War made it necessary to leave.

The first major exhibition in which she took part was held in the Schönbrunn Palace in 1959, appropriate perhaps as she has Hapsburg ancestors. This was soon followed by another in Rotterdam and a pattern was established. An early career highlight was being invited by the Austrian authorities to demonstrate at the World Expo in Montreal in 1967. The intricately enamelled piece made under the watchful eyes of Expo visitors is still in her possession and inspired a return to enamelled and granulated pieces in 1995. The visit was followed by a solo exhibition in the same city. Soon afterwards the family moved to New York, where Leitner worked in a Manhattan jewellery atelier fabricating work in precious stones for the high-fashion market. However, she did not entirely neglect her own work, holding exhibitions in New York and New Jersey. In 1970 she returned to Vienna with other moves pending. Finding it difficult to orchestrate a career in these circumstances, she undertook additional classes in restoration under Otto Nedbal and has since restored many precious artefacts for churches in Austria. The opening of Galerie am Graben in Vienna – one of the major modern jewellery galleries of Europe – by Inge Asenbaum was opportune. This valuable contact grew into a mutual friendship and promoted Leitner's work regardless of her geographic location. The family's move to Lusaka, Zambia for 1973–76 necessitated a complete change in work. Tools and resources were limited and she developed her now signature technique of knitting gold. Familiar with the childhood activity of French knitting, Leitner developed a method of knitting finely-drawn gold or silver wire using a small board with several pairs of steel pins inserted to make the various gauges or sizes of her stitches. The wire is first bent into loops in long coils and then knitted into place using pliers. Earrings, bracelets, collars, brooches and cufflinks can all be made using this method. Unlike textile knitting it can be soldered and bezels, catches and other fabrication undertaken and attached. It was here also that she acquired her first dedicated student, Joke van Omen, who later opened Galerie VO in Washington (now Galerie Handwerke).

Returning to Europe in 1976, Leitner set up a new studio with academy friend Jutta Seidenspinner and they continued to work together whenever she was in Vienna. This continued until Seidenspinner's early death in 1990, after which Leitner established her current space. She staged solo shows in 1978 and 1979. The new technique intrigued people and she won the Benvenuto Cellini Prize in Hanover. Her fractured career was back on track but once again the family moved; this time to Brussels which, happily, was not so distant. She was still able to

exhibit in Schmuck International in Vienna for the World Craft Council Conference in 1980, in "Email" at Goldsmiths' Hall in London, and in "Email" in 1982 when it toured Australia. Soon, however, the peripatetic family were off again; this time to Kuwait where they spent 1984 to 1987. Since 1988, based back in Vienna, she has had time to rebuild her profile, staging solo exhibitions in New York, Berlin, Vienna and other European cities. This has been successful and in 1997 she was selected for the prestigious survey show "Schmuck '97" in Munich.

Leitner does not restrict herself to the knitted technique as she enjoys forging, hence there are often considerable contrasts within a piece of her work. A suite of brooches from 1996, for instance, combines forged or drawn elements with the more organic knitted sections. Oxidised aluminium and carved ebony were also incorporated into the large graphic pieces exhibited in Galerie Tiller in Vienna.

The work made for "Flowers in Jewellery", an exhibition curated by Veronica Swartzinger of Galerie V&V, that toured Europe in 1997-98, is typical. The gold ring and silver earrings inset with moonstones have grown under the artist's hand. Each is individual, referencing the fan-shaped earrings of 1995. In fact, she often reworks earlier ideas, taking them a step further in the later incarnations. She says of her work: 'It should be worn for love and sentiment. The wearer counts – not status, not power.'

Leitner is very generous towards others. She says her work has always brought her closer to people, especially in the countries of Africa and the Middle East. 'People often got to know me through my work before a personal contact could develop.' She has sponsored displaced persons and refugees to a better life in Austria. Today she runs a jewellery school in an airy, purpose-built studio on top of a heritage Secession building in Vienna, where she teaches her dedicated students and also creates her own pieces. Each summer she gives workshops in the province of Burgenland and in 1999 will start a new series at a summer residence in Zwettl in conjunction with the owner, the famous painter Linde Waber.

A generous and vivacious person with an enviable range of skills, Leitner is considering holding special three-week workshops for overseas students in July of each year to enable them to utilise her fully equipped workshop, learn such techniques as they require while having access to the galleries, museums and suppliers of Vienna. This could be an opportunity for students or graduates who wish to upgrade their skills and make contacts in Europe without undertaking a full academic course. For Australians this could prove an opportunity for any jewellers who wish to set up their own residencies¹ in Europe and apply to the Visual Arts and Crafts Fund for funding to negotiate a residency with Leitner.

Erika Leitner is an artist-jeweller who has only been able to concentrate on her career relatively late in life, but her work goes from strength to strength, to the delight of her dedicated following of clients. In recent years she has also turned to large-scale sculptural works which are winning acceptance throughout Europe.

Dr Dorothy Erickson

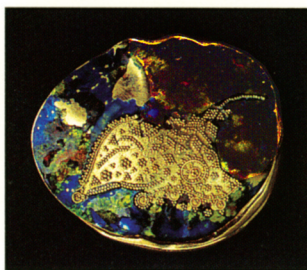
Dr Dorothy Erickson exhibits jewellery worldwide and writes on art and design from her base in Perth, Western Australia.

Erika Leitner can be contacted at her studio: Huttledorferstrasse 259 Vienna, 1140, Austria. Fax: (+43) 1 9111661.

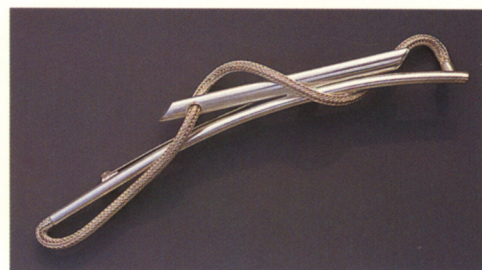
1. The traditional Australia Council studios do not cater for the needs of metalsmiths.



'Neckpiece', 1995, knitted 18 ct gold



'Brooch', 1995, 18 ct gold



'Brooch', 1996, knitted silver with silver tube, 8 cm



'Brooch', 1995, 18 ct gold and ebony with knitted insert. Private collection, Austria



'Large Fibula Brooch', 1995, forged 18 ct gold, knitted gold