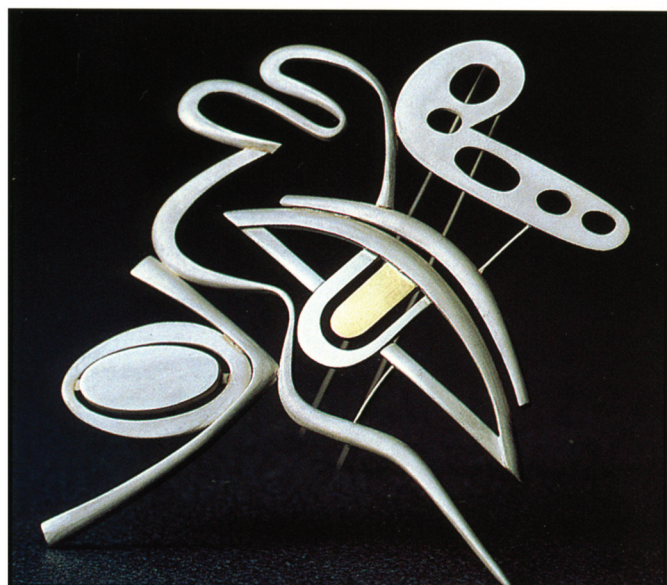


Neckpiece for 'Portrait of a Woman', 1989, oxidised silver and black colourcore. Inset: Pablo Picasso 'Portrait of a Woman', 1946

EMOTIONAL GEOMETRY: THE JEWELS OF WENDY RAMSHAW

Wendy Ramshaw, OBE, Lady Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, is arguably the best-known artist/jeweller in the world and particularly noted for her conceptual innovations.

Text by Dr Dorothy Erickson. Photography by Bob Cramp.



TWO major retrospective exhibitions, with matching publications, in London in October, 1998 enabled the scope of Wendy Ramshaw's practice to be appreciated. At the Victoria and Albert Museum "Picasso's Ladies: Jewellery by Wendy Ramshaw", the culmination of a 10-year project, made a magnificent display. Examples from almost

40 years of jewellery-making, along with maquettes for larger works, were also shown at the Lesley Crazie Gallery in Clerkenwell to accompany the book *Wendy Ramshaw: Jewel Drawings and Projects*, published by Hipotesis in Barcelona. Ramshaw's work is part of the Modern Movement. It is of its time and place but, beyond that, it is a very personal vision. As respected art historian, Paul Greenhalgh,



Brooch for 'Portrait of a Nusch Eluard', 1990, silver and 18 ct gold. Inset: Pablo Picasso 'Nusch Eluard', 1937



Set of rings for 'Portrait of Woman with Book', 1990–91, 18 ct yellow gold, with amethyst, emerald, citrine, fire opal, garnet, iolite, sapphire and cornelian, approx. size 15 x 3 cm. Private collection, UK

Above: Pablo Picasso 'Portrait of Woman with Book', 1932

perceptively remarked in the drawings catalogue: 'It is a combination of the larger, objective symbols of the modern world, with the subjective inner life of the person herself. There is nothing arbitrary in Ramshaw's repertoire, she selects the forms she uses because they have symbolic weight for her.' She is an artist who uses whatever techniques and materials suit the realisation of her personal vision. That most of this has been in the form of jewellery is purely accidental – it was not her original training. This freedom of approach has allowed her to extend the boundaries of whatever media she is using.

Early in her career Ramshaw established an idiom and recognisable style, but within that there has been immense variation. She is known for her delicate colour combinations in her signature ring-sets on their sculptural stands, for her vocabulary of gentle geometric shapes, for the inventive use of series, multiples and editions. The more recent large-scale works for architectural environments have seen some of the most interesting – such as setting iron with glass "jewels", as in the screen for the Victoria and Albert Museum.

It is in this museum that the "Picasso's Ladies" were displayed in the Silver Gallery. This is arguably one of the most exciting and innovative jewellery projects of the 20th century. Paul Greenhalgh summarised the results of Ramshaw's work, writing: 'These are undoubtedly some of the most intellectually complex and aesthetically accomplished pieces of jewellery at large in the world today. Emotional geometry has fused with modernist history to create absolute poetry...

'There are many extraordinary games being played in these works and some of them represent an interesting departure for the artist. There is irony and wit, for example, in the decision to use Picasso. Picasso made art containing ladies wearing jewel-

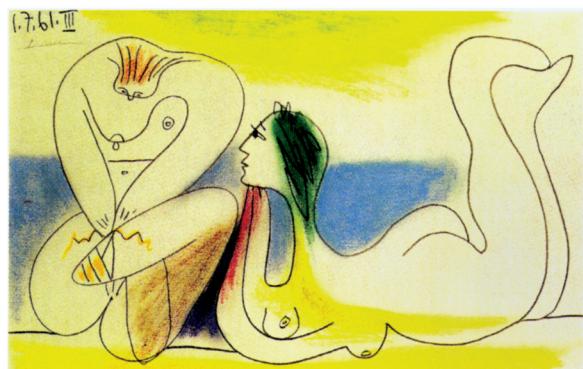


Pebbles and pearls for 'Seated Nude Drying her Foot', 1994–98, collection of jewellery made from beach pebbles, silver and pearls, 27 x 6 cm

Above: Pablo Picasso 'Seated Nude Drying her Foot', 1921

lery; Ramshaw has made jewellery containing ladies who are art.'

Why Picasso? 'He is the only artist to offer me the variety, change of style, technique and emotional range – all by one hand,' says Ramshaw. Picasso's work referenced his predecessors, making modern works after Velasquez, Delacroix, Manet and others, and Ramshaw took this one step further, often playing up the sensual geometric vocabulary or the sexual symbolism. The jewels for the 66 paintings – although they are created as adornments for the women who are Picasso's subjects – also reflect or counterbalance the form and colour composition. The works are surprisingly varied in design and materials. Ramshaw has deliberately used the painted ladies as a means of freeing up her thinking and expanding her *oeuvre*. 'Enjoying the moment', she responded to the playful distortions of the human anatomy and to the immediacy and vibrancy of the line, shape and colour. Some of the works are spectacular, others are more intimate. Some are owned

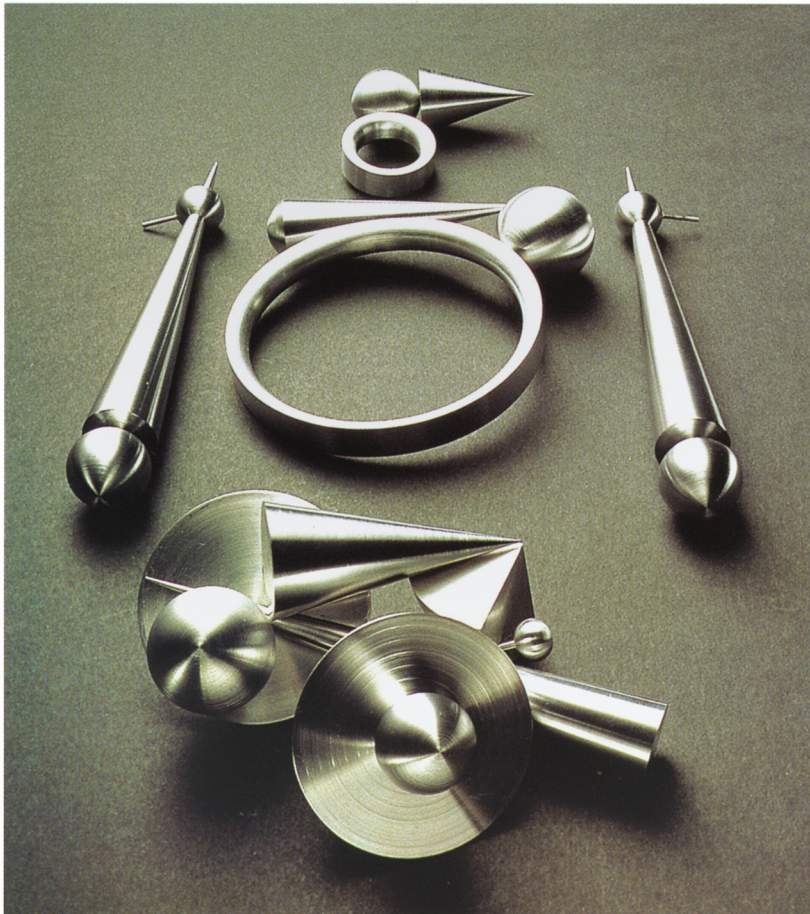


Collection of jewellery for time spent 'On the Beach'. Series of 50 unique pairs, silver, gold, sand jasper, agate, vitreous enamel. Painted wooden cones, tallest 9 x 3 cm

Above: Pablo Picasso 'On the Beach', 1961



Pair of brooches of coloured "tears" for 'The Weeping Woman', 1990, 18 ct yellow gold, fire opal, amethyst, chrysoprase, lapis lazuli, citrine, blue, orange and green cornelians



by private patrons or museums, others are still to find owners, but all chart Ramshaw's personal response to a particular Picasso portrait. Frequently, she attempts to capture Picasso's feeling for the sitter at the moment at which he painted her. Each emotion seen and felt has aroused a specific response. Dora Maar shed so many tears over her disintegrating personal relationship with Picasso that he used her image in many studies related to *Guernica*.

Three paintings referred to as "The Crying Woman", for instance, have jewels designed to incorporate tears. *Necklace of Tears for Dora Maar*, made in 1995-96, is composed of six oxidised silver necklaces with long bezel-set teardrops of rock crystal and blue topaz. The jewel is in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Another variation on the theme is the 1998 *Chain of Glass Tears for the Weeping Woman* portrait which belongs to the National Gallery of Victoria. Constructed of blackened steel and over 100 droplets of lampworked glass matched to water-colour sketches, this piece was designed to create a beautiful 'random cascade of water-like droplets to express tears'. One of Ramshaw's last pieces, also inspired by a portrait of Dora Maar, is one that she considers particularly special, made for the brilliant



Pablo Picasso 'The Weeping Woman', 1937

Weeping Woman in the Tate Gallery. In this piece the bright colouration of the painting is reproduced in two very large brooches with cascading pendants. The composition is disorganised to play upon the image of the distorted and distracted weeping woman. Her aim was to convey the anguish depicted in the painting, a challenge that



Jewellery for 'Nude Sitting Against Green Background', 1989, aluminium

Above: Pablo Picasso 'Nude Sitting Against Green Background', 1946

Ramshaw says she would not have attempted in the early years of the project.

Her response to the pencil drawing of François Gilot, *Portrait of a Woman*, was to create a graphic linear jewel in blackened silver suitable for the original image to wear. The piece is striking in its single-



Pablo Picasso 'Nude Woman in a Red Armchair', 1932



Left: Set of 19 rings for 'Nude Woman in a Red Armchair', 1990, 18 ct white gold with semi-precious stones

Above right: A pair of hair combs for 'Head of a Smiling Woman', 1991, Colorcore with resin inlay, 10 x 17 cm. Collection of Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany

Above: Pablo Picasso 'Head of a Smiling Woman', 1943



Below: Chain of glass tears for 'Weeping Woman', 1998, four necklaces, glass and steel



plane complexity. 'The oxidised lines embrace a number of dissimilar elements inspired directly by the Picasso drawing.' Gilot's missing eye and curling hair are captured in oxidised-silver wire. The vital essence of the sketch is captured in the jewel which, if placed on the drawing, forms a frame for the head. The same vocabulary is employed in the very large *Earrings for Woman with Large Profile* in sterling silver and 18 ct yellow gold. The same elements are used – parts of concentric circles, triangles, balls, feather motifs and wavy lines. The elegant pair are a deliberate mismatch. They fit in the darkened space on the original painting. Striking hair combs were made for *Portrait of a Young Woman*. The well-known portrait of Sylvette David with the ponytail. The linear, single-plane pins echo the treatment of the hair and the shading on the neck.

An interesting departure consists of a set of five identical bracelets in yellow and white gold, created for the outstretched arm of *Gertrude Stein*. These lobed bracelets are set with five balls of white gold on the interior rim where the curved sections join. The bracelets are one of the plainest pieces yet took the longest of all to design. It is, however, the thoughtfulness of the design that allows the pieces to be worn either loosely grouped or carefully positioned. Only in the close contact of wearing of the piece can the design be fully understood. Ramshaw considered some close contact would be necessary to get behind the enigmatic painted mask of *Gertrude Stein*.

Ramshaw's wonderful tower stands are seen with many of the works. A striking green patinated-brass



Hair combs for 'Portrait of a Young Woman', 1989, silver, lapis and garnet



stand of 1990–91 supports a delicate cluster of rich, ripe-coloured jewels, each bezel-set on its own ring. A sinuous line is introduced to play upon the composition of the bright voluptuous portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter – *Portrait of a Woman with Book*. The painting forced Ramshaw into a higher key with her palette than is usual, contrasting the luminous green of the stand against the red, amber, green, blue and purple of the cabochon-cut stones. Set of *Rings for Portrait of Dora Maar*, 1990 was made to capture a confident sitter with her gaily painted fingernails. The motifs include the 10 painted fingernails interpreted with assertive teardrop garnets and citrines. The scarlet-coloured resin inlay on the stand reflects the linear patterning in the background of the portrait and the spiky rendering of the figure. A more muted palette is used in the *Ring Set for Nude Woman in a Red Armchair*, 1990. The frosted acrylic stand is inlaid with pastels and the bezel-set stones in the 19 rings are limpid peridot, moonstone, tourmaline and aquamarine. The curvaceous subject of the portrait, Marie-Thérèse, may be dreaming. The delicate, sensuous jewel with its wavy, linear elements catches an otherworldliness of someone whose thoughts have strayed to another place. *White Rings for a Nude Lying in White Bed*, 1996–97, is an interesting departure based on one of the most abstract of Picasso's portraits. White marble is cut in geometric shapes taken from the abstracted pastel of 1946. The marble is set in white gold on a white, turned, acetal stand, tiny-waisted like the nude. The piece is cool, simple and strangely compelling. 'Both stand and rings are in themselves a sculptural form as remote as the reclining woman. She is both ancient and modern, both figurative and abstract, suspended in a cool realm of her own,' says Ramshaw.

A variety of approaches is evident throughout the collection. In *Necklace for the Reader*, 1991, of hollow-box form construction in 18 ct gold embellished with garnets, the jewel echoes the rather severe portrait style. The simple shapes inspired by the painting are seen in the necklace. While the *Brooch for the Portrait of Nusch Eluard*, in sterling silver and 18ct gold, is larger in scale, the motifs of forged silver are more literally plucked from the portrait. In this piece Ramshaw has used the waves of the green hair, the left eye and the dominant buttons of her jaunty suit.

The necklace *Gift for Seated Woman in a Chemise*, in unadorned gold-plated brass, is an appropriate gift for the "undressed" figure of the sitter. Quite different is the huge *Necklace of X-Ray Beads for Standing Woman*. In this the patterns inside the turned perspex beads are only revealed from certain angles and are as minimal and linear as the drawing that inspired the work. Unlike any other work is the necklace *Pebbles and Pearls for Seated Nude Drying her Foot*, 1994–98. The association of pebbles and English beaches comes to mind, but the lumpen shapes actually reflect the massive style of the 1921 painting of Picasso's wife Olga and the real pebbles came from Kythera in Cyprus – the legendary birthplace of Aphrodite. This piece seen in isolation would never be attributed to Ramshaw. With its oxidised and flux-marked pebbles of silver, soldered at the seams with gold, it has a more 1960s alternative ambience.

Other unlikely materials are seen in a pair of combs for *Head of a Smiling Woman*, made from household Colorcore, *Nude Sitting Against Green Background* is in turned aluminium.

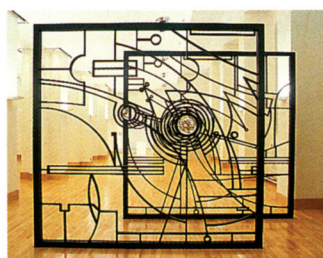
Rings for 'Woman in Armchair', 1998, two sets from a series of 10 sets of rings, 18 ct yellow gold, with amethyst, fire opal and citrine, approx size 13.5 x 7 cm

The necklace with suspended ball and cone for *Portrait of Sylvette David* incorporates glass and machined parts of nickel alloy with hi-tech imagery, gyroscopic settings and cone of glass, all linked by a fine gold chain. The counterbalanced weights are worn with the cone down the back and the ball at the front. Fake pearls, silver mirrors, enamelled steel, plastic and glass are used in *Swingtime for Harlequin* and *Woman with Necklace*.

Also on turned and painted wooden stands are a set of *Rings for Woman in An Armchair*. This painting from Picasso's early cubist period is painted in sensuous shades of flesh pink with violet-shaded fabrics. The stands and stones echo the painting. The most prominent of the forms, a pendulous breast, is combined with several stones and three-dimensional forms developed from motifs in the painting. These dismountable forms are solidly anchored to heavy rings which detach from the stands for wearing. The gold is subtly textured and polished. As in other pieces, the configuration can be as the owner desires. The rings have been designed so that however they are arranged, the result will be harmonious. They conclude the series and form a punctuation point to a decade's work.

At Lesley Craze Gallery examples from Ramshaw's almost 40-year career were on display. Highlights included the screen-printed perspex *Optik Art* works and the paper *Something Special* – fashion ranges created jointly with her husband David Watkins and sold through *Swinging Sixties* in Carnaby Street and Bond Street, and exported as far afield as Japan. At the Central School of Art and Design, which she attended as a supernumerary in order to have access to machinery, Ramshaw developed the first pillar rings. This lathe-turned jewellery was running against the tide of hand-made textural and organic work fashionable at the time and led to a coveted Council of Industrial Design Award for innovation in 1972; exhibitions in the USA and at Goldsmiths' Hall in London were followed by a De Beers Diamond International Award, a Johnson Matthey Award for Platinum Jewellery, Fellowship of the Royal Society of Arts, Fellowship of the Chartered Society of Designers and Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.

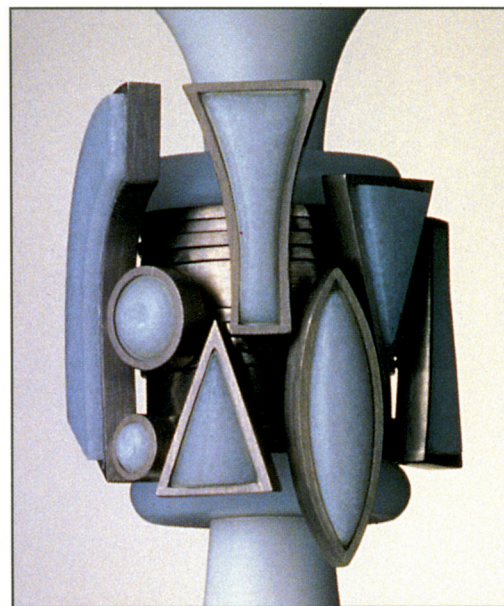
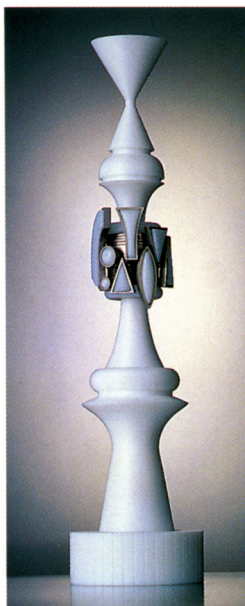
Circa 1975, Ramshaw made the first of the drawings in gold to be worn. There is a playfulness in the designs that have an affinity to the approach of the painter Paul Klee.



'Double Screen EH9681', 1997

A major piece in this style, *White Queen Necklace*, was created for the exhibition "Jewellery in Europe". It now belongs to the Australian National Gallery and is illustrated in the catalogue. In 1978 Ramshaw and Watkins spent six months in Western Australia as artists-in-residence at what is now Curtin University. The Art Gallery of WA has one of the experimental porcelain works made at this time. Work with Wedgwood's Jasper followed. Some neckpieces from this period were on display at the gallery.

As visiting artist in the Glass Department of the Royal College of Art in 1985–86, she experimented with optical glass. This experience has been utilised not only in jewellery but also in the larger architectural works of the next decade. These large works are now *in situ*, but the maquettes were on display, encouraging a visit to the finished works. It is this aspect of Ramshaw's practice that is the most exciting, for her design style translates with equal effectiveness to an architectural scale and



Top: 'White rings for Nude Lying in White Bed', 1997, 18 ct white gold with marble.

Above: Pablo Picasso 'Nude Lying in White Bed', 1946



Wendy Ramshaw

when installed in public buildings it can be shared with a greater number and range of people.

In 1993, Ramshaw was commissioned to design a chandelier, door handles and a garden gate at St John's College, Oxford. The rhythms and proportions of the latter resemble those seen in her jewellery of the late 1980s. The concentric rings and the interplay of line with geometric form are incorporated in what is a most elegant solution to a design brief. The gate, in mild steel with gold leaf, won an Art in Architecture Award.

Double Screen EH9681, designed for the Victoria and Albert Museum and installed in 1997, is more complex with more movement in the design. The metamorphosis of the design from first sketches to the finished work is clearly illustrated. Two three-metre screens, offset, create a four-metre by one-metre corridor within the staff restaurant. The set jewels are a pair of lenses containing a miniature image of the main design in stainless steel and materials representing the collections in the Materials Galleries. As the abstract design evolved it curiously evoked a knight on a charger or a figure moving forward with skirts or frock coats flaring behind – ghosts of curators past? The bull's-eye motif, the graphic curving lines and geometric shapes are there, and yet there is something more. The piece has a soul, as if the project to capture the essence of Picasso's *Ladies* has infiltrated her very being and spilled into other works.

Eric Turner has written that the Picasso's *Ladies* Collection added a 'new and substantial contribution to a career which has already proved truly remarkable'. A selection of the exhibition moves to the American Craft Museum, New York in 1999. It is hoped that part of the collection can be brought to Australia in the future.

Dr Dorothy Erickson

Art historian and critic Dr Dorothy Erickson exhibits her jewellery internationally. She is an admirer and collector of the work of Wendy Ramshaw whom she invited to Australia, with her husband David Watkins, in 1978 on behalf of the Western Australian Institute of Technology. The two catalogues are available from the Craft Council Shop at the V&A Museum, London.