

## The Transcendent Jewelry of Margaret De Patta: Vision in Motion

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This presentation is based on the exhibition *Light-Space-Structure: The Jewelry of Margaret De Patta*, co-organized by the Museum of Arts and Design and the Oakland Museum of California. It opened at MAD in New York on June 5, 2012. De Patta was a seminal figure in the history of America art jewelry and the focus of this presentation is on her jewelry and its relationship to constructivism and the Bauhaus as reborn in Chicago. De Patta's jewelry embodies the concept of 'vision in motion' as championed by the legendary Bauhaus visionary, Hungarian-born László Moholy-Nagy.

Margaret Strong was born in Tacoma Washington in 1903 and the family soon moved to San Diego. In the 1920s, De Patta studied painting in San Francisco and at New York's Art Students League. She was particularly excited by European avant-garde art that was shown in museums and exhibitions on both coasts. In the 1930s she turned to jewelry and was already an established jeweler by the time she attended the Chicago Bauhaus in 1940. In the early 1940s, she returned to San Francisco where she spent the rest of her life making one-of-a-kind and production jewelry that was perfectly in line with Bauhaus aesthetics.



1a: László Moholy-Nagy, *Black Quarter Circle with Red Stripes*, 1921, oil on canvas, Private Collection

Moholy-Nagy was only eight years her senior, but had been in the forefront of avant-garde art and design in Europe. The two artists shared a compatible aesthetic: abstraction. In early paintings, circa 1921, both artists explored an overlapping series of planes as well as translucency. These paintings were completed decades before the artists met.



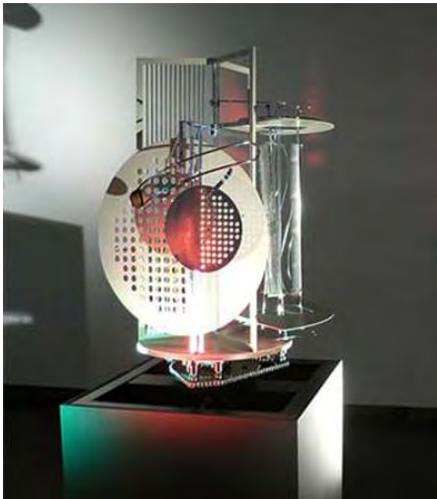
1b: Margaret De Patta, *Untitled Painting*, c. 1917-21, gouache on paper, Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust, Point Richmond, California

De Patta was sixteen when the German Bauhaus was established in

1919. It moved from Weimar to Dessau and then to Berlin for one final year in 1933 before it closed for good after being raided by the Nazis. As German

democracy collapsed in the 1930s, most of the Bauhaus faculty was forced to flee, including Moholy-Nagy, one of the principal Dessau faculty who had resigned in 1928.

It is difficult to describe the Bauhaus in just a few words: it was neither a technical school nor a traditional art academy. The Bauhaus trained artists, designers and craftsmen to create superior design destined for industrial production. Inherent in the Bauhaus philosophy was a democratic principle that good design should be widely available. As a result, students were not trained as specialists but as well-rounded individuals whose talents could be applied to many different design problems. These factors played an important part in shaping De Patta's life and art. Moholy-Nagy was the principal proponent of the constructivist movement in Germany and the quintessential innovator. Besides being the Bauhaus master of the metal workshop in Dessau, he was a photographer, filmmaker, typographer, painter, sculptor, writer, graphic designer and stage designer. Constructivism as an artistic movement originated in Russia around 1917 to promote art for societal and political purposes, but Moholy-Nagy was focused on the purely visual aspects of constructivism and was not interested in using it for political purposes. He took an unconventional approach to painting and sculpture, using a creative process based on the



2: Moholy-Nagy, *Light-Space Modulator*, c.1925, Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism

assembly of various, often industrial-looking, components. Constructivism called for a careful technical analysis of modern materials and included light and transparency as design elements to create more open compositions. Moholy-Nagy's celebrated *Light Space-Modulator* was a machine-like sculpture that he developed over many years beginning in 1922 to create illusionary volume by dividing space through light and motion. The *Light-Space-Modulator* includes many constructivist elements: flat planes that intersect space at sharp angles, the movement of screens, perforated plates, revolving discs and vertical rods. Moholy-Nagy was particularly interested in exploring the shadows cast through translucent materials onto other planes and surrounding walls.

Moholy-Nagy fled Germany as the political atmosphere changed and became active in Amsterdam and then London before the Association of Arts and Industries in Chicago invited him to come to the United States and open a new design school based on Bauhaus principles. (This was on the recommendation of Walter Gropius who was already teaching at Harvard by that time.) Moholy-Nagy founded the Chicago Bauhaus in 1937 and was its

head until his untimely death in 1946. The school converted a Victorian mansion owned by Marshall Field, the department store magnate, gutting the original interior to eliminate the heavy ornamentation and create open interiors. Photographs show the added workshop area, a white cube jutting out the side of the building. The renovation parallels the transformation De Patta accomplished in converting the conventional jewelry of her day into the new, modernist aesthetic.



3: Marshall Field Mansion (1876), 1905 S. Prairie Ave. Chicago, Bauhaus – 1937 Chicago School of Design - 1938 Engelbrecht, Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism



4: Margaret De Patta, *Bracelet*, c. 1933, sterling silver, 32 x 54 mm, Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

De Patta's life took a dramatic turn and her jewelry career was born in 1929 when she was shopping for her wedding ring. When she could not find one with a modernist design, she decided to make her own. This is such a good story – if it were not true, you would have to make it up. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of the ring are unknown. She saw that no one was making jewelry inspired along the lines of modern art. With no formal training programs available, she was primarily self-taught. She turned to books on jewelry making and studied ethnic jewelry in museums. Her very early jewelry experiments demonstrate how she used ethnic museum pieces as models to explore how jewelry was fabricated. A bracelet of beaten metal and simple wire circles and spirals shows a somewhat Moroccan influence. Only a short time later, her work had changed dramatically, becoming carefully balanced, modern compositions. She made pins from flat sheets of silver, cutting out simple shapes that she assembled.

By the mid-1930s, De Patta had stopped painting altogether and before any direct contact with Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus, she was already an accomplished jeweler with work that frequently appeared in galleries and in major exhibitions, including the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. De Patta was increasingly interested in translucency and light, and she began experimenting with photography, especially photograms. Photograms were first explored in the 1920s by



5: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, 1937, sterling silver, 64 x 32 x 22 mm, The Dukoff Collection, photo: John Bigelow Taylor

Man Ray, Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy, who called himself a light modulator, not a photographer. Photograms are made without a camera by placing objects directly onto photosensitive paper and then exposing it to strong light. The result is a negative image with variations in tone that depend on the transparency of the objects used. The F-shape in one of De Patta's photograms, for example, might have been opaque cardboard, showing up as white on the paper.



6a: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, c. 1955  
Sterling silver, rutilated quartz, 45 x 57 x  
13 mm, The Dukoff Collection



6b: Margaret De Patta, *Untitled Photogram*, 1939 Gelatin silver  
print, 191 x 226 mm

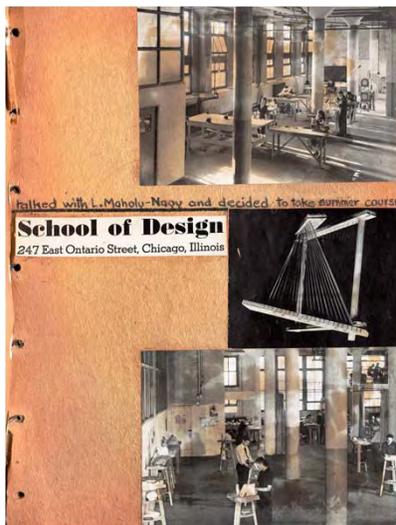
Around 1939, Moholy Nagy gave a Bauhaus lecture in San Francisco in which he showed photograms made by Bauhaus students. After that, De Patta made a great number of photograms herself and often used them as blueprints for her jewelry. A 1955 brooch shows the relationship between the photogram image and the actual jewelry.

As her jewelry evolved, De Patta continued to introduce more light and transparency and a more open structure than in the earlier silver pieces in the early 1930s. She also searched for new materials such as moss agate, a form of quartz with a clear or milky-white field and a range of mineral inclusions. The varied level of opacity and transparency, as well as the interesting inclusions in the new materials De Patta discovered, allowed her to further explore the perception of light and space through the structure of the piece.



7: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, 1941, sterling silver,  
moss agate, onyx, 25 x 32 x 6 mm, Collection of the  
Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene  
Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial  
Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

De Patta took her explorations of transparency in jewelry to a new level when she began collaborating with Francis Sperisen, a noted lapidary in San Francisco. De Patta would shape and cut wood or acrylic models to show the designs and shapes she wanted and Sperisen would cut the actual stones. De Patta called these stones with complex optical qualities, Opticuts. When Moholy-Nagy first saw her work in 1940, he told De Patta that she was already putting many Bauhaus theories and constructivist ideas into practice because “they reflected the same logical working out of structural and spatial problems without using any extraneous elements.” (Uchida 14)



8: Margaret De Patta, *Page from Margaret De Patta's scrap book showing the School of Design in Chicago, 1940, mixed media, 279 x 241 mm, Margaret De Patta Archives, Biewlawski Trust, Point Richmond, California, photo: Benjamin Blackwell*

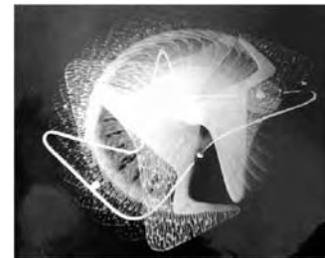
De Patta traveled often during the 1930s and one of her most important trips was to the New York World's Fair in 1939. On her way to New York, she visited the Chicago Bauhaus, now called the School of Design. (The original Chicago Bauhaus had closed after just one year because of financial difficulties, but reopened in 1938 under its new name in a much larger building on Ontario Street. It is now in operation as the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology.) A page from her travel notebook features the notation “talked with L. Moholy-Nagy and decided to take the Summer course.” She was referring to the summer course that the Chicago Bauhaus faculty was going to hold in Mills College in Oakland, California, in 1940.

After the summer course, she enrolled at the Institute of Design in Chicago, which closely followed the principles of the German Bauhaus. The School believed in learning by doing without preconceived notions. All students took the Preliminary Course for the first two semesters of an eight-semester program. De Patta only attended two semesters but those two semesters were a life-changing experience for her. The preliminary course emphasized experimentation and direct experience with materials. But students like De Patta could also participate in the more specialized workshops including, for the first time anywhere, workshops on light, which was one of the most important for De Patta. Surviving paper exercises demonstrate that De Patta was becoming extremely adept at changing a flat surface through cutting and folding into a three-dimensional structure. In an interview shortly after De Patta left Chicago, Moholy-Nagy commented: ‘... the best jewelry in the country is made by a former student of ours, Mrs. Margaret De Patta.’ (Engelbrecht 245)



9a: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, 1947-50, sterling silver, coral, malachite, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Bequest

Allowing the wearer to interact with the jewelry, De Patta did not specify a position for her brooches, but left it up to the individual. Components were often movable and colored stones could be flipped to suit the wearer's mood or outfit. De Patta's open structure integrated the wearer's clothing with the piece's appearance and made the wearer a participant. A kinetic pin now in the MAD collection has three positions to give the wearer a choice of displaying different colors and shapes. There is one component holding coral and malachite stones and another with a textured, bird-like shape that can be placed in a choice of three different positions.



9b: Margaret De Patta and Milton Halberstadt (1919-2000), *Three Position Pin in Movement*, 1947, multiple exposure, gelatin silver print, Museum of Arts and Design, New York

Sometimes she would use multiple photographic exposures to capture the kinetic effects of her work.

Over the years, her collaboration with Sperisen intensified and they invented sophisticated



10: Margaret De Patta, *Ring*, 1946, sterling silver, tourmaline, quartz, 25 x 6 x 6 mm, Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

Opticuts, including the use of natural inclusions and irregularities in quartz that were generally considered unwanted faults in the crystals. The 1947 ring dramatically exploits tourmaline inclusions to heighten the internal optical effects. The chevron-shaped mounting around the stone forms a counterpoint to the line-like inclusions; De Patta was always concerned that the mountings for the stones would not interfere with the purity of the stone itself.

The 1948 pendant, one of De Patta's most sophisticated and satisfying works, has been referred to as her "Cathedral Piece." The very fine natural rutile inclusions appear as fine lines, known as Venus hairlines. The thin lines of the setting complement the rutiles and the cantilever suspension of the crystal heightens the effect of the lines within the stone.



11: Margaret De Patta, *Pendant*, 1948, gold, rutilated quartz, 82.6 x 28.5 x 19 mm without chain, Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust, Point Richmond, Photo by M Lee Fatherree



12: Margaret De Patta, *Ring*, 1949, white gold, rutilated quartz, 22 x 10 x 25 mm, Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust, Point Richmond, California, c2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

In her 1949 rutilated quartz ring the facets of the clear stone create dramatic internal reflections and refractions that alter the perception of the internal space and natural rutile inclusions. The combination of internal linear elements bears a striking resemblance to Moholy-Nagy's *Space Light Modulator*. The mounting problem was to hold the crystal with a minimum of metal interfering with the play of light and color. As in previous pieces, De Patta cantilevered the metal mounting at the top of the ring to harmonize it with the



13: Margaret De Patta, *Pendant*, 1950, sterling silver, stainless steel screen, quartz, 102 x 76 x 32 mm without chain, Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

crystal. In this 1951 pendant, she used a free-form cabochon quartz crystal to visually distort the patterns on the stainless steel screen—the effect recalls some of the screens in the space light modulator. This central element in her 1956 pendant is a beautiful opticut quartz crystal faceted in opposing directions. The double facets distort the straight line of metal behind the crystal, seeming to break up the line, a zigzag effect that De Patta achieved in many of her pieces.



14: Margaret De Patta, *Pendant*, 1959, white gold, ebony, faceted quartz, 95 x 25 x 64 mm, Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

After her year in Chicago, De Patta returned to San Francisco in 1941 and cleaned house, literally and figuratively: she divorced Sam De Patta and replaced an old wooden house on a San Francisco hill with a model of modernist architecture featuring a glass brick corner wall that met the modernist goal of providing transparency and light to the interior.

In 1946, De Patta married Eugene Bielawski, who had been a Chicago Bauhaus faculty member. She had many friends in the Bay Area craft community and was one of the founders of the San Francisco Metal Arts Guild in 1951. She was a devoted teacher and taught at the California Labor School together with her husband. The school strongly promoted democratic principles and was one of the institutions that trained returning veterans, but McCarthy-era politicians targeted the Labor school as a Communist front. The couple was blacklisted

and in 1947 they had to leave the school, which closed a few years later. They tried to open their own Bauhaus-type school, and began writing a book on design, but these efforts never came to fruition. Instead, they turned to serial production.

De Patta had become upset that her handcrafted pieces were so time-consuming that she had to charge high prices for them and only the well-to-do could afford them. Selling only to the rich was in conflict with democratic design philosophy of the Bauhaus, which really always had been part of De Patta's basic nature. The couple decided to design jewelry for the growing middle class and started an important new phase in their lives. In 1946, they founded Designs Contemporary while they were still teaching at the Labor School. With Designs Contemporary, they made production pieces that were intended to be comparable in quality to many of her one-of-a-kind pieces. De Patta designed 40 to 50 master models in silver that Bielawski would cast in limited editions so that the designs would not become too familiar. The production pieces, mostly rings and pins, were sold across the country at affordable prices. De Patta and her husband became packers, shippers and marketers, as well as manufacturers. This, they had to admit later, turned out to be an overwhelming amount of work. All the production pieces were wax cast by Bielawski and De Patta finished each one by hand.



15: Margaret De Patta, *Pendant*, 1960, white gold, quartz, diamonds, 76 x 29 x 10 mm without chain, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Bequest, through the American Craft Council, 1976, photo: John Bigelow Taylor



16: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, 1960, gold, topaz, peridot, 76 x 64 x 22 mm, Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection, photo: M Lee Fatherree

Margaret made an enormous personal investment in the less expensive production pieces, but even at very low prices, the public did not accept her avant-garde designs. In one of her letters she wrote that '... the Purchaser's taste is conditioned by the choice between one conventional design and another— just as bad.' (De Patta 30) De Patta became frustrated by her inability to change the consumer's buying patterns and must have been disappointed that the democratic principles on which she had based her life and work had not produced success. They gave up their production line in 1957. De Patta's studio jewelry remained innovative. The 1960 pin is an exquisite example using solid gold and gemstones. Since she had always economized and would not purchase costly materials

speculatively, this exceptional and very elegant work was obviously a commission. It now belongs to the Bielawski Estate. In the pendant from 1960, De Patta embedded brilliant diamonds and fine gold strips in depressions cut into the clear teardrop crystal. The carefully designed optical qualities refract light in such a way that they ingeniously hide the mounting that surrounds the crystal.

De Patta continued to be aligned with Moholy-Nagy's constructivist ideas even into the 1960s. Her designs clearly were an inspired response to Moholy's advice to 'Catch your stones in the air. Make them float in space. Don't enclose them.' (Uchida 15) De Patta's late pieces demonstrate the beauty she saw in simple river stones and beach pebbles. She collected them in large numbers to create her so-called Sweater jewelry. De Patta designed them to be worn either as a pin or as a pendant when a chain was attached.



17: Margaret De Patta, *Pin*, c. 1964, sterling silver, beach pebbles, 89 x 41 x 16 mm, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Bequest, through the American Craft Council, 1976, photo: Eva Hevd

Margaret De Patta's art reflected constructivism's treatment of space, light and motion and her life reflected the democratic ideals of the Bauhaus, which were innately her own from the very beginning. Her iconic works are as timeless and as vital today as when they were first made.

**Ursula Ilse-Neuman is Curator of Jewelry at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. During her two decades at MAD, she has organized and curated more than 35 exhibitions in all media. She has an MA in the History of Decorative Arts and Design from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (Parsons The New School for Design) and has completed doctoral studies at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture. She has been a juror for national and international exhibitions and is a regular contributor to *Metalsmith*. In 2010, she was Adjunct Professor of Art History at Pratt Institute.**

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