

# THE TRANSPARENT FORM

## BEN NEUBAUER

Robin Updike

Although he was only six years old, Ben Neubauer clearly remembers sitting down with pad and pencil in front of innumerable churches, palaces and other architecturally noteworthy buildings throughout Europe and drawing. Neubauer, his younger sister and their father, an architect, would happily sketch, sometimes attracting crowds curious to get a peek at just how good the father and two small children were at rendering some of Europe's most majestic architectural treasures. "My dad is a really good draftsman," states Neubauer, "and for our ages I think my sister and I were doing pretty well. We were drawing from a subject, rather than from our heads, which I think is unusual at that age. And we had some rudiments of perspective."

Whenever the family was visiting a building or monument particularly noteworthy, Neubauer's father would try to make his son remember. "He'd say, 'Burn this one in, Ben.' My dad taught me to look critically at architecture, both ancient and modern. Though he used the phrase many times, I especially remember standing in front of the Parthenon and hearing him tell me to burn it in. He was probably worried that, being so young, I would not remember what I saw."

From the looks of Neubauer's modernistic, abstract, geometric, eighteen karat gold, and sterling fabricated jewelry, it is easy to guess that his time spent drawing architecture as a child indeed made an impression on him. Now a Portland, Oregon-based jewelry artist, Neubauer's work is spare, lean and unquestionably architectural in spirit, as though three-dimensional architectural drawings have been distilled and crafted into gold and silver miniatures. As in real architecture and the engineering that supports it, Neubauer's jewelry is, at its most fundamental level, an organic design of joints and junctures created with both structural and aesthetic integrity.

Neubauer makes a point to leave the intersections of his gold and silver wires visible and tactile. Look at the joints on his jewelry and you see the ends of wires overlapping ever so slightly like an elegant tic tac toe grid. Run your finger over the pieces and you feel the tips of the wires. The overlapping wires are a signature of his style, he says. In a broader way, they also seem to reflect his belief that craftsmanship should be visible and honest. It is a philosophy that would have been right at home at Germany's famous Bauhaus school of design nearly one hundred years ago. Neubauer's work certainly suggests Bauhaus ideals updated for the twenty-first century.

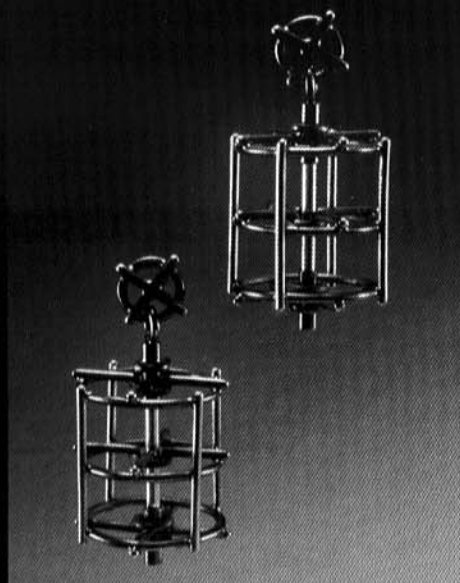
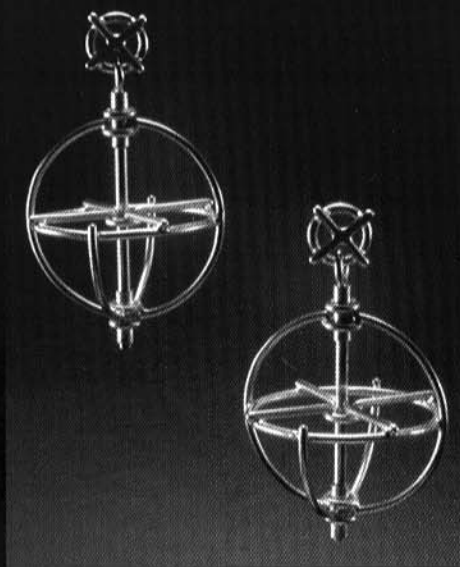
"Style is a set of rules about what you will or will not do," Neubauer says. "And one of my rules is that I have chosen to work only in eighteen-gauge round wire. I also have a general rule that when two wires come together they are not on the same plane. Instead one is on top of the other. Another rule is that every line is either straight or an arc." As he says this, Neubauer, a tall, lanky man with a gentle, thoughtful demeanor laughs a little. "Actually, the spiritual teachings I follow are opposed to rules, so I'm not sure how the rules fit in except that they define my style."

Though Neubauer has been showing and selling professionally only since 2001, he has spent much of his life thinking about style and aesthetics. Growing up in Boston he was exposed to the arts by his father and his mother, a librarian, and he played viola. A serious music student, he also sang in the school choir. In addition he took art classes and enjoyed drawing and painting. He even had an early, brief exposure to jewelrymaking. "I remember taking a jewelry class in a summer arts program in high school," Neubauer states. "But I don't remember much about it. I made a brooch modeled after two lilac leaves. It was brass with a little pin in the back. I think my mother still has it around somewhere."

After high school he attended Oberlin College in Ohio, where he intended to major in music. But he was also interested in religion and worked toward a double major. When after several years he became discouraged with what he perceived as a lack of progress in his music studies, he focused entirely on religion. He graduated in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts in religion. At about the same time he took a class in jewelrymaking through a community education program. He earned extra money in college by learning some carpentry and by doing handy-man jobs, and he enjoyed working with his hands.

The jewelry class, with its melding of art and technique, was a revelation. "Although it was not a very sophisticated class the tools and the materials really appealed to me," Neubauer says. "On the first day I thought that 'this could be a career.' I loved the idea of fabricating and turning a piece of bland sheet metal into something of interest."

For the next couple of years Neubauer stayed in Ohio and taught himself everything he could about jewelrymaking. He studied jewelry textbooks and struck up a friendship with Ruth Aschaffenburg who owned (and still operates) Bead



THREE PAIRS OF EARRINGS of sterling silver and eighteen karat gold.

exterior concepts can be sensed simultaneously. The wire implies form, leaving its completion to the imagination.”


The relationship between exteriors and interiors is of great interest to Neubauer not only artistically but also philosophically. In his personal life he devotes considerable time to meditation and what he calls his “spiritual practice.” To support his spiritual life, he lives in a Portland ashram with a community of several dozen like-minded seekers who follow a spiritual philosophy called Kashmir Sivism. Neubauer says it was founded in India at about the same time as Buddhism, and that the two religions influenced each other. He notes that his academic study of religion at Oberlin was “a way for me to find out how to start a spiritual practice.”

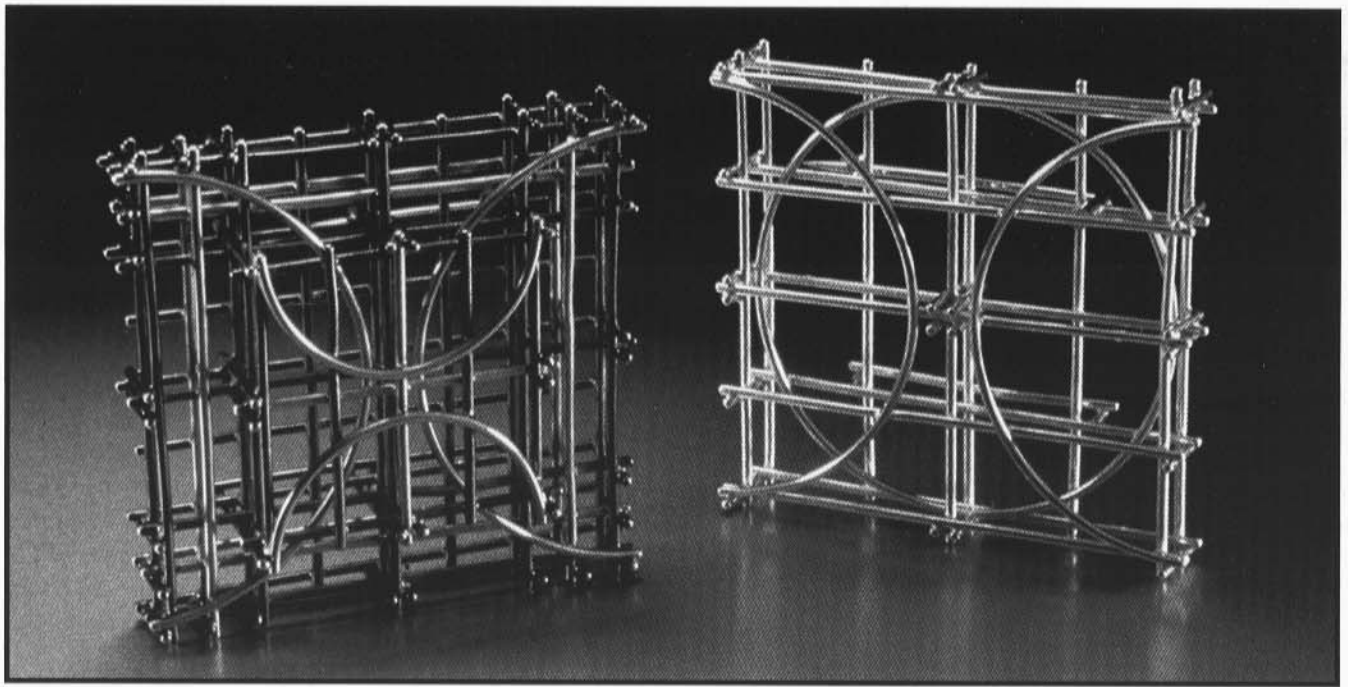
He gets some of his design ideas from drawing and working with the materials, but Neubauer also discovers many ideas during his daily meditations. “That’s certainly not the idea of meditating,” he states. “But I do get ideas that way.” Other ideas come from his interest in contemporary European jewelry, especially contemporary German jewelry.

Neubauer’s work is mostly fabricated of gold or silver wire, though he also has some small parts cast. Building an inventory for his galleries, he quickly discovered that in some of his collar-style neckpieces, for instance, he was using wire shapes over and over, strung along in a series like beads. To help keep costs down for himself and his collectors, he now has some of those “beads” cast. Though they are cast they look like his signature geometric wire forms. Some of his newest pieces include long, lighter-than-air chains, and highly architectural rings. Though Neubauer occasionally uses gemstones, most of his rings, like the rest of his work, are highly design influenced. Like his brooches and earrings, the rings suggest the inner ‘bones’ of a building—the framing and support beams that you do not usually see once the building is complete. Finding ways to bring the inner integrity of his designs to the surface has a parallel in the way he is trying to make his life as an artist and craftsman meld seamlessly with his broader philosophies about life.

“I’m trying to live a life that has meaning for me, and expressing my creative ideas is one way of having meaning in my life. To be able to make a living based on one’s creativity and hard work is difficult but satisfying. I have to challenge myself in many ways to make this happen. But the core of it is seeking to create the best work that I’m capable of.

“Being an artist means trying to find an expression of true integrity, and bringing that expression into the world. That’s what I’m after, both in my spiritual life and as a jeweler. It’s a process, a goal that can be approached but never reached. The continual effort to find a truer expression is what gives some meaning to the results one may get along the way. As soon as you stop refining it, stagnation sets in.”

Neubauer recently returned to Europe for the first time since he was a small child sketching beside his father. He went with his parents, and they visited the same small Slovenian town where they had lived thirty years ago while his father was working on a building project. Though Neubauer did not have time for a lot of sketching this time around, he nevertheless was moved by what he saw. “I find the more I look at art and architecture, the more inspired I get to do my own work, even though what I’m looking at may be totally different from what I make. When I look at art I take something of it into myself where it is slowly digested and feeds me. At some later date some elements of what I’ve looked at may return in my own work, but usually transformed beyond recognition.” 



TWO BROOCHES of sterling silver and eighteen karat yellow gold.

Paradise II, an Oberlin destination for beads and jewelry, clothing and ethnographic works. He found a copy of Oppi Untracht's classic *Jewelry Concepts and Technology* and worked his way through the book.

He also grew ever more enthusiastic about the life he envisioned as a craftsperson. When he was a child his father's best friend was a fellow architect who, in mid-life, gave up architecture to become a potter and work with his hands. Neubauer liked and respected the man, and spent many hours with him in his ceramics studio in the country. "We would do raku firings and build pots," Neubauer says. "I was inspired with the lifestyle of being self-employed and being a creative person, and Rudy Houk was a vision to me. He showed me an alternative to the workaday world and showed that it was possible to make beautiful work with your hands."

Realizing that he needed to study with professional jewelry makers and artists, Neubauer enrolled in several short study programs at such schools as the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and Haystack Mountain School of Craft. Finally he looked into certificate programs and found the Oregon College of Art and Craft in Portland. He moved to Portland in 1995 and spent the next five years going to school while supporting himself with restaurant and construction work. He is still grateful to the Oregon program because of its excellent teachers and the measures it takes to prepare students for the real world of making a living. "They prepare you to be a professional craftsperson with classes in production jewelry, for example, and programs about how to find galleries and organize resumes. It was very helpful."

A modest inheritance allowed him to concentrate on his jewelry starting in late 2000 and within the year he had

developed a production line and continued with his one-of-a-kind pieces. His work was soon shown in several galleries and he was accepted into his first professional craft fair, the prestigious American Craft Council Baltimore show. He has also piled up awards. At the ACC Baltimore show for 2003 he won an Award for Achievement. At the Oregon College of Art and Craft he was a two-time finalist and a winner in the Student Niche Awards, and he received the school's Annual Merit Award.

"I remember the first time I got an award while in school," Neubauer states. "I was in my first year at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, but I was not enrolled as a degree-seeking student yet. I went to the opening of the annual juried student show and was extremely surprised to receive an honorable mention award. What an honor! I felt the same way this past February at the ACC Baltimore winter show. The year before I'd been amazed that I even got into the show and so I really found it astonishing that in my second year they'd decided to give me an award. Like most artists, I have many moments when I wonder if I'm fooling myself, if this whole idea of trying to make my living this way is a pipe dream from which I need to wake up, become realistic and get a normal job. Having received some recognition from time to time means a lot."

Besides the obvious influence that architecture has had on the linear look of Neubauer's work, architecture is also important to Neubauer in a metaphorical sense. In a recent artist's statement he wrote that he is fascinated by "the relationship between the interior and the exterior nature of form, and how one's feeling for a form vary depending on whether one is aware of its interior as a volume, or its exterior as an object." Later in his statement he writes "these objects enclose space, but leave it transparent, so that the interior and