

# Harold B. Helwig (1938-2012)

BY BERNARD JAZZAR AND HAL NELSON

HAROLD B. "BILL" HELWIG was an immensely accomplished artist, a masterful craftsman, and a widely respected educator. Always willing to share his technical expertise through classes, workshops, and demonstrations—or simply through his over-the-phone encouragement and advice—he introduced several generations of students to the beauty, mystery, and poetry of the enameling medium.

Trained as a watercolorist, Bill was best known for his extraordinarily well-crafted figurative compositions done using a

painterly Limoges technique. However, no matter how adept he was at his craft, technical virtuosity was never the end goal of Bill's creative process. Rather, articulating a humanistic vision with richly evocative content—intimate visual poetry—was central to his aesthetic.

Through his multilayered compositions in glass on metal, Bill explored such fundamental human issues as the origins of life, the ever-presence of death, the constancy of spiritual yearning and the rich complexity of human social and sexual interaction.

Accordingly, most of Bill's works have evocative titles—*Marriage of Heaven and Earth* (1966), *Angelic Devils* (1968), *Safe in Dreams* (1976), and *Waiting/Awakening* (1980), to name a few—which underscore the importance he placed on poetic content. In each meticulously worked composition Bill created enduring metaphors for the human condition, images that reflect our hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations.

Bill described his approach in the catalogue for the 1970

traveling exhibition, *Objects USA*: "In my work I embody an enduring meaning of my way of life and thereby an object is formed that has duration: from this, one can come to understand the nature of beings living and dead, and what endures is the unswerving directive, the inner law of one's being,

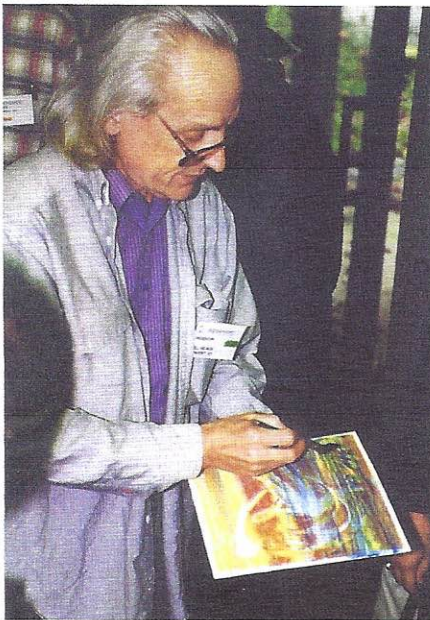
which determines all actions." Through these words, Bill captured the essence of his work and the role each gloriously hand-crafted object played in rendering meaning and, ultimately, "duration" to his life. In a very marked way, Bill's spirit lives on through each piece he so thoughtfully and lovingly produced.

In addition to providing laconic poetic narratives, Bill Helwig's enamels are highly inventive, both formally and technically. While in his early work he typically used round, plate-like forms, about 1972 Bill began to pierce, cut, open, and eventually give sculptural shape to his copper plates, creating objects of extraordinary beauty, elegance, and power. Similarly, through near-obsessive exploration, he discovered several nearly lost enameling and glazing techniques—including *grisaille*, *impasto* and *camaieu*—and reintroduced them to the contemporary enamels field. He also used fuming, dramatically built-up surfaces and silver and gold-foil reticulation.

Throughout the course of his life, Bill's work was included in numerous solo and group exhibitions, most recently in the 2007 exhibition "Painting with Fire: Masters of Enameling in America 1930-1980." In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, we wrote about Bill: "Relationships, human sexuality in its wondrous diversity, desire for the other, coupled with a quest to know oneself, and spiritual yearning in all its traditional and distinctly non-traditional forms, are subjects that have engaged the imagination and creative spirit of artist Harold B. Helwig for the past forty years. . . . With masterful skills in all methods of enameling, he has produced a series of inventive forms that, while still alluding to the vessel, transcend their functional origins. Helwig's virtuosity never becomes an end in itself as he uses technique to support his richly layered, poetic vision."

We miss Bill tremendously. But we're confident that his spirit will endure in the powerful and deeply moving work he produced in the venerable medium of glass on metal.

Bernard Jazzar is curator for a Los Angeles-based private collection; Hal Nelson is Curator of American Decorative Arts at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. They are co-founders of the Enamel Arts Foundation.



Bill Helwig giving a watercolor demonstration, 1999

HAROLD B. HELWIG  
*Man of Sorrows*, 1987  
enamel on copper  
1/2 x 6"  
Collection of the Enamel Arts Foundation



Metalsmith As process of pier jewelry

1988 ENAMEL - ARCHIVES ONLY

ONE PAGE RESUME

HAROLD B HELWIG

Self employed artist, enamelist and enamel consultant.

Previous work experience:

- Process Consultant, Thompson Enamel, a division of the Ceramic Coating Company, Newport, Ky. 1983 - 85
- Cofounder and editor of "Glass On Metal" published by Thompson Enamel and the Ceramic Coating Company, 1982 - 85
- Director, VITREARC, a division of the Ceramic Coating Company (Research and development of lead free vitreous enamel) 1977 - 84
- Ass't Director, Creative Craft Center, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1964 - 73
- Ass't Professor, Design Department, State University College of New York at Buffalo, 1973 - 77
- United States Army, Germany, 1962 - 64

Education:

BS - 1960, MS - 1961, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kansas

Juror:

- Flux, Fusion, Fireworks, Contemporary Craft Gallery, Portland, OR, 1980
- International Exhibition of Enamels, Long Beach, CA, 1985
- Also local, state, regional and national art/craft fairs and exhibitions

Author:

- "Freedom and Control," Fred Uhl Ball Retrospective, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, 1987
- Catalogue for Masterworks/Enamel 87, Taft Museum, Cincinnati, OH, 1987
- Technical Advisor to "Enamels, Enameling, Enamelists," by Glenice Matthews, published 1984, Chilton
- Many articles for Glass on Metal, 1982 - 85

Exhibitions:

- American Crafts at the Armory, New York, NY, 1987
- Masterworks/Enamel 87, Taft Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1987
- Metals Exhibition, Contemporary Crafts Gallery, 50th Anniversary, Portland, OR, 1987
- Two person Exhibition, Wichita Art Association, Wichita, KS, 1985
- Cincinnati Selections, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH, 1984
- Enameling; Art and Industry, Ornamental Metals Museum, Memphis, TN, 1984
- Enamels 2, Sandusky Cultural Center, Sandusky, Oh, 1984
- Crafts; An Expanding Definition, John Michael Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI, 1983
- Glass and Enamel, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY, 1983

The above is an edited selection. Mr Helwig was born on 23 July 1938 in Wellington, Kansas and has lived in Newport, Ky for the past nine years.

ACC

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

HAROLD BILLY HELWIG

son of Oleva M Schwab and Harold D Littrell  
later of Oleva M (Schwab) Helwig and Fredrick H Helwig

born Wellington, Kansas, 23 July 1938

grew up Hoisington, Kansas

college Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kansas  
BS - 1960, MS - 1961

United States Army, Germany, 1962 - 1964

joined together with Lenore Davis, 21 December 1968

Ass't Director, Creative Craft Center, Norton Hall,  
State University of New York at Buffalo, 1964 - 1973

Ass't Professor, Design Department, State University College  
of New York at Buffalo, 1973 - 1977

Director, VITREARC, a division of the Ceramic Coating  
Company, Newport, Kentucky, 1977 - 1984

Cofounder and Editor of "GLASS ON METAL", published by  
Thompson Enamel and the Ceramic Coating Company, 1982 - 1985

Process Consultant, Thompson Enamel, a division of the  
Ceramic Coating Company, 1983 - 1985

Currently self employed - Artist, Enamelist, Consultant

## MEMBERSHIPS AND POSITIONS

- World Crafts Council, U S Section, 1971  
Coordinator, North American Day, 10th Anniversary  
World Crafts Council Conference, York University,  
Ontario, Canada, 1974
- American Crafts Council, 1964 to date  
Fair Committee, Northeast Region, 1968, 1969, 1972 - 74  
Fair Chairman, 1970  
Vice Chairman, ACC/Northeast Region, 1970 - 1971  
Chairman, ACC/ Northeast Region, 1975 - 1977  
American Craft Enterprise, board member, 1976 - 1977
- New York State Craftsmen, Inc., 1964 - 1977  
appointed to Board, 1967 to 1969, elected 1969  
resigned 1971
- Buffalo Craftsmen, Inc., 1964 - 1977  
Elected to Board, 1965 - 67, 67 - 69, 70 - 72  
Buffalo Craftsmen Fellowship, 1973 to date
- Buffalo Society of Artists, 1966 - 1977
- Greater Cincinnati Guild of Craftsmen, 1977 to date  
Elected to Board, 1981, resigned 1982
- Kentucky Guild of Craftsmen, 1977 to date
- North American Society of Goldsmiths, 1978 to date
- Ohio Arts Council, Advisory Board, 1980
- Cincinnati Art Museum, 1984 to date
- Technical Advisor, Enamels, Enameling, Enamelists, by Glenice  
Matthews, published 1984, Chilton
- Juror - Flux, Fusion, Fireworks, Contemporary Craft Gallery  
Portland, OR, 1980  
- International Exhibition of Enamels, Long Beach, CA, 1985

About the work.

The works included in this exhibition span the last five years; The Bed, Sheet and Pillow Series the last two and are on steel, whereas the plate forms are copper.

The plate forms are considered as functional forms, i.e. serving trays for natural food forms, as well as works, visual records of attitude and idea in glass on metal. All works are executed in lead free, acid resistant vitreous enamel fused to a metal base. Each piece represents a variety of techniques typical of enamel and its history past and present.

This exhibition marks my return to the art of enameling as a self employed enamelist and artist. These pieces are not only my method of producing an income, but also represent my life and its relationship to mankind. Each work confirms or reconfirms my faith in man and his ability to relate and progress from idea to idea and move between and beyond the modern rhetoric with individual sensibility and thoughtful beauty.

Visual works are all illusions for the eye and the mind. They are works to draw you in and set your sight free to see, not the myth of reality, but the reality of the myth which no words can faithfully express. My works are meant for solitary viewing which unfortunately exhibition display does not allow. As you view the work isolate each piece as well as yourself. Let your own mind approach and travel, on its own terms, a selfish moment.

- 1977 Plans and Processes, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
 Focus On Crafts; An Exhibition, University of Minnesota, St Paul  
 Two Flats, Almost Flat and Stuffed, Farmington Valley Arts Center,  
 Avon, Conn.  
 Group Exhibition, Design Department, State University College of  
 New York at Buffalo  
 100 American Craftsmen, Kenan Center, Lockport, NY
- 1978 Two Person Exhibition, Contemporary Craft Asso. Portland, OR  
 Cincinnati Guild of Craftsmen, Cincinnati, Ohio  
 National Ring Show Jury Exhibition, University of Georgia, Athens  
 One man Exhibition, Illinois State University, Normal  
 For Collectors, Florence Duhl Gallery, New York, NY  
 Arrowmont School of Crafts, Faculty Show, Gatlenberg, TN  
 Crafts Invitational 79, Southeast Center for Contemporary Art  
 Winston-Salem, NC
- 1979 Buffalo Craftsmen Tribute to Jean Delius, Buffalo, NY  
 For the Collector, The Hand and the Spirit, Scotsdale, AZ  
 Strategies, Artists in the 80's, The Contemporary Arts Center,  
 Cincinnati, OH  
 Brookfield 25, Brookfield Craft Center, Brookfield, CT  
 Two Person Exhibition, Jackie Chalkley Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1980 Two person Exhibition, Craft Alliance, St Louis, MO  
 Group Exhibition, Greenwood Gallery, Washington, DC  
 Cincinnati Guild of Craftsmen, Cincinnati, OH  
 Couples, East Tennessee State, Johnson City  
 Flux, Fusion, Fireworks, Contemporary Craft Gallery, Portland, OR  
 Off the Tody, Bradley University, Peoria, IL  
 One Person Exhibition, Edenboro State College, PA
- 1981 One Person Exhibition, Zeitlin Gallery, New York, NY  
 Jubele 50, Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH  
 Metalsmith 91, Lawrence, KS  
 Centennial Exhibition, Cincinnati Museum of Art, Cincinnati, OH  
 Greater Cincinnati Craft Guild Exhibition  
 Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlenburg, TN  
 One Person Exhibition, ASA Gallery, Oakridge, TN  
 Group Show, Contemporary Artisans, San Francisco, CA  
 Enamels 50/80, Brookfield, CT  
 Southeastern Contemporary Metalsmiths, The Mint, Charlotte, NC  
 1500<sup>OF</sup>, Emery Gallery, Edgely College, Cincinnati, OH
- 1982 Greater Cincinnati Guild of Crafts, Cincinnati, OH  
 Two Person Exhibition, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS  
 Two Person Exhibition, Greenville County Art Museum, Greenville, SC  
 Small One Person Exhibition, Wichita Art Association, Wichita, KS  
 Spotlight 82, Arrowmont, Gatlinburg, TN  
 Group Show, The Private Collection, Cincinnati, OH
- 1983 Craft; An Expanding Definition, John Michael Arts Center,  
 Sheboygan, WI  
 Glass and Enamel, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond

- 1973 Two Person Exhibition, with Lenore Davis, State University  
College at Oswego, N. Y.  
One man show, The Artisan Gallery, Pinceton, N J  
Black, White and Shades of Gray, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
Body Adornment, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
American Crafts Council/Northeast Region, Rhinebeck, NY  
Juried Show  
100 Craftsmen, Kenan Center, Lockport, N Y  
Buffalo Craftsmen Exhibition, Erie County Savings Bank  
Buffalo, N Y  
Crafts, Niagara Community College, Niagara Falls, N Y  
Objects Made in the USA, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio  
The Art of Enamels, New Paltz College Gallery, New Paltz, N Y  
Crafts of the Northeast Region, Fairtree Gallery, New York N Y
- 1974 Baroque 74, Museum of Contemporary Crafts New York N Y  
Couples, Nostalgia Etcetera Gallery, Baltimore, Md  
Radial 80, Xerox Square, Rochester, N Y  
The Fine Art of Craftsmanship, Roberson Center, Binghamton N Y  
Couples, Fairtree Gallery, New York, N Y  
18 Years, Buffalo Craftsmen, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery  
100 Craftsmen, Kenan Center, Lockport, N Y  
Open '74, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery, Buffalo, N Y  
Two Person Exhibition, with Lenore Davis, The Hand and  
The Spirit Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona.  
Buffalo Craftsmen Christmas Show, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery
- 1975 Lenore Davis - Harold B. Helwig, Todorof Galleries, Buffalo N Y  
Contemporary Crafts of the Americas, Ft. Collins, Colo.  
(travel for two years)  
Enamelware - Bill Helwig, Illinois State University, Normal, Ill  
Craftsman Statements, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery  
Carborundum Museum of Crafts, Niagara Falls, New York  
(Opening exhibition)  
New York State Craftsmen, Court of Honor, Ithaca, N Y  
The Design Department, State University College, Buffalo, N Y  
Enamels Invitational, Worcester Art Center, Worcester, Mass.  
Buffalo Craftsmen Exhibition, Erie County Bank, Buffalo, N Y  
Crafts, Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, Delaware
- 1976 100 American Craftsmen Celebrate 200 Years, Fairtree  
Gallery, N Y and travel for 1 year.  
Enamels, Group Show, Florence Duhl Gallery, New York N Y  
One man exhibition, Nostalgia Et Cetera Gallery, Baltimore, Md  
Craftworks, Summit Art Center, Summit, N J  
Lenore Davis, Harold B. Helwig, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery  
One man exhibition, Maple Hill Pottery, Ogunquit, Maine  
Craft 76 A Continuing Heritage, Brookfield Craft Center  
Brookfield, Conn.  
Group Exhibition, Buffalo Craftsmen Gallery  
American Crafts 1976, An Aesthetic Overview, Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Chicago Ill  
Craftsummer, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio  
Plaza Suite Exhibition, Buffalo Craftsmen, Buffalo, N Y

York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, N Y  
75th Annual Buffalo Society of Artists, Buffalo, N Y  
5th Annual Religious Arts Exhibition, Buffalo, N Y  
Crafts 1970, Boston City Hall, Boston, Mass  
Buffalo Craftsmen Exhibition, Erie County Savings, Buffalo, N Y  
Special Award  
New York State Fair, Albany, N Y  
Buffalo Craftsmen Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, N Y, Featured Craftsmen  
Ceramics 70 Plus Woven Forms, Ceramic National, Everson  
Museum, Syracuse, N Y

1971 One-man Show, The Artisan Gallery, Princeton, N J  
One-man Exhibition, Private, Ernest Freudenheim, Buffalo, N Y  
8th Annual Southern Tier, Corning, N Y, Jury Award  
American Crafts Council/Northeast Region, Bennington, Vt.  
Juried Exhibition, purchase award to the Bennington Museum  
CPFA Juried Art Exhibition, State College, Pennsylvania  
1971 Craft Festival, Keenan Center, Lockport, N Y  
New York State Craft Fair, Ithaca, N Y, Court of Honor  
Group Exhibition, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries at the Wilcox  
Mansion, Buffalo, N Y  
Crafts for Christmas, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
Paintings and Drawings by Craftsmen, Buffalo Craftsmen  
Galleries  
Second Invitational Contemporary Craft Show, Skidmore  
College, Hathorn Gallery, Saratoga Springs, N Y  
1971 Craft Festival, Keenan Center, Lockport, N Y  
Group Exhibition, Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, Pa  
Our Heritage of Art in Western New York, Burchfield Center  
Buffalo, N Y

1972 Three-man Show, Design Corner, Cleveland, Ohio  
Two-man Show, The Specturm Galleries, Bruster, Mass  
Fibers and Enamels, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries, Buffalo, N Y  
Boxes, Covered Containers and ..., Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
Artist-Craftsmen, Buffalo Craftsmen, Erie County Bank  
Buffalo, N Y  
Made for the Body, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
9th Annual Southern Tier, Corning, N Y, Jury Award  
American Crafts Council/Northeast Region, Bennington, Vt.  
Juried Exhibition  
100 Craftsmen, Keenan Center, Lockport, N Y, Juried Exhibition  
Dolls, Toys and Games, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
Seasons Senments, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
Christmas Show, Buffalo Craftsmen Galleries  
1st Annual Realism Exhibition, AAO at the Wilcox Mansion  
American Crafts Council Gallery, Opening Exhibition  
New York, New York  
New York State Craftsmen 1972: Selection, Albany, N Y  
American Crafts Council Gallery, Northeast Regional Show

2nd Annual Religious Arts Exhibition, Buffalo, N Y  
4th Annual Southern Tier Exhibition, Corning, N Y  
Jury Award  
York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, N Y  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition, SUNYAB, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor  
Lewiston "Wake", Russo Gallery, Lewiston, N Y  
New Currents in Crafts, Monmoth Museum, Red Bank, N J

1968 Creative Capsule #2, State University of New York at Buffalo  
American Craftsmen Council/Northeast Region, Mt Snow, Vt.  
Jury Award  
3rd Annual Religious Arts Exhibition, Buffalo, N Y  
5th Annual Southern Tier Exhibition, Corning, N Y  
73rd Annual Buffalo Society of Artists, Buffalo, N Y  
York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, N Y , Court of Honor  
Quaker Arts Festival, Orchard Park, N Y , Craft Award  
New York State Fair, Albany, N Y  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor

1969 Creative Capsule #3, State University of New York at Buffalo  
3rd Annual Indoor Art Festival, Hamburg, N Y  
American Craftsmen Council/Northeast Region, Bennington, Vt.  
Jury Award  
One-man Show, Rome Art and Community Center, Rome, N Y  
Two-man Show, Art Corner, New York, N Y  
74th Annual Buffalo Society of Artists Exhibition, Buffalo, N Y  
4th Annual Religious Arts Exhibition, Buffalo, N Y  
Contemporary Crafts #1,  
Contemporary Crafts #2,  
Ontario, Canada Department of Education, (4 enamels  
purchased by the Canadian Guild of Craftsmen)  
York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, N Y , Court of Honor  
6th Annual Southern Tier, Corning, N Y  
Crafts 1969, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, N Y  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor  
6th National Biannual Religious Arts Exhibition, Cranbrook.  
Objects USA: The Johnson Collection, Smithsonian Inst.  
(to travel thru 1974)  
2nd Annual Invitational, Hunterdon Art Center, Clenton, N J

1970 Creative Capsule #4, State University of New York at Buffalo  
American Craft Council/Northeast Region, Craft Fair  
American Craft Council/Northeast Region, Juried Exhibition  
Bennington, Vt.

EXHIBITIONS OF WORK

- 1958 5th Annual Kansas Designer Craftsmen Show, Lawrence  
Kansas, Honorable Mention
- 1959 14th National Decorative Arts Exhibition, Wichita, Kansas  
6th Air Capital Annual, Wichita, Kansas  
Southwestern Artist Biennial Exhibition, Sante Fe, N M  
1st Annual Lutheran Brotherhood Fine Arts Exhibition  
29th Annual Exhibition, Springfield, Missouri  
6th Annual Kansas Designer Craftsmen Show, Lawrence, Kan.
- 1960 One-man Show, Salina, Kansas  
15th National Decorative Arts Exhibition, Wichita, Kansas  
30th Annual Exhibition, Springfield, Missouri  
7th Annual Kansas Designer Craftsmen Show, Lawrence, Kan.
- 1961 Two-man Exhibition, Hutchinson, Kansas  
Two-man Exhibition, Hays, Kansas  
Five-man Show, Assaria, Kansas
- 1962 ...
- 1963 USAREUR Level Art Competition, Heidelberg, Germany  
Drawing Award  
Four-man Exhibition, Wurzburg, Germany
- 1964 Buffalo Craftsman Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor  
2nd Annual Southern Tier Exhibition, Corning, N Y
- 1965 Allentown Outdoor Art Festival, Buffalo, New York  
Five '65, State University of New York At Buffalo  
One-man Exhibition, State University of New York at Buffalo  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y
- 1966 Origins thru Diversions, State University of New York at  
Buffalo  
Allentown Outdoor Festival, Buffalo, New York, Drawing Award  
One-man Exhibition, Garret West, Cleveland, Ohio  
One-man Exhibition, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kan.  
York State Craftsmen, Ithaca, New York, Court of Honor  
Buffalo Craftsmen Annual Exhibition and Sale, Buffalo, N Y  
Court of Honor  
2nd Annual Country Beautiful Exhibition
- 1967 Creative Capsule, State University of New York at Buffalo  
Allentown Outdoor Art Festival, Buffalo, N Y  
American Craftsmen Council/Northeast Region, Mt. Snow, Vt.  
Jury Award  
Quaker Arts Festival, Orchard Park, N Y, Craft Award  
One-man Show, Gallery 912, Buffalo, New York



**HAROLD B. HELWIG**

Helwig, one of the younger artists involved with enamels, works figuratively. The expressionistic subject matter of much of his work is drawn from mythological or metaphysical sources, with imagery reflecting a highly personal approach. Helwig works with two of the most difficult enameling techniques, *basse-taille* and *grisaille*. Illustrated here is a good example of the latter method, which involves the firing of various thicknesses of white opaque enamel on a black opaque background.

*birthplace:* Wellington, Kansas, 1938  
*education:* Fort Hays Kansas State College, B.S., 1960;  
M.S., 1961  
*teaching:* Creative Craft Center at the State University of  
New York (Buffalo)  
*residence:* Buffalo

*My work is as I am, drawn from a persistent and quiet influence of mutual attraction between one's encouraged approaches and readiness to receive. For as long as intention has no visible effect, it has no importance to the outside world and leads into nothingness. What takes place in the depth of one's being, in the unconscious, can neither be called forth nor prevented by the conscious mind. For if we cannot be influenced ourselves, we cannot influence the outside world. In my work I embody an enduring meaning of my way of life and thereby an object is formed that has duration; from this one can come to understand the nature of beings living and dead, and what endures is the unswerving directive, the inner law of one's being, which determines all his actions.*

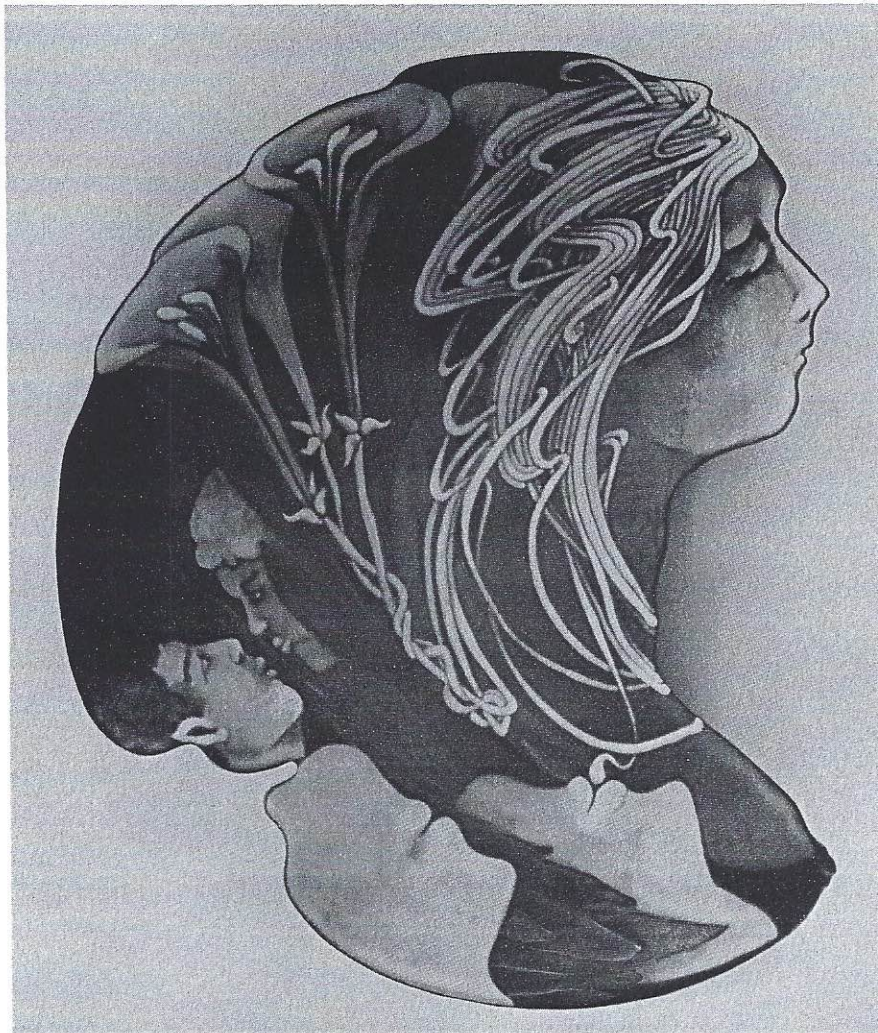
—Harold B. Helwig

*ANGELIC DEVILS:* grisaille matte enamel:  
11" diam.: 1968



# Bill Helwig

by Lenore Davis



*"A thought About,"  
grisaille enamel on  
copper, with transparent  
green overlay, fumed,  
11-11/16" wide,  
by Bill Helwig.*

A prerequisite for becoming a creative person might be to have a square mile to play in as a child, alone. A certain sense of space comes from being born on and growing up surrounded by flat land, where the vertical and the interruption of space become strong influences, and now are a permanent frame of reference.

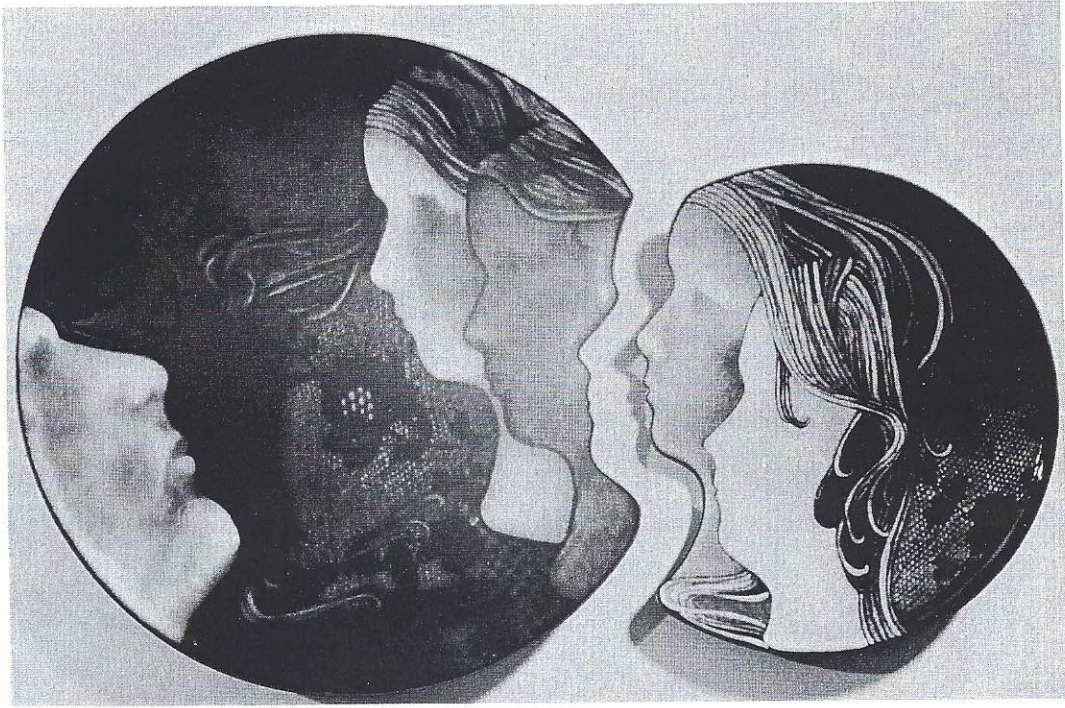
Bill Helwig is from Kansas. There is in his work a central flow of events of his own making that relate and complement each other. Thoughts and ideas stem from being a whole person, by purposely developing a diversity from a given point and allowing a flow from, as well as to, oneself. The development of which both the objectmaking and eloquent verbalization become natural and based on experience learned rather than taught.

As a person, he has gaps filled with silence and work in contrast to the noise of verbalizing in teaching and participating in the professional organizations—vents for consider-

able energy. It is almost as penance for the pleasure he takes in his work.

Physical movement is part of the whole, as in many ways the dance and theater are not very far from the teacher-student situation. Nijinsky-spirited with a high metabolism, Bill moves gracefully, knowing where his body is in relation to the space around him. This realization is not omitted in the repertoire for students, as sensitivity of the body in relation to the tools, materials, and kiln is a necessary consciousness.

Bill has called himself a surface embellisher, an ornamenteer. His work in enameling is self-taught, on the basis of a firm background in drawing, painting, design, jewelrymaking, a master's degree in watercolor. He chose the Limoges painting techniques of enamel, which included his most characteristic black to white work, grisaille. This is the 16th-century French technique of beginning with a black or dark background, then applying a thin layer of opaque (continued on page 28)



*Grisaille enamel on copper by Bill Helwig:  
"Four Sisters," glossy black and matte white, 8" and 6"  
in diameter (top), and  
"Face with Hair," bowl, 9 1/2" in diameter (above).*

(continued from page 26) white, unfired, through which the design is sgraffitoed. This is followed by successive painted applications and firings of the same opaque white. The result is a broad range of gray tones, from white through black, which can be further manipulated for color by firing time and kiln temperature. Further surface finishing entails matting the whites with etching solution or fuming with stannous chloride for an iridescent effect.

In Bill's work the background and figurative imagery is worked simultaneously. A variance in the amount of enamel causes tonal change. Backgrounds, as such, are worked in the early firings. Subsequent firings are handled so as to cause the earlier applications of enamel to recede. The finest of delicate blue tones, which are ethereal in their maximum effect, are caused by alternation of overfiring and underfiring of a piece which has been brought to a midpoint of white tones. After this process, continued applications of white are used for highlights and details. Most firings take place at 1650°F. The maturation is controlled totally by eye in relation to the desired effect for that firing. The average piece is fired a minimum of 10 times; however, no limit is set when special techniques are employed to cause a new surface or texture.

The imagery is his personal re-creation and viewpoint. The images are the crux of the involvement. The figures and objects are rendered naturalistically, yet abstractly. We see the people looking, touching with affection, thinking, dreaming, and joining to one another with much human expression, gently distorted by the physical boundaries of the space they occupy.

The content of a work is there to be found and discovered, as the viewer needs to touch the surface and feel the glass textures, to turn the forms about in the light and read the images in the round. The finished works reflect, in addition, a delight for perfection of technique. Few people take their enamels to a temperature which allows the enamel to mature, and even fewer people understand the characteristics of each enamel they use in relationship to their subject matter or design. The quality Bill wants for himself and to present to others is that of elegance, no less than the full potential of the medium. ■

# Lenore Davis

by Bill Helwig



*"Lady with Red Hair,"  
dye-painted velveteen, with  
polyester stuffing,  
trapunto quilting, hand and  
machine stitching, 40" high,  
by Lenore Davis.*

Lenore Davis's work fills one of the second-floor showrooms in our home. To enter it is like falling down the rabbit hole into a world of fantasy remembered from childhood before Pop, but after the Victorian influence; all of which is totally untouched by the Walt Disney craze of cuteness.

Each object is a pleasant, luxurious, and desirable situation made of velveteen. Each is yielding, ready to be touched, smooth and agreeable, not harsh or unpleasant to either the eye or the hand, not sharp, but truly gentle and mild. The colors are always richly vivid and narrative. The cloth, with its inherent softness and newly dyed colors, is stitched together with a soft interlining, or quilted, so as to have an embossed texture produced by the outlining of a pattern with single stitching, then padded with yarn or stuffing from the reverse side. To the surface, touches of raised and ornamental designs in threads of silk and cotton are applied, either by hand or machine, with an occasional bead or feather or

piece of surface-mounted leather, lace, or unspun wool as finishing.

Each object is homogeneously constructed, and its form is not the intention of content, but rather the embodiment of content. They are totally based on supposition, a setting of boundaries so as to be the whole extent of the idea. Thus excessive materials are abolished through discipline according to the needs of the content alone. The objects, whether flat, freestanding, or cushion, have the subtle relief of fabric alive and fluid, timelessly caught without any form of resistance.

This description of Lenore's work only perceives the external impressions of the finished piece. In actual process each work begins with an idea or sketch and proceeds through a selection and decision to start: the paper maquette; the paper pattern (actual size); the fabric sample (if needed); the fabric itself; the fiber-reactive dye (Procion); the color of dye, its mixing and many methods of (continued on page 29)

(continued from page 27) application; the dye setting; the rinsing; the drying; the sewing; the quilting and/or trapunto; the cutting and trimming; the sewing, again; the turning; the stuffing and supports or weights; the closure; the surface refinements and then, if correct, the satisfaction and finish.

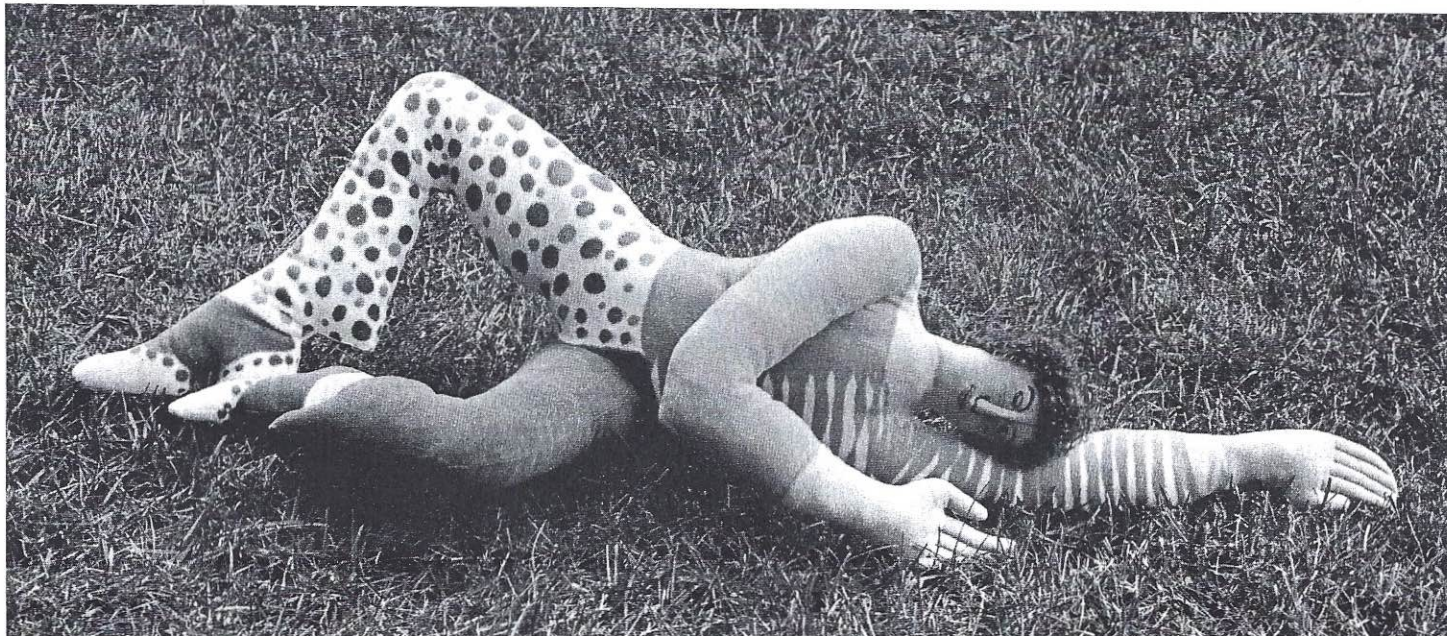
At each step of the way Lenore draws out the essence of the matter and through actual reason separates necessary fundamentals from the processes and techniques on her way discarding the irrelevant materials surrounding each step. Sometimes days are spent on a single step, while on other days only a few seconds are needed for a similar choice. Whether hard or easy, this abstracting of essentials is most necessary to continually free the form from the details, allowing the growth to occur unencumbered.

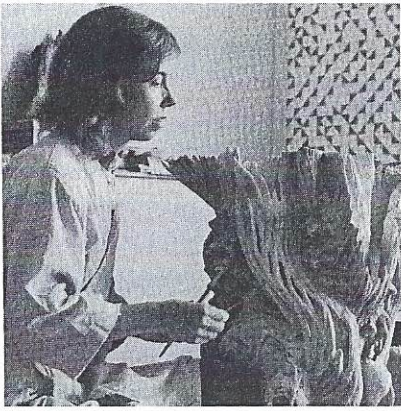
At present Lenore's work encompasses the realm of single and multiple figures, horses and riders, circus figures, heads, wall hangings, stuffed books, mountains and hills, works of pure pattern, narrative pillows, and dimensional scenes. Her imagery stems from notions that are translated into fabric imagery pure and direct. These ideas are romantic in nature and are meant as momentary releases for the denied child within each of us. In attitude each object is created by a single individual and concerns itself only with that individual, to be enjoyed by a separate person as it relates to that individual as a vital being. Although the idea of each may have been timelessly encountered, through Lenore the thought and object become straightforward and unaffected. All traces of machine, politics, satire, slapstick, vogueiness, and commercialization have been banished. This leaves the imagination completely unrestricted as one views and plays with any of the soft sculptures. Each work could almost be called an adult toy, but it is neither adult nor a toy; its life lies somewhere in between. Any one of her works becomes a reprieve from the pressure and pattern of daily life when played with or thought about. It is obvious that each work stands in opposition to the technology that has weakened certain points of our spiritual rest.

At home Lenore works in her studio and cares for our house, plants, and garden. Some days her creative work revolves around sewing clothing, polishing brass doorknobs, or preparing food. On other days she is one-tracked into herself as she culminates ideas and processes for her soft objects. She uses each as a break from the other. ■



Dye-painted velveteen, stuffed and embroidered, by Lenore Davis: "Mother and Daughter," 21" high (above), and "Reclining Dancer," 28" long (below).





Karina-Canavier



Troy



Helwig and Davis

## Our Contributors

"Having lived as a child in a house based on the Charles and Henry Greene style of architecture," says **Elena Karina-Canavier**, "and having been influenced, unknowingly, at an early age by arts and crafts concepts, I was delighted to find in 'California Design 1910' (page 22) the sources of many of my concepts as an artist today." Karina-Canavier's sculptured porcelains were most recently exhibited at the Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art (August 7-September 1). As a writer, she has contributed to the *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Artweek*, and *Ceramics Monthly*, as well as *CRAFT HORIZONS*. . . **Lenore Davis**, sometimes known as "the doll lady," has been working in dyed, stuffed, fabric sculpture for seven years now, though she received her masters degree in ceramics. She writes about her husband, **Bill Helwig** (page 26). And Bill writes on Lenore's work (page 27). Chairman of the ACC/Northeast region and teacher of enameling at the State University of New York, Buffalo, Bill received a 1974 Craftsmen Fellowship grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to continue experimenting with non-enamel elements between layers of enamel. . . Since his last contribution to these pages ("Words for the Unknown Makers," February 1974), poet **Stanley Kunitz** has begun his one-year term as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress. This issue we feature his collage/poem in our "Homage to Joseph Cornell" (page 38). . . **May Natalie Tabak**, whose notorious series of nine articles on women and the arts ended in our April 1974 issue, was at the typewriter this summer producing, among other writings, "Odd Cuds for Ruminations on a Fall Day in the Summer" (page 41). . . In "Metal Arts North America" (page 42), **Pat Passlof** describes the current scene in that medium. Passlof's paintings are on view this month at SoHo's Landmark Gallery. . . **Jack Troy** pens a portrait of fellow-potter "Don Reitz" (page 46). They are working together on a book on salt-glaze ceramics.

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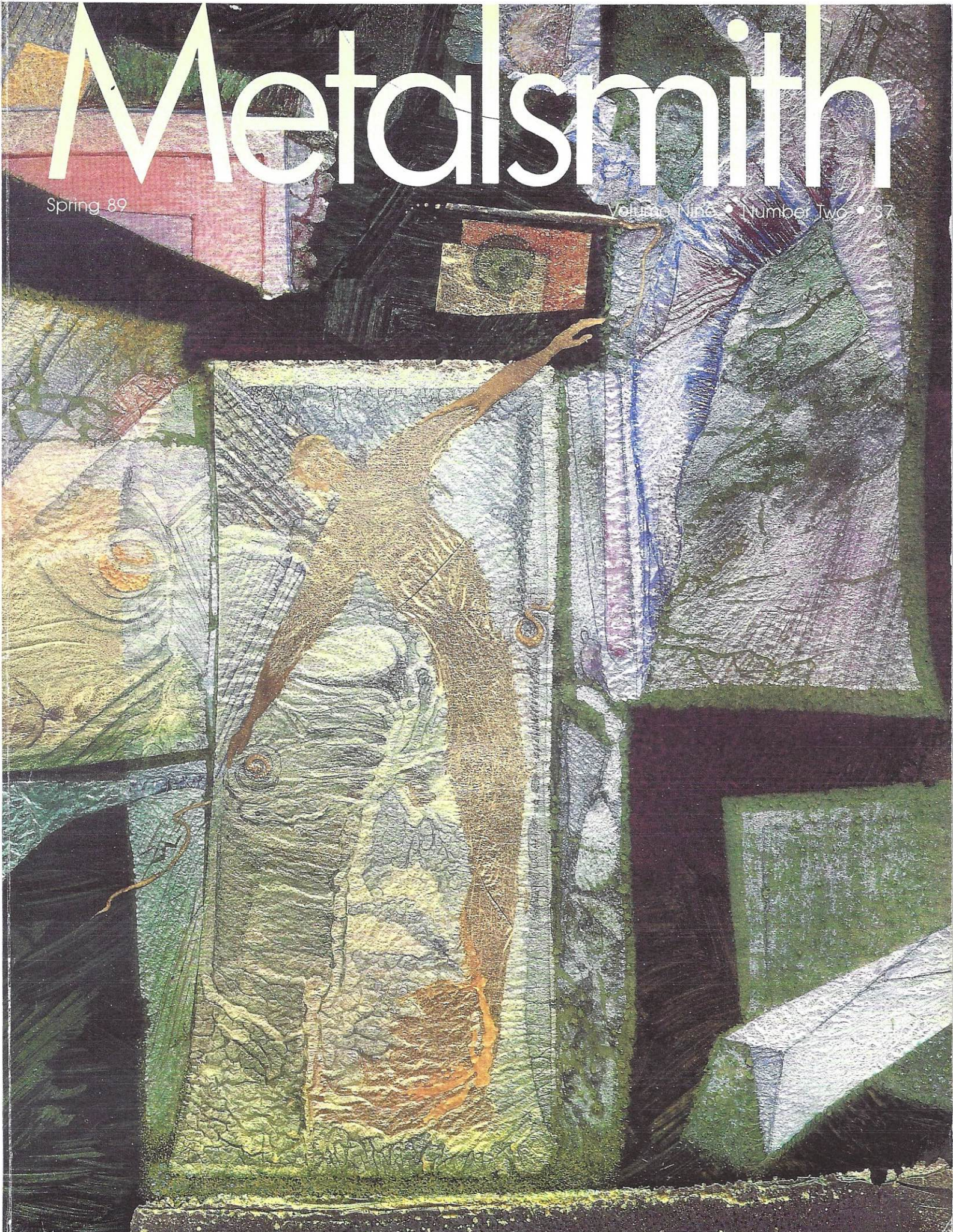
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# Metalsmith

Spring 89

Volume Nine • Number Two • 57





# BILL HELWIG

## WHAT I SAY TODAY IS A LIE TOMORROW

by Beverly J. Semmens

When enamelist Bill Helwig celebrated the half-century mark in July of 1988, his wife, Lenore Davis, asked the celebrants to festoon the trees with colorful paper strips with famous Helwig quotes. Most were culled from his workshops and provide a familiar litany for those who have experienced his teaching style over the past 20 years. The quote above leaped to the fore as I reviewed my taped interviews with him, for, although I've known Bill Helwig for close to 30 years, he has remained an enigma. The hours of conversation for this article helped illuminate, but certainly did not eliminate, all of the mysteries.

"What I say today is a lie tomorrow" means that he is a consummate researcher and experimenter who continually reinvents and reintroduces technical knowledge to spur the growth of enameling as a viable, exciting art medium. The ultimate enameling book, which we hope he completes and leaves as a legacy, may never reach the printer. Each day he discovers anew the wonders of glass fused to metal, and each night he rewrites the previous chapter. It has become a Penelope-like ritual.

Just where did the impetus for this enamelist's insatiable curiosity begin? The roots are Kansan and reveal much about the man. Raised by his grandparents, he asserts that his questions were either patiently answered or that solutions were suggested for the problems he posed. At six, for example, Helwig recalled being upset that he didn't have a bowl of his own, required for his play. His grandfather found some limestone pieces, and showed him how to rotate them over round stones to grind out two shallow bowls, warning the boy that it would "take some time." This self-dependency mode was further encour-

aged during the family's thrice-weekly treks to the bowling alley, where he was given lots of paper and crayons to amuse himself. Early on, he could draw, or reproduce, virtually anything he saw. He claims, with a hint of pride, and no apology, that he's doing nothing different now than he did as a child in Kansas, exploring sandstone, mineral deposits, the residue of shell forms and a horizon uninterrupted by fences.

School itself was a less positive experience, including the threat of failure in the second grade, just because he broke his crayons while trying to fit them into a more pleasing box. Helwig learned easily and quickly by observation and example, despite his slight problems with reading, or with grasping words as total units. Very little formal art training was available to him, but during the summer following high school he took drawing and watercolor classes in a neighboring town while preparing to enter Fort Hays, Kansas State College as a Pre-Med student.

Helwig realized by the time he reached the junior year in college that finances and family attitudes would deter him from completing a medical degree, so he transferred to art. Two influential teachers John Thornes (jewelry and design) and Joel Moss (ceramics and watercolor) urged him to be excited about learning. Never idle, he created cartoons for campus publications, worked in both the bookstore and reference library and sold a lot of silver jewelry—examples of which he wishes he still had, due to their unique, avant-garde qualities. He remained at Fort Hays to complete both bachelor and master degrees in watercolor, with thesis work that was abstract, vigorous and freely handled.

After graduation, in 1961, he taught junior high school art for one semester in Leavenworth, Kansas, then headed south for a Mexican holiday. But a draft notice intervened, and Helwig enlisted in the Army. Due to a fluke, he was sent to Wurzburg, Germany, for a 30-month assignment, winding up an Administrative Specialist at the post's hospital (when they

learned he could type) and enjoying some freedoms that few other enlisted men could manage. Not content to merely "serve his time," Helwig ran a radio station, designed Christmas cards and medallions, painted, worked with Special Services and arranged children's programs.

Upon discharge, he returned home to become the assistant director of the Creative Craft Center at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he remained for nine years. Jean Delius, who had seen Helwig's watercolors, suggested that he might like enameling, and the first seed was sown. Within three years, he taught himself the basics, beginning with color-field studies, which employed fire scale and bands of color. He read voraciously and turned his attention to grisaille, since there was little or no competition in that area. Margarete Seeler provided encouragement and information, but the remainder he acquired through autodidactic tenacity.

Marriage to fiber artist Lenore Davis in 1968 enhanced both his interaction with the art community and his own creative energies. Early Helwig grisailles suggest interesting parallels to Davis's use of the human figure as landscape. Both grew up in the flatlands (Kansas and Montana), with similar spatial landscapes of interminable blue skies and unbroken horizons. As an independent, solitary child, Helwig seems to have later suffused his enamels with mythical figures from his reading, or with surrogate friends from his imagination as a way of counteracting that endless Kansan plain. Davis, the daughter of a forestry professor, used her ebullient figures to form the landscape and to protect its riches, ever mindful of the freedom such spaces provide. She seems to find the spaces liberating; he tends to find them restricting.

By 1973, Helwig was teaching part-time at Buffalo State, but there's no doubt it was a full-time effort. As he says, "I know I teach very well; I had very good teachers." Disciplined and demanding of himself, he expects the same from stu-



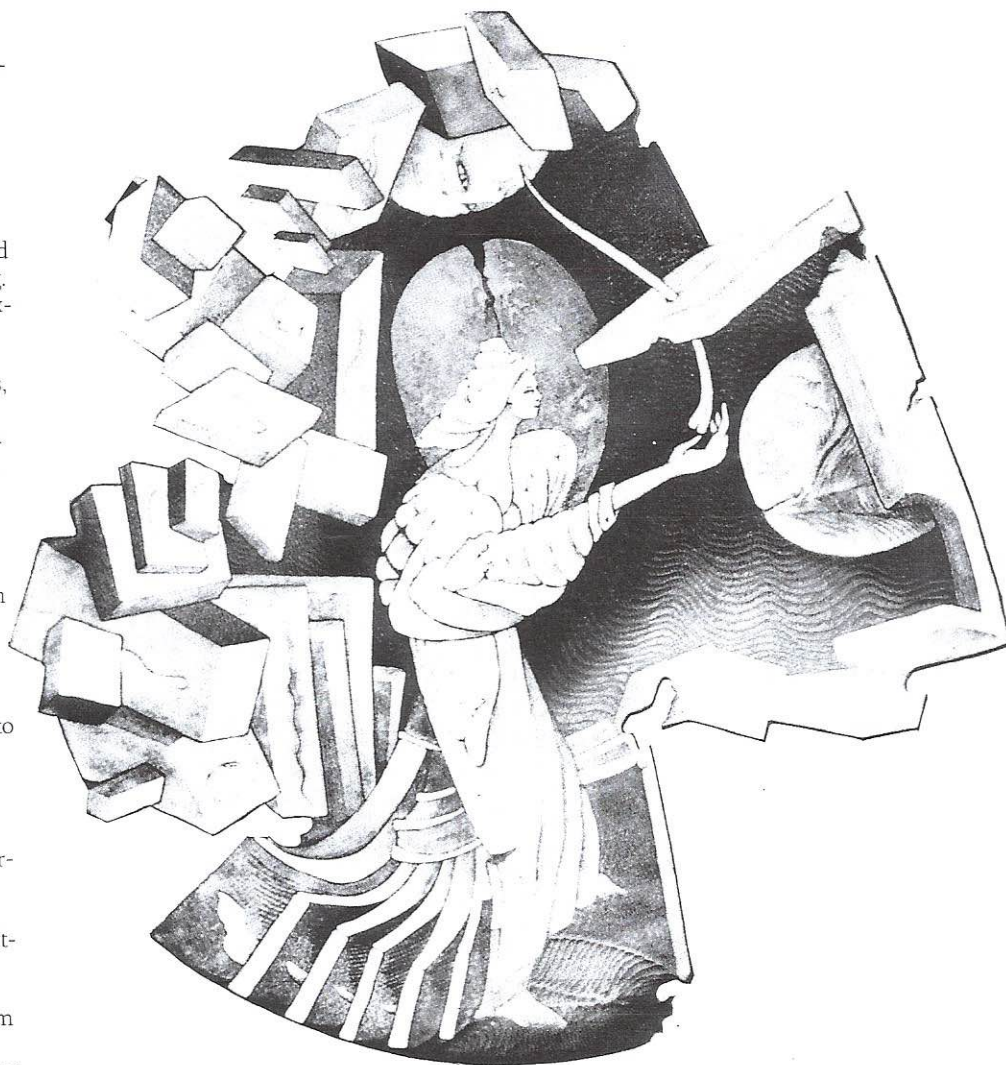
dents. He might have remained in the academic realm, but was lured by Woodrow Carpenter to the Ceramic Coating Company in Newport, Kentucky in 1977, to head the Vitrearc division. These two men shared knowledge about, and enthusiasm for, enamels, resulting in an eight-year commitment by Helwig to the development of lead-free enamels for artists. This was the period of his greatest technical growth: testing and changing formulas, researching historical documents and tying everything together with current industrial methods. The laboratory at Ceramic Coating Company became his studio. It wasn't uncommon for him to fire 144 one-inch test squares five times in one day, in addition to his personal experiments (he was free to create his own imagery). Helwig mastered the techniques as few others could, developing an inner clock for firing times and sifting enamels with astounding accuracy and consistency. He learned the language of industry, to communicate with the production team, and edited the publication *Glass on Metal*. Unfortunately, the intensity and success of these efforts also precluded participation in juried shows or the wider dissemination of his enamel work. Helwig admits that he became locked into discovering—a virtual victim of information. His industry experience may have heightened the conflict between scientist and artist, with the prolific edging out the profound. Although he prepared pieces at home to fire at the factory, this period of intense production necessarily resulted in some schematic work. The enamels completed during this stage seem, despite their technical virtuosity, to be more contrived conceptually, no doubt due to the stress of relentless research.

Thus, in 1985, he decided to become a full-time studio artist. He refers to himself as an alchemist who retires to his monastery, gets out his enamels and plays. His third-floor studio is relatively free of visual stimuli or music. Helwig works on six to eight enamels simultaneously, some of which require only a few hours and a

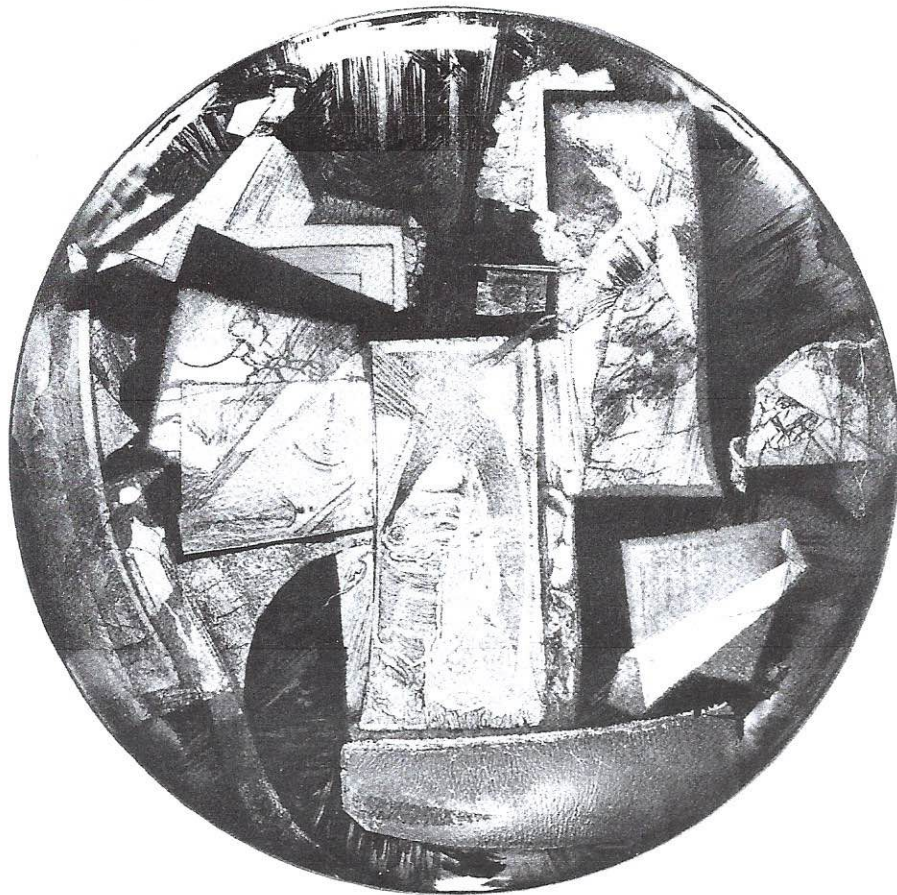
minimal number of firings, others remaining in the studio a year until they're considered finished. Unlike many enamelist, he seldom draws or plans pieces in advance, preferring to approach the metal like a painter does the raw canvas. Since even his kiln can provide surprises when colors layer and interact, some firings lead to extended contemplation and reworking. Nor do transparent enamels allow the luxury of completely obscuring an area to begin anew, as pigments can. As a watercolorist, he is accustomed to spontaneous, direct application methods, but the kiln adds another factor to the work's success.

Helwig's impact on enameling has been profound. He has either "reinvented" or brought back numerous processes and techniques through tireless research and experimentation. First on his list of contributions is the grisaille technique, which he presented in larger formats and with contemporary imagery. Coupled with his growing expertise in grisaille enamel, he reintroduced the art of fuming, as practiced in the Tiffany and Lalique studios, to create lustrous, iridescent surfaces with myriad color shifts. He consulted with glass artists and chemists in developing his own method. The process also made him ill, so it was removed from his repertoire. In defiance of the conventional stamped metal forms available to enamelists, he innovatively altered the outside edges, pierced interiors, hammered plates full of texture, upturned edges or manipulated the metal while still hot from the kiln. The latter process was new in America but had been practiced in Europe for years. Like so many of his discoveries, what began as an accident emerged as yet another method to push enameling beyond the limitations often ascribed to the medium.

When asked why he ignores or dislikes cloisonné enamel, he responded that he prefers to leave it to others who do it well, and that he "doesn't like fences." The shoe series, which he created as a teaching aid several years ago (*Double-Breasted Boot*) resulted in cryptic social comments



**Opposite:** *Comment*, grisaille, 9 x 12½ x ½", 1970; *The Librarian*, grisaille, pure gold, 13⅛" max. d., 1976



about shoes and their wearers and allowed his sardonic wit to emerge in the titles. He saw the work as being nonserious, therefore the humor and sarcasm were given free reign, and the results often delight. I think that his avoidance of cloisonné is two-fold. When he first began to study enamels, he realized that the field was crowded with cloisonné artists, and he wanted to carve a totally unique niche for himself that could lead to greater recognition. In addition, the wires tend to impede his painterly approach to the medium, drawing too much attention away from the rich colors, depth and surfaces he desires.

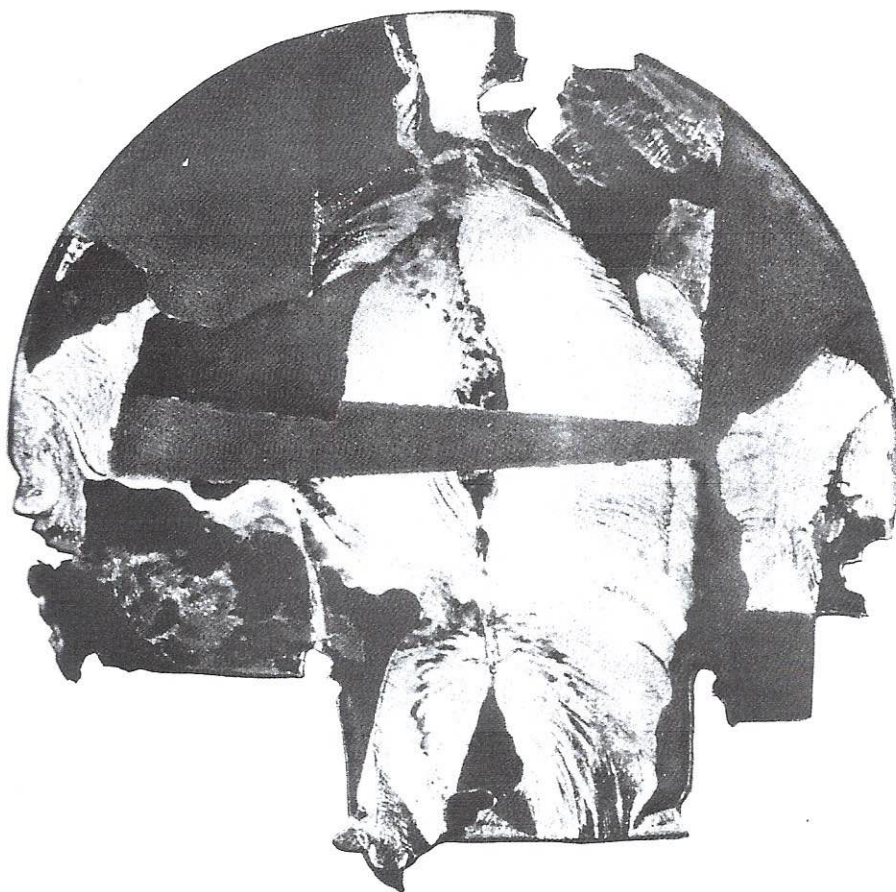
Preferring direct, spontaneous methods of enamel application, and a pastiche of processes, he relied upon the shallow bowl format for years. He feels that the manageable size and shape allow the viewer a personal interaction that comes with turning the pieces in the hand. I fear that this assertion forestalls consideration of the real problem, that of presentation. It is difficult to imagine these expensive enamels piled with food, despite Helwig's claim that he prefers that functional aspect. Rather, I see the pieces deserving special presentation, either on the wall or in boxes, to isolate them in the environment. Helwig is aware of the presentation problems, particularly with the shallow-bowl forms, but no affordable, acceptable solution has been found.

He even began to make his own glass, resulting in some unique ruby and pink colors. Also, rather than using the lusters commercially available to the enamelist, he tried Winsor-Newton's pure gold on the surface, firing it in place with the addition of oil binders. *Red Sea, She Said* uses underglaze ceramics pencils in a new way as color tonalities and line work atop enamels. These experiments occurred nearly 15 years ago and are now taken for granted by the enamel community.

Discontent with using minute amounts of silver or gold foil to accent an enamel, Helwig covered the entire surface, then reticulated details or used oxides to create his imagery. A Helwig signature style is the hiding of bodies within bodies or faces within heads, like the games included in the Sunday comics that he remembers from his childhood. Unafraid to alter the surface, he will etch it chemically, add oxides and fire anew. If a sculpted surface is the goal, enamel is applied like an impasto painting.

There are no sacred cows in Helwig's enamel lexicon. He's an enthusiastic, prolific risk-taker in the enamel studio, and his expertise is unmatched. Fortunately,

**Top left:** *Alpha Omega*, underglaze, silver and gold foil with pure gold details, 8½" d., 1983; **left:** *The Servant Caught a Thousand Conjectures*, basse taille, underglaze, repoussé, 12⅓" d., 1982; **opposite, top:** *Heaven and Earth*, underglaze, silver and gold foil, 9" d., 1985; **right:** *Unnamed Angel*, 8½" max. d., 1981



his selflessness provides for the promulgation of that expertise through his workshops and writings. He encourages students to learn the logic of the process, rather than the process itself. Helwig generously shares his hard-earned technical knowledge to assure progress in the medium. Unencumbered by an academic's strictures, he reinvents the art form daily, both technically and esthetically.

When you become aware of the thousands of enamels he has created, it is easy to forget that Helwig has been involved with the medium only since the 1960s, and that a considerable portion of that time was spent teaching himself or working closely with manufactory. Thus, his image making may still be in its infancy. He concurs that his images will change and become more personal the longer he is away from industry. I sense that the close, introspective scrutiny that he lavishes on these pieces during their production can lead to a surfeit of both technique and imagery, resulting in a less cohesive whole. A close-up, for example of *Alpha-Omega* reveals the strength and intrigue of one surface and could stand as a statement unto itself. The figurative, narrative works, although readily identified as Helwig's, are often inscrutable. In some works, the figures are stiff, with bizarre exaggerations, and a whiteness that makes them float eerily above rich fields of color. I respond most favorably to the works in which figures are shrouded or suggestive, for when Helwig gives me less, I'm usually rewarded with more. They allow the viewer to move between figure and ground and encourage personal interpretation.

Moving away from the figurative, he is currently engaged in new work on larger steel plates, featuring bed sheets and pillows in various stages of disarray, as in *Bed Sheets and Pillows #2, Inner Edges*. The series is as free, fluid and provocative as the watercolors from his graduate school days. One cannot help but respond to their spontaneity, peacefulness and masterful handling of the diaphanous materials. During the course of the interviews for this article, Helwig admitted to being an elitist, and I would concur that the majority of his previous enamels convey that attitude. The *Bed Sheet* series, however, provides yet another interpretation for his quote, "What I say today is a lie tomorrow," for these works are not elite. They imbue the familiar trappings of everyday life with an aura of mystery yet avoid being overworked or unapproachable. These pieces suggest to me a Bill Helwig who is more mellow and introspective yet communicative of personal feelings. Since his technical base is so secure, this seems an ideal time to allow his conceptual base to flourish. If this series is an indication, I will follow his journey with enthusiasm.

Beverly J. Semmens is a fiber artist and associate professor of fine arts at the University of Cincinnati.