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The Scintillating Jewelry of Barbara Berk

By Yvonne Markowitz

Barbara Berk creates jewelry designs that are miniature, wearable sculptures of woven metal that are dynamic, delightful, versatile, and elegant. The handwoven metalwork typically takes the form of loops, spirals, ruffles, and ribbons Berk artfully combines with colored stones and pearls. Her jewelry, which has won several national awards,¹ is eminently wearable and suitable for both day and eveningwear.

Ms. Berk is one of a number of contemporary jewelers who draw inspiration from the works of Arline Fisch (b. 1931), known for her pioneering efforts in applying textile techniques to body ornament. Ms. Fisch was intrigued by the various metal technologies of the past, and during a visit to Denmark's Viking Museum in 1970, discovered chain mail body armor. Back in San Diego, where she moved from New York City, she experimented with wire, creating large-scale adornments made of silver wire that were crocheted, woven, knitted, and braided. Her work also includes Jacobean-inspired neck ruffs of metal lace, full-body stoles of knitted wire, and neck ornaments of hammered silver. Ms. Fisch is a dedicated teacher and has, for several decades, taught her groundbreaking metal techniques to scores of metal students, including Barbara Berk, at San Diego State University.²

Another metalsmith whose work influenced the design aesthetic of Barbara Berk is Mary Lee Hu (b. 1943). For many years a professor in the art department at the University of Washington in Seattle, the artist is best known for her highly original woven wirework constructions made of high-karat gold. Like Arline Fisch, she familiarized herself with a variety of weaving techniques, studying ancient, antique, and ethnic methods of working with fiber and metal wire. The results are stunning and represent a highpoint in the history of world jewelry.

Berk has a non-traditional background for a jeweler as she holds a graduate degree in Russian and European history and had a successful career in the world of corporate magazine publishing before deciding to explore something new. She was attracted to antique jewelry and during the 1980s took advantage of courses offered at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City where she learned basic metalsmithing skills. As for gems, she took courses at Gemological Institute of America, eventually earning a graduate gemologist diploma. After relocating to San Diego in the early 1990s, she enrolled in classes taught by Arline Fisch which exposed her to the extraordinary potential of adapting traditional textile techniques to jewelry making. The result was both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually challenging. Two techniques—Plain Weave and Soumak weaving—were of particular interest and Berk explored their use in depth.

In a 2004 paper delivered at the Santa Fe Symposium in Jewelry Manufacturing Technology,³ Barbara Berk analyzed these two approaches to metal, using her own work as examples. She explained that “Weaving is the interlacing of two sets of elements, one vertical and one horizontal.” In creating *Large Ruffle Brooch* the vertical element (the warp) for the ornament consisted of strips of sterling silver sheet, while the horizontal element (the weft) incorporated multiple strands of resin-coated copper wire twisted with black silk thread (plain weave drawing). For *Bow Brooch*, she used an antique rug technique called Soumak that originated in the Azerbaijan city of Shemakha, near Eurasia's Caucasus Mountains. In this case, “...both elements [of the brooch] are single strands of wire: a thin wire weft and a thicker wire

¹ Among Berk's honors are a 2004 American Gem Trade Association *Spectrum Award*, the 2002 *Award for Excellence in Design* from the Women's Jewelry Association, and a 2001 *Saul Bell Design Award* for jewelry design.

² Several of Barbara Berk's ornaments are illustrated in Arline Fisch's seminal book, *Textile Techniques in Metal* (New York: Lark Books, 1996), 55, 139.

³ The proceedings of the symposium were subsequently published. See Berk, Barbara. “Textile Techniques in Metal: A Designer's Perspective on Sheet and Wire,” ed. Eddie Bell, 55-86, *Proceedings, Santa Fe Symposium on Jewelry Manufacturing Technology*, Albuquerque: Met-Chem Research, Inc., 2004.



Aquamarine Rhapsody. Pendant © Barbara M. Berk, photo by Robert Weldon. 950 platinum, 31.08 ct aquamarine carved by Sherris Cottier Shank, cultured pearls. 3.6875" H x 1.25" W x 0.50" D. Courtesy Barbara Berk.

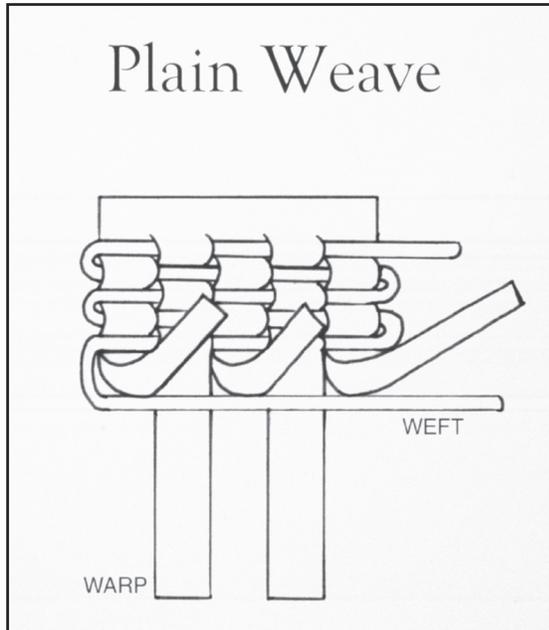


S-Curve Brooch © Barbara M. Berk; photo by Robert Weldon. A citrine briolette carved by Sherris Cottier Shank tops the interchangeable stickpin which is the attachment mechanism for the brooch. The sculptural woven gold forms a "portrait collar", framing the 14.20 ct citrine and returning light to the eye back through the gem. 2.125"H x 2"W x 1.25"D. Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2007.569.

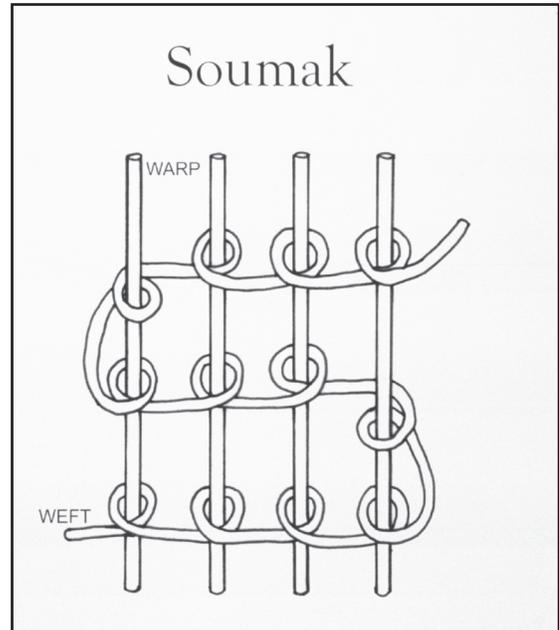


Double Spiral Brooch. © Barbara M. Berk; photo by Dana Davis. 950 platinum, 12.6ct faceted blue chalcedony briolette (19 x 10mm) tops the separate stickpin which is the attachment mechanism for the brooch. 2.25" H x 1.375" W x 1.0" D. Courtesy Barbara Berk.

warp”⁴ Berk further explains that in both Plain Weave and Soumak weaving, each object is woven individually and flat, without a loom. For both, the “...patterns rely on an open-ended warp system, which allows the weft to be easily placed over and under the warps without distorting the warps in the case of the Plain Weave, or easily wrapped around and pushed down the warps in the case of the Soumak. When the weaving is completed, the edges are finished and then the woven ‘fabric’ is shaped.”⁵ When using fine silver or high karat gold, the metal is soft enough to manipulate without applying heat. It work-hardens during the processes of weaving and shaping so that the final result is a stable, wearable ornament.



Plain Weave: sheet warp and continuous wire weft (over 1, under 1). Weaving a wire weft into a sheet warp creates texture and depth. If the weft is continuous from row to row, it will create two finished edges during the weaving process. Courtesy Barbara Berk.



Soumak: a continuous wire weft wraps around each wire warp (over 2, back around 1). Courtesy Barbara Berk.

Platinum Weaving

Barbara Berk represents the second generation of jewelers to apply weaving techniques to wearable art. However, she is the first to successfully work with platinum wire. Beginning in the spring of 1996, she set out to determine which alloys of the precious metal would work best using her preferred methods of weaving. She was assisted in her endeavors by Dr. Richard Lanam, Director of Product Development at Engelhard-Clal, a metals company located in Carteret, New Jersey.⁶ After explaining her technique and showing examples of her work to the scientist, she decided that for the warp of the platinum Soumak, an alloy composed of 95% platinum and 5 % ruthenium would provide the necessary tensile strength, while a thinner wire made of 95% platinum and 5% iridium worked well for the weft.

To enliven the flat, lifeless surface of the platinum, Berk discovered, with the help of Curt Hensen of the firm Rio Grande, that a magnetic finisher with tiny stainless steel needles brightened the weaving. At first, they experimented with a finisher having needles measuring 0.5 mm in height. This produced impingement on the metal, so they switched to a finisher with 0.3 mm needles.⁷ The result was a sparkling ribbon of woven platinum wire.

⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Engelhard-Clal was subsequently purchased by BASF which continues to make platinum products although it no longer services the jewelry industry.

⁷ Berk, op. cit., 63.

Berk's next project was to use platinum for making a Plain Weave ornament. In this case, she selected 95% platinum—5% ruthenium for both the sheet warp and wire weft. For the platinum sheet, she discovered that .004 inch-thick sheet was mechanically workable and produced the desired result.

In addition to her groundbreaking work in platinum, Barbara Berk is the first of the metal weavers to incorporate pearls and significant gemstones into her work. The gems are integral to the design and have been artfully selected to enhance the metalwork. Many are purchased from gem-carver Sherris Cottier Shank, an award-winning lapidary artist known for her one-of-a-kind carvings. Trained as a goldsmith, Cottier Shank's creations are graceful, fluid, and sensual. They contribute to the "preciousness" of Berk's jewelry, adding color, sparkle, and textural variety.

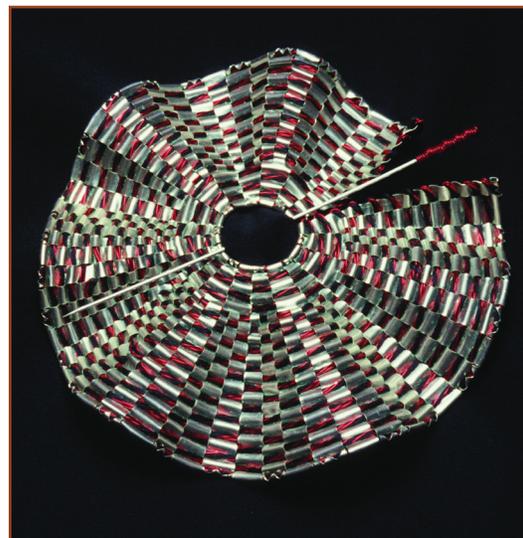
More recent work by Berk demonstrates her ability to evolve technically and stylistically. In 2007 she created *Toccata*, an 11.5 cm high pendant of 22 and 18 kt gold that features a 9.92-carat Mexican fire opal briolette carved by Shank (cover of this issue). She continues to work in the tradition of Arline Fisch and Mary Lee Hu, weaving her own magic into exceptional jewels.

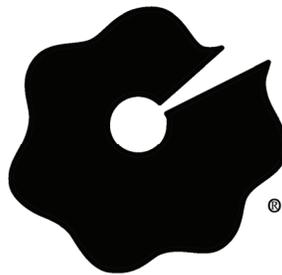


Barbara Berk

Bow Brooch © Barbara M. Berk; photo by Dana Davis. 22kt and 18kt gold, cultured pearls. A highly stylized, late 20th century interpretation of the classical motif. Berk's Soumak technique is ideally suited to this brooch for it enables her to create a dense weave on the back band, weaving in place the framework that holds a traditional pin stem and safety catch, thereby fully integrating the attachment mechanism into the design. The Soumak also enables her to fan out the warp wires to create the open lacy areas above the pearls..9375"H x 2.5"W x .75"D. Courtesy Barbara Berk.

Large Ruffle Brooch © Barbara M. Berk; photo by Dana Davis. Sterling silver, red coated copper wire, black silk, stainless steel. This was Berk's first student project in Arline Fisch's classroom at San Diego State University (Fall 1991). The Ruffle is her signature piece. It is also her registered trademark, her corporate logo and her maker's mark— it is stamped on every piece of jewelry Berk creates. 4.5" W x 4.3125" H x 0.50" D. Courtesy Barbara Berk.





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