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Silversmith Robyn Nichols sculpts graceful jewelry and serving pieces with shapes inspired by nature.

BY DAN WEEKS PHOTOGRAPHY BY KING AU

Robyn Nichols' work is so sophisticated and elegant, so flawlessly executed and highly polished, that it can only be the work of a master long apprenticed to masters. Or so it seems.

In fact, Robyn Nichols is largely self-taught. A woman in her thirties with a disarming smile and a straightforward, refreshingly unpretentious manner, she grew up on her grandmother's farm near Independence, Missouri, and now lives in Kansas City.

"I was the first girl in my shop class," she says in the relaxed cadence and soft twang of rural Missouri. "We were supposed to be building mailboxes, but after I learned how to weld I persuaded them to let me make sculpture.

"After that," she remembers, "I somehow or other turned every class into an art class. When I got to high school, they'd ask a question and all these hands would go up. 'How do they know all this?' I'd wonder. I realized then that all I had learned was art, so I'd better be an artist. That's all I really wanted to be."



Nichols' Calla Lily letter opener, right, rests on blossoms of the real thing. "That design came from looking at a fragile calla blossom and wanting to hold it. The function came after," she says. Her Nasturtium Leaf salad servers, left, were the first in a large and growing number of tabletop pieces. "I made them because I love nasturtium in salad," she says. The Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt Museum recently acquired a pair to add to its design collection.







Of the Morning Glory napkin ring, opposite, Nichols says, "Sometimes I like to take the most fragile thing from nature I can think of and strengthen it, give it stability and permanence, by making it in silver." Chinese Maple Leaf salad servers, above, and Samara Seed Pod earrings and brooch, below, show her virtuosity in combining line, form, and finish to create what she calls "miniature sculptures."



Today, her silver jewelry and tabletop pieces are sold internationally and are almost beyond comparison. In her work, the metal ripples and curls and enfolds itself, following the form of the leaves, blossoms, and tendrils of the plants that inspired them. Her designsfor bracelets, pins, earrings, necklaces, serving pieces, napkin rings, even a sugar bowl-are as refined and graceful as the sterling from which they are made.

Her pieces are more natural than realistic. They are a product of careful observation, artful abstraction, and technical mastery.

"I'm not here to repeat nature," she says. "I borrow from it. The challenge is to transform rigid metal into something flowing and alive as it sits in front of you."

Sterling is marvelously malleable, allowing for the graceful tendril stems that are Nichols' trademark, for the compound curves of a cupped leaf, or for the fluted lip of a lily petal. Silver also takes a high finish that has wonderful reflective qualities.

(Nichols feels too much contemporary silverwork has a matte finish. "Reflection is what silver is all about," she says. "If you're going to use a precious metal, why make it look like aluminum?")

It is this combination of flowing form and brilliant, dancing reflections that animates Nichols' work with what she calls "life," "breath," or sometimes, simply "movement."

"In the form of a piece I try to capture a gesture of nature," she says. "A leaf is breathing, it is growing. I want to see that in my work—or maybe that the wind is going to catch it and it is going to curl.

"At first a piece looks like a frozen moment, like a photograph. But as you turn it, the reflections make it seem to move."

Nichols credits some of her achievement to innocence. "I think the reason my style is so strong is that I didn't know what was impossible," she says. "At first I didn't even know what tools were used for what. A lot of things I figured out as I went along."

She apprenticed briefly with a jewelrymaker to learn basics, then earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute. Since the institute didn't have a program in metalsmithing, much of her studies were independent studio work and reading.

"I tried all kinds of ancient techniques that nobody uses anymore because they are so labor-intensive," she says. All of her pieces are handformed from sterling sheets and wires. Paul Revere and generations of metalsmiths before him would recognize her methods.

Silver sheets are cut and filed, then shaped by raising and sinking—beating them over convex and concave forms with rawhide and wood hammers. Next they are fabricated—heated with torches and joined with invisible seams of silver solder.

They are often chased, a form of engraving using a hammer-driven tool that incises one side of the material and leaves a corresponding, subtly raised line on the reverse.

Repoussé—further tooling of selected areas of the piece while it is resting on a resilient surface—adds to the relief. A combination of chasing and repoussé can, for instance, produce the vein







structure and rippling surface of a leaf. Finally, the work is buffed and polished.

Each piece of a given design starts out from the same pattern, but no two end up exactly the same, because there are no molds. "I like it that way," says Nichols, "because that's how it is in nature, too."

Nature pervades Nichols' work. All her pieces interpret natural objects, but the relationship goes deeper than that: it involves her ability to perceive and represent what she calls the "movement" of nature—the sometimes enduring, sometimes ephemeral, inevitably cyclical process of life.

At the heart of her vision is a personal, mystical relationship with nature. As a child, she saw fairies in the woods. The trees surrounding her grandmother's farm were her guides and her protectors, and the plants she raised in her garden were her companions. She still spends much of her time outdoors in her garden, in the woods, or at the seashore. Nature is her sustenance as well as her subject.

"I want to embrace nature, to consume it, to be one with it," she says. The focus of her gaze shifts. Her presence seems to drift toward a stand of trees outside the window, and her voice quiets.

"When I discovered silversmithing, it was as though someone said, 'Here are the means to transform something you love into something you can always have near you.' My work has to do with preserving something that is fragile, with wanting it always to be there."

For more information, see Reader's Resource on page 100.



Even Nichols' simplest work has a sense of wholeness, grace, and balance. The Myrtus Leaf earrings and brooch, opposite, curl gently as though embracing the wearer. Her designs are practical, as well: her first pieces were made for dancers, who require light, comfortable ornaments. Costs range from about \$200 for the the Chinese Lantern earrings, above, to thousands for the elaborate Morning Glory sugar bowl, below.

