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Precious metal

Nancy Miller has found lasting value in her career as a jewelry artist.



Miller in her Saratoga Springs garden.

Eight years ago, Nancy Miller first laid her hands on metal clay. Now she says she's "obsessed with it."

Miller, a Saratoga Springs jeweler, has conceived and created a remarkable—she calls it "spirited"—collection of bracelets, rings, pendants, necklaces and earrings from the unusual medium. Metal clay is an innovative material of metal particles—such as silver, gold, bronze or copper—in a supple substance that, as Miller says, "goes squish." Its finished sheens are rich, layered and deep.

Miller's work is distinguished by dramatic, earthy patinas; exceptional placement of stones and gems, pearls, found objects and glass; and organic motifs that emulate leaves, petals, tendrils and fossils. "Some days I wake up and know just what I want to do. And then I spend the whole day down here doing it, with music for company," she says.

"Down here" is the airy, lowest level of the home she and her husband Al built in 1992. Al is a stone artisan and woodworker whose craftsmanship flows through the residence alongside Nancy's. The house is a sylvan refuge with a massive stone fireplace constructed by Al, 360-degree views of woods and streams, picture windows, wide hallways, a gourmet kitchen and lots of porches. Indoor plants flourish everywhere, and Miller says they inspire her designs.

The bright space that serves as a studio for Nancy and a workshop for Al—with "shared custody" of machines like a drill press—is a grand span of color, form and

Just the facts: Metal clay

Precious Metal Clay originated in Japan and was introduced to the United States in the mid 1990s. It's a non-toxic material consisting of small particles of pure silver or pure gold that are combined with an organic binder and water to produce a malleable substance that can be textured and shaped by hand and using simple tools. After they dry, objects made of PMC are kiln-fired at a high temperature; the metal particles sinter (fuse) and the binder and water burn off, leaving behind a pure silver or gold piece. PMC works can be enhanced and finished by soldering, burnishing, tumbling, enameling or coloring with a patina, among other methods. More information is available at www.pmcguild.com. The price of the raw material varies depending on the current market value of the metals. Metal clay, which was developed in the United States, added the options of bronze and copper products.

utility: walls stocked with beads, wires and stones; a polisher; hammers and small implements for shaping, imprinting and carving; molds and rubber stamps; work tables; a blue kiln; and a panoply of creative-trade tools for husband and wife. It's collage, not clutter.

"I'm on a mission to use or find a purpose for everything," Miller says. "Sandpaper, tweezers, buttons, a knitting needle, the steel ball with letters on

it from an old Smith-Corona typewriter, and every bit of clay—if it's dry, I rehydrate it. Nothing gets wasted here. And I don't stop."

From classes to career

Miller's current business as a jeweler was a sharp turn away from her first career with the Capital District Developmental Disabilities Services Office,

based in Saratoga Springs. When she retired in 2003, Miller knew she wanted to be a full-time artist, a venture she had launched ten years earlier while she juggling an office job.

"My family members were art dabblers," she says. "I sewed and quilted and worked with beads. I especially liked to handle small parts like chains and charms and was always taking classes, experimenting with different methods and different materials. I was curious and open to being expressive."

Miller had considered herself a dabbler, too: "I used to think, 'I can't draw, so how could I be an artist?'" Then she discovered metal clay. She waxes lyrical about being "hooked on every aspect of it—researching supplies, studying new designs, experimenting with techniques, teaching and showing my work. You can never know it all."

Exhilarated by the medium, Miller's definition of "artist" expanded. Now she works confidently, reaching for a brush with the right number of bristles to join unfired pieces of silver clay; placing a gem just so in a bezel setting; coaxing an ear wire to close with perfect tension to secure it; exerting precise pressure on a handmade sheet of metal clay to produce a grainy plane; or filing a surface until it is smooth enough to wear near skin.

Miller also uses a technique for transferring black and white graphic designs, text and photographs onto jewelry, allowing her to customize pendants with unique images; for example, she can design a bracelet or key fob depicting loved ones. *Voilà*, an heirloom!

"It can happen from idea to finished product right away, or sometimes I spend a whole day on a single part and still am not satisfied," Miller says. "So"—she interrupts herself to open a box of not-yet-used pieces in explanation—"these eventually will be lovely pendants or earrings, or an element in something bigger."

Lately, Miller has been focused on a new line of silver and bronze earrings that are a departure from her usual controlled forms. Their construction is built around mix-and-match pieces of varying size, color, shape and texture that can be removed, reversed or rearranged to create several design options from one pair.

Take a class with Nancy

Nancy Miller takes great pleasure in imparting the how-to and can-do nuances of her art form. She leads frequent workshops for individuals interested in learning how to craft jewelry from precious metal clay, has presented at a professional conference and is involved in an online network of artists available to each other to discuss techniques and outcomes.

The classes are no sideline, but a main event in Nancy's schedule, and designed to reach a broad audience—from beginner to expert artists. She also continues to study with the masters in the genre when the opportunity arises, defining herself as a continuous learner as well as an enthusiastic teacher. Miller says she learns from her students, also, as they study with her. She laughs at the idea of being worried a student might become a competitor: "I am proud of them when they accomplish their goals or sell a piece on their own. We each do our own thing and there is an audience for everyone."

One devotee and perennial student, Josiane Birbiglia of Ballston Lake, reports: "When I attended my first class, I had no idea if I could produce something that would even be acceptable. Well, my first piece, a geranium leaf pendant, has proven to be my favorite. I had no confidence in my ability but Nancy gave me the assurance to try and to succeed. Once, when a ring I made broke in half before going into the kiln, Nancy cut the two halves again and had me make a pair of earrings that I get complimented on to this day. She has the most amazing ability to help you see the art and beauty in everything you make. She can turn the most negative student into a positive artist."

Her classes are small-group, single-day sessions, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with the goal of the participant bringing home four finished pieces. The cost is \$137 and includes materials. Dates are flexible and Miller welcomes inquiries, particularly from people who want to work together. Most of the lessons are in her studio.

Some classes are for beginners and others are specialized or advanced, based on the needs of the students. Groups can focus on jewelry for a particular event, such as a wedding or Christmas; to learn how to make a specific item, such as a ring or pendant; or to perfect a technique, such as how to integrate stones and gems.

Individuals can join a class Nancy already has scheduled or contact her to arrange their own private group session. Materials are available through Nancy at the class. If a student has been working on a piece independently and brings it to class to finish, it can be fired as well.

Interested? Visit www.nancymillerjewelry.com/workshops or call (518) 583-0045.

“It’s important for me to re-imagine the basics all the time, to be fresh and inventive,” says Miller. “I play with composition and combinations, highlighting what I know works and introducing new forms.” In progress now is a prototype for a handsome ring whose centerpiece is a graceful dome crowned with a tiny gem. Its intimate roundness is a bold step away from Miller’s textured, three-dimensional signature pieces.

Her intuition about which direction to steer her style is on target, if you listen to admirers like Andrea Wise, the director of media relations at Skidmore College, where Miller’s jewelry is on display and for sale at the Tang Museum. “Her work is beautiful—delicate, but not overly fragile,” Wise says. “I love how her color combinations harmonize; for example, she has a red necklace of beads and stones with copper-colored metals added as details and clasp. Very warm and lovely.” She adds: “I want it.”

Miller’s pieces are also practical, Wise says: “I especially like her clasps—a utilitarian essential for the necklaces, yet gorgeously wrought. I could and would wear a Miller necklace with the clasp in the front!”

Wise also is impressed with Miller’s attention to detail in the elegant lines that are fragile without being frail. Two silver rings riveted her particularly—one hammered, one smooth, both enhanced by contrasting and complementary surfaces.

Art: not for the faint of heart

Miller is known among peers, customers and fans as an exceptional teacher (see sidebar), generous with the techniques she has developed, and a kind soul as well as a prolific talent.

Josiane Birbiglia of Ballston Lake, a customer, student and friend of Miller’s, owns a sage leaf ring, several pairs of earrings and two of the artist’s bracelets. Beyond those purchases, Birbiglia prizes above all a necklace Miller made and gave her as a gift: “When I was diagnosed with breast cancer a year ago, Nancy made a beautiful heart pendant for me. She set a pink stone in the center, the color for breast cancer survivors. I have worn that pendant ever since. It helped

give me the hope and courage to survive my surgeries and treatment. In my book, she is an angel.”

“Selling is important, of course, but knowing people enjoy the jewelry is a joy,” Miller says. There’s more evidence of her philosophy: Each summer, she spends considerable time at the Double H Ranch summer camp in Lake Luzerne, volunteering to make jewelry with children living with serious illnesses. “Their diagnoses don’t get in the way of their fun,” she says. “Metal clay is a great medium for these children to explore, with maximum opportunities for success. It’s exciting for them and gratifying for me.”

When she pauses to consider her experiences, Miller concludes: “It’s not for the faint of heart to be an artist in the marketplace. You have to produce plenty, promote it, travel for and set up shows, visit galleries and keep up a Website. Meanwhile you may want to teach or study... and must continuously innovate.”

The balancing act has not fazed her. Michelle LaLonde, owner of Mimosa Gallery on Beekman Street, retails the jeweler’s work. “Nancy’s choice of stones and her unique work with metal clay are popular with our customers at Mimosa,” she says. She adds that purchases can be very personal, since Miller is willing to custom-design.

Her achievement and prospects please and surprise Miller, who has come a long way from her days as a “dabbler.” Even so, she confides: “Nobody ever accused me of being an artist until I picked up clay and started making jewelry.” **SL**



Miller fashions jewelry of metal clay (top photos) in her Saratoga home studio (above).

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If you want to buy...

- Online: www.nancymillerjewelry.com
- **Mimosa Gallery:** 70C Beekman Street, Saratoga Springs; (518) 583-1163 or www.mimosagallery.com.
- **Riverfront Studios:** 96 Broad Street, Schuylerville; (518) 695-5354 or www.riverfront-studios.com.
- **Tang Museum at Skidmore College:** 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs; (518) 580-5534 or <http://tang.skidmore.edu>.

Nancy Miller’s jewelry also is sold in Glens Falls, Albany and Schenectady. Check her Website for a complete list of retailers.