
Regional

Myers: Stimulating minds, teaching art

For thousands of years metalsmithers were held in great esteem by numerous societies because they supplied many of the basic tools used in agriculture. As time went by metalsmithers began to specialize based upon the kind of metal they used or the final product they wanted to generate.

One of those specializations became metalsmithing for the sake of art.

Today, using metals in art has become very popular thanks to artists such as Paulette Myers, professor of metalsmithing in the Department of Art and Design at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Myers was born in Fostoria, Ohio, to artist parents and developed her interest in art from an early age.

"It was the confidence I gained working in any construction-related experience or drawing that led me to become an artist," said Myers. "In school I was considered the artist of the class. My parents nurtured that."

She went on to obtain her bachelor's degree in metalsmithing and art education at Indiana University in Bloomington and her master's of fine arts in metalsmithing in jewelry design and sculpture at Washington University in St. Louis.

One of the areas that Myers is active in is art education. She said that she believes that exposure to art from an early age has a tremendous impact on children's general education.

"The sensitivity of each individual is developed to a

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

higher degree for any kind of art if they study arts from early on," said Myers. "Artists are both born and taught, but when people are not exposed to the arts, they lack the opportunity to assess whether or not they have the talent to become artists."

But there are fewer opportunities for children to discover art at an early age due to increasing economic pressures that have led to many arts programs being closed in public schools.

"In the whole person of every child ... arts play an important role in the development of society consciousness, and everyone needs that opportunity," Myers said.

Myers is a great example of how it is a misconception that the physical nature of the work involved in sculpture and metalsmithing has led to it being an art form dominated by men. In fact, Myers learned metalsmithing from other women artists in the 1960s at Indiana University.

"There are both males and females in the field, but early on females were not recognized," Myers said.

Although the common view is that metalsmithers use metal objects in their work, many use plastics and resins to create sculpture and jewelry.

Myers has had about 50 exhibits of her art throughout the United States. Staging an exhibition of art is a very time consuming process. Things begin with an invitation two years before an exhibit is scheduled to take place.

Once they receive the invitation, artists must then start thinking about what to produce to include in the exhibit. Many work to get funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in order to have the time and material they need to produce their art.

"You start with sketches," said Myers, who added that there are many steps in the creative process before the metalsmith actually starts working with the metals. Many art students today are using computer graphics to develop their ideas, creating three-dimensional models before beginning the actual work of art.

At what point are metalsmithers satisfied with their creation? And what do they do if they are not? For musicians it is relatively easy to go back to the score and make changes. Painters can repaint entire sections of canvas, but metalsmithers have a harder time since they have to reshape the pieces they have produced.

The famous art historian Giorgio Vasari told the story that when Michelangelo finished the statue of Moses he thought it was so perfect that he exclaimed "parla," which means "speak" in Italian. Contemporary artists don't always seek such perfect representations of reality in their art.

"You are always thinking on how to represent things

in multiple ways," said Myers.

Today's metalsmithing students, Myers said, must have a strong background in different skills to express their ideas, including modeling metal with a hammer, controlling their materials and casting.

When these students graduate and decide to go into teaching sometimes they are chosen not because of their skill in metalsmithing but because of the other skills they have developed.

In addition to becoming teachers, many metalsmithers produce jewelry or have their art exhibited at galleries. Others make a living by having their work commissioned by either organizations or individuals.

Myers teaches a number of different courses on metalsmithing at SIUE, where she said she finds the environment very conducive to producing art.

"It is very stimulating to be in an environment where there are so many minds taking on an idea and moving with it," Myers said. "You are not alone in the studio, which really helps you to be aware of other people and movements in the field, which, in turn, helps you propel faster into your own thinking."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.