

Jewelry for a Never- Increasing Minority

Margaret De Patta in the Marketplace

JULIE M. MUÑIZ

"It seems to me that a creative artist has a social responsibility [to] produce not the single highly-priced handmade article for extremely limited consumption but to produce the best possible in design, workmanship, and materials and give pleasure to the largest number of people possible."¹

A socialist and supporter of the postwar labor movement, Margaret De Patta held strong convictions about her social responsibility as a jewelry artist. Art should be for everyone, she felt, not just for the wealthy. Attempting to make good design more affordable to a larger public, in 1946 she boldly attempted what some of her colleagues thought unthinkable: limited serial production of her jewelry designs.² Looking back on her decision in an essay for *Arts & Architecture* the following year, she wrote: "Here then was the aim—to produce more than one piece of each design and to sell these pieces at a lower cost. . . . I wanted to place my designs upon the market at a figure to compete with the comparable material quality costume jewelry."³

Many signs indicated that the time was right for such an endeavor. Yet *Designs Contemporary*,⁴ the business Margaret De Patta and her husband, Eugene Bielawski, founded to market limited production jewelry to "an ever-increasing minority"⁵ (figs. 1,2), was never a financial success, and the couple was forced to stop production after only eleven years in business.

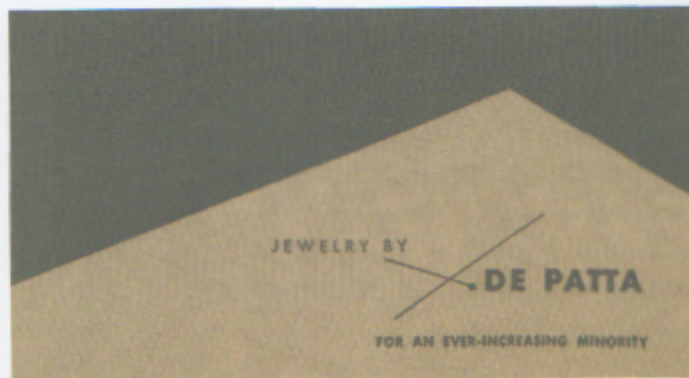


FIGURE 1
Margaret De Patta
*Working drawing of Designs
Contemporary logo, c. 1947–57*
ink and graphite on card stock
14½ x 10½ in. (36.8 x 26.7 cm)
Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust,
Point Richmond, California

FIGURE 2
Jewelry by Margaret De Patta announcement card,
c. 1947
ink on card stock
3 x 5½ in. (7.6 x 14 cm)
Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust,
Point Richmond, California

The failure of the production line highlights the inherent conflict between De Patta's Bauhaus-inspired social, political, and economic ideals and her need to express herself artistically through concepts, materials, and techniques suited to one-of-a-kind studio production. Moreover, despite De Patta's desire and efforts to educate Americans, most were not able to appreciate her innovative designs.

Prior to her attempt at limited production, De Patta had already established a name for herself in modernist and jewelry circles. She had been selling her studio jewelry through the San Francisco craft gallery Amberg-Hirth for over a decade. More significantly, she had participated in a series of exhibitions that brought her talents to the attention of ever more influential audiences, culminating in her inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's 1946 exhibition *Modern Handmade Jewelry*.

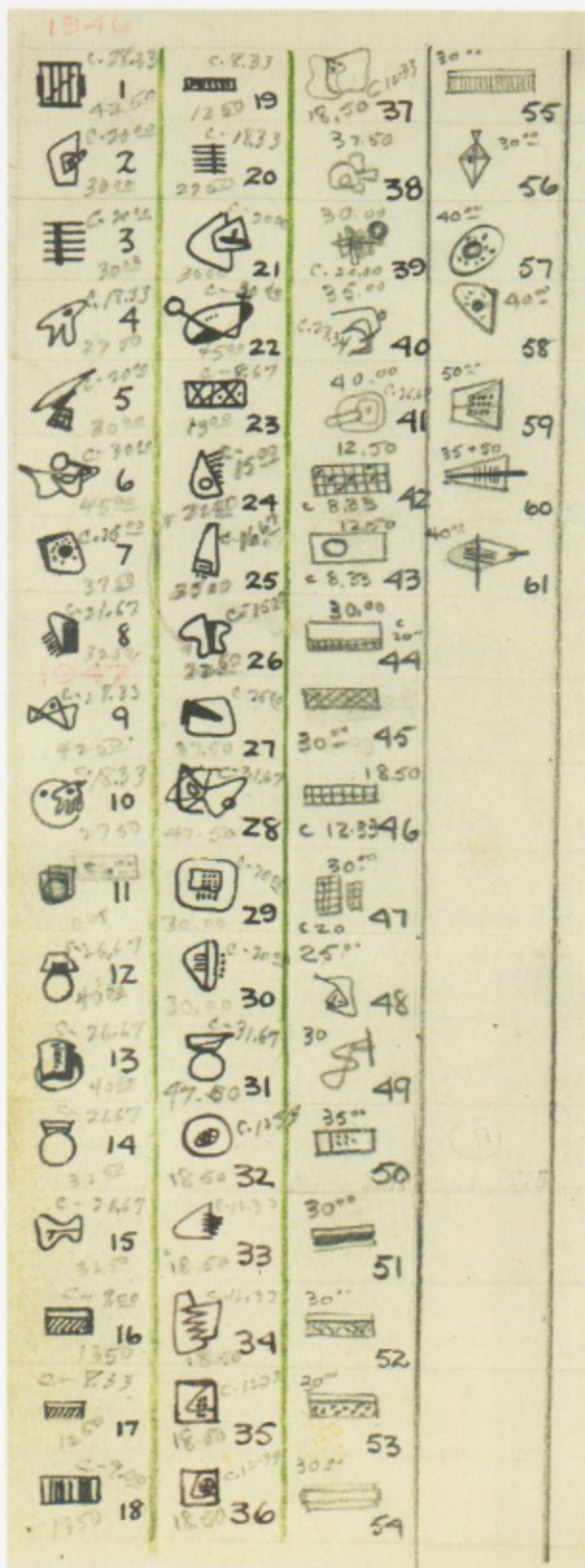
De Patta also drew attention to herself because of her political associations. Between 1944 and 1947, she taught at and served as chairman of the Basic Design Workshop at the Tom Mooney Labor School in San Francisco (later called the California Labor School). Eugene Bielawski, whom she met when she attended the School of Design in Chicago in 1940 and 1941, became director of arts at the institution in 1945. In addition to art and design classes, the Labor School offered courses such as "What Is Coalition?" "Soviet Union, 1917-47," and "Economic Theories of Marx and Keynes." The school's strong political bent led to a three-year investigation from 1947 through 1949 by the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, with the Committee concluding that the school was one of California's "Red centers of intrigue and treachery. . . under the complete control and domination of the Communist Party."⁶ In 1948, the U.S. Attorney General placed the institution on the List of Subversive Organizations. As a result of their association with the school,

De Patta and Bielawski were blacklisted by the Joint Fact-Finding Committee of the California Legislature for three years, from 1947 through 1949.

De Patta was a self-employed artisan, so the legislature's censure meant little to her bottom line. For Bielawski, however, the consequences were dire. After refusing to sign a loyalty oath, Bielawski could no longer find work as a teacher. This is likely a factor in his increased involvement in De Patta's jewelry business.

According to many of their friends, it was Bielawski who conceived of the production line, swaying De Patta with their shared belief in "design for all." Philosophically, De Patta supported the line. In actuality, she was ambivalent about production and its boring repetitive process, even disapproving of the use of casting, which she felt "destroys the characteristics of the metal."⁷ She kept these feelings mostly to herself, however, and together she and Bielawski arrived at a solution that worked for both of them: De Patta designed and crafted each of the original designs, and Bielawski applied his technical expertise to developing and refining the casting process (fig. 3). In addition, Bielawski took on the tedious task of casting and finishing each piece himself, with occasional help from a hired assistant.⁸

The original 1946 line included only eight pieces: four rings, three brooches, and one set of earrings or cufflinks.⁹ The following year, the line increased to thirty-one pieces, including nineteen rings (fig. 4), and by 1949 the total reached forty-one (fig. 6). In 1953, the popularity of wedding bands prompted new designs and a promotion, bringing the total number of production pieces to sixty-one (fig. 5).¹⁰ By 1955, De Patta had designs sketched and ready for one hundred six pieces, although it appears that no more than the first sixty-one were serially



produced. Ranging in price from thirteen to fifty dollars, the complete line was comprised of thirty-three rings (seventeen were wedding bands), fifteen brooches, and thirteen pairs of earrings/cufflinks.

From the start, De Patta and Bielawski were organized in their undertaking, giving each design a production number to allow for easy identification and ordering¹¹ and developing a written statement that detailed their policy concerning minimum purchase requirements for retailers in exchange for an "exclusive territory franchise."¹² De Patta and Bielawski modified the policy in the first two years of production to require a minimum wholesale purchase of two hundred dollars in order to carry the line.¹³ Only after the initial investment were retailers allowed to take jewelry on consignment—a savvy business decision that not only ensured orders upfront but also provided stronger motivation for retailers to sell their inventory.

Through their combined efforts, the couple succeeded in attracting retailers in major cities across the country.¹⁴ The majority of shops taking on the Designs Contemporary production line, such as Van Keppel-Green in Beverly Hills and Cargoes in San Francisco, retailed modern designs in furnishings and housewares alongside her jewelry; a few, such as Nanny's in San Francisco, specialized in jewelry or other small handicrafts. Many outlets sold De Patta's one-of-a-kind creations, or Originals, as she called them, as well as her production line, and many also brokered special commissions.¹⁵

FIGURE 5 [LEFT]

Margaret De Patta

"Original De Patta Productions" from De Patta design book, c. 1946–53
Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Eugene Bielawski, The Margaret De Patta Memorial Collection

FIGURE 6 [RIGHT]

Margaret De Patta

Production jewelry as photographed by the artist, 1949
Margaret De Patta Archives, Bielawski Trust, Point Richmond, California