

***Quanta of Space: The Bosom Sculpture of
Ibram Lassaw***

Edited by Andrew Wallace
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Reviewed by June Scalia
PhD Student, Department of Art History
Washington University in St. Louis

Last week, I surveyed a group of colleagues to see how many of them, at that moment, were wearing a piece of jewelry: every single person raised a hand. This (admittedly unscientific) data set speaks to the broad appeal of the catalogue under review, *Quanta of Space: The Bosom Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw*, and the exhibition of the same title organized by the Figge Art Museum in fall 2023. The catalogue brings together for the first time artifacts of abstract sculptor Ibram Lassaw's considerable jewelry production and juxtaposes these miniature works with his larger, though no less ethereal, constructions in a variety of metal alloys. This book does not mount a full-scale defense of jewelry's position within the hierarchy of the "fine arts." Rather, it emphasizes the visual resonances

between Lassaw's two bodies of work, and in doing so, highlights the pioneering sculptor's innovative approach to material and form.

Thoughtfully crafted and aimed at both the casual museum visitor and the initiated enthusiast of abstract sculpture, the catalogue's four full-length essays mix references to popular culture and in-depth scholarly analysis to delightful effect. Notes on *Star Trek*, automobiles, and snowflakes are intermingled with detailed biographical accounts and shrewd formal analyses. An Instagram post demonstrating an at-home science experiment, for instance, is mentioned by Andrew Wallace in his introductory essay "Yesterday's Tomorrow" to illustrate the cosmological and molecular aspects of space resonant in Lassaw's work.

Rather than detract from the volume's intellectual rigor, the pop-culture parallels provide useful entry points into the often-elusive world of abstract art. Jewelry is, after all, something many of us encounter on a daily basis, so it is only appropriate that the exhibition's organizers and the catalogue authors would situate it within a common vernacular. Thus, the catalogue largely does what executive director Michelle Hargrave says the Figge continually aspires to do: bring art and people together.

A brief word on the title: essays by art historian Nancy G. Heller and the artist's daughter, Denise Lassaw, both mention Lassaw's tendency to refer to his jewelry as "bosom sculptures." Was he trying to avoid the word "jewelry" and, by extension, associations with craft and the decorative arts? Has the Figge perhaps done the same thing? Maybe the museum regarded the cheeky phrase as suitably surprising and effectively suggestive. Or, in a more generous reading, perhaps the organizers saw in the word *bosom* a gesture toward a nurturing, nonsexual form of intimacy, the kind of comfort that comes with being in close physical proximity to someone's heart. Either way, it is a slightly odd and clunky, albeit memorable, title. Admittedly,

"wearable sculptures," another term used by Lassaw, doesn't quite pack the same punch.

The first part of the title also raises interesting questions. The artist's enduring interest in astronomy, mathematics, physics, and the transcendental aspect of space embodied in Zen Buddhism attests to the significance of the title's opening phrase. Space, with its myriad connotations, was essential to the way Lassaw both conceptualized and constructed his sculptures. As the catalogue demonstrates, the jewelry conforms to the same basic principles of his larger works: irregular metallic lines woven together to form webs of open-form cells. The energetic configurations, which recall crystalline structures, nebular formations, and bacterial growths were achieved through the artist's experimental use of the oxyacetylene welding torch, which he purchased after his first major sale in 1950. The tool enabled a procedural immediacy that permitted Lassaw an increasing degree of improvisation. Working without maquettes or templates, the artist fused various metal alloys into quivering grids that visually belie their structural integrity.

Heller traces the periods before and after this transformative purchase in her essay, "Shapes Made of Air: The Life and Sculpture of

Ibram Lassaw.” Born in Alexandria, Egypt, to Russian Orthodox Jews in 1913, Lassaw moved with his family to New York City in 1921, settling first in Manhattan and later in Brooklyn. Heller, whose essay benefits from interviews she conducted with the artist between 1979 and 1981 while writing her PhD dissertation on Lassaw, describes an insatiably curious child, nurtured in a multilingual environment that encouraged his interest in art from a young age. As a teenager, Lassaw exhibited his work through the Clay Club (now the SculptureCenter), a communal workspace founded by Dorothea Denslow, a graduate of the Art Students League and Lassaw’s only formal teacher. (It is worth noting that both Heller and Denise Lassaw mention Denslow’s influence, and I’d venture to say that her role in fostering a generation of young artists in New York City may deserve an exhibition in its own right.) These early, largely figurative sculptures owe their inspiration to works by Henri Matisse and Alexander Archipenko. Heller notes that the teenage Lassaw encountered the work of both artists in the pages of the French-language journal *Cahiers d’Art*.

The second half of Heller’s essay turns toward the 1950s, when Lassaw began to experiment with oxyacetylene welding. The

technique was not unique to Lassaw; several contemporary sculptors, such as Herbert Ferber, Theodore Roszak, and David Smith, similarly explored the emancipatory potential of welded steel. What distinguished Lassaw’s work was his idiosyncratic integration of color. Defying the popular Greenbergian mandate of medium specificity, particularly in terms of its insistence on monochromatic form in sculpture, Lassaw incorporated multiple metallic patinas within a single work. In the jewelry, the variegated alloys were further enhanced by semiprecious stones, patterned beads, and seashells. It was Lassaw’s wife, Ernestine, who in 1951 first thought to hang a small scrap of the sculptor’s experimentations with color around her neck; and the industrious Manhattan gallery owner Samuel M. Kootz recognized their wider aesthetic and ornamental appeal. The pocket-sized pieces, whose sales provided a degree of financial stability, soon became an integral part of Lassaw’s sculptural output.

In “Bosom Sculptures: A Family History,” Denise Lassaw recapitulates many of the same biographical details of her father’s life, including her mother’s role in the conception of the so-called bosom sculptures on that fateful day in 1951. The value of Denise Lassaw’s

contribution is in the memories she shares, recollections that make the work come alive, stories that treat the pieces of jewelry as savory accoutrements of everyday life. In one particularly delightful anecdote, she recalls a large, subtly asymmetrical bronze necklace dotted with semiprecious stones that she received from her father on her sixteenth birthday (plate 68). As a young woman, she wore the necklace in the halls of her high school, to openings at the Whitney and MoMA, when hitchhiking across the United States, and while floating nude down the San Lorenzo River in California. The last is a vivid recollection that perfectly captures the joyful freedom of youth and the aesthetic reality of a fully lived life.

The final essay, “Modernist Sculpture/Modernist Jewelry” by Marin R. Sullivan, most directly addresses the traditional disciplinary divisions between the two mediums. The text, which adds to Sullivan’s growing body of scholarship on the often-overlooked artistic contributions of postwar abstract sculptors such as Henry Bertoina, Richard Hunt, and Harold Cousins, situates Lassaw’s work within the broader arena of midcentury studio jewelry, that is, artfully handcrafted wearables that were relegated to the domain of design. The maneuver not only

tacitly endorses jewelry’s estimable position within the canon of visual culture; comparisons to pieces by studio jewelers Art Smith and Margaret De Patta also enhance an understanding of Lassaw’s cosmic compositions and reveal parallel formal and conceptual spatial concerns which Sullivan describes as unique to the historical moment. As such, Sullivan reengages the narrative first introduced by Wallace, in which a discussion of the period’s technological advancements and scientific innovations highlights an ethos of intergalactic fascination—literal and metaphysical—manifest in both popular and artistic artifacts of the time.

Sullivan also notes the practical reasons artists like Lassaw made jewelry: it is, generally speaking, less expensive to produce. It requires less time, less space, and less physical labor, and is consequently easier to move, easier to store, and, as exemplified by Sam Kootz, often easier to sell. Denise Lassaw writes of the economic stability her father’s jewelry provided in her own essay. Beyond monetary concerns, however, Sullivan frames jewelry as an exploratory and experimental medium, one which allowed artists to translate certain formal ideas across scale while utilizing the body as a living pedestal. Hung around a person’s

neck, Lassaw's unique compositions become suspended constellations, small material reifications of a universal, macrocosmic ideal. For Lassaw, who never editioned any of his jewelry designs, the medium provided a creative outlet that far outweighed its economic potential.

Ibram Lassaw was an extremely fecund producer of wearable works, creating by some estimates 1,500 pieces, a quantity that supersedes even that of Alexander Calder, the best-known artist-jeweler of the twentieth century. The catalogue concludes with forty-eight plates featuring work created by Lassaw between 1938 and 1996. Most of these images present isolated close-ups of intricate pendants, though the spread is punctuated by examples of the artist's larger sculptures, an arrangement that accentuates the visual parallels across the two mediums. If this catalogue has a weakness, it is this: Where are all the bodies? Other than a group portrait of Ibram, Denise, and Ernestine Lassaw at the beginning of Heller's essay, there is not a single photograph that depicts these objects being worn. This strikes me as a missed opportunity to demonstrate how these unique works may have been enhanced by their relationship to the human body. Nonetheless, *Quanta of Space* is an admirable catalogue that benefits

from the inclusion of intimate details provided by people who were close to the artist as well as insightful contributions by art historians with a deep knowledge of postwar abstraction.