

MAGAZINE

At 97, preeminent jewelry designer Betty Cooke is still inspired to create

By Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

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The first time a major museum exhibited jewelry made by Baltimore artist Betty Cooke, it was because she went to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis unannounced and asked to see the curator. It was 1948, and Cooke, then 24, was on a road trip across America with a friend. The Second World War had irrevocably changed the American art world, fomenting the form-meets-function of modern design and the abstract expressionism of painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Artists prioritized the thoughtful use of material and the purity of their own vision, and Cooke exemplified this ethos in her jewelry.

She brought to the museum that day a custom-made box displaying elegant and distinctly reductive pieces. Sturdy, yet agile, her jewelry captured a sense of movement not unlike the full-size modernist mobiles that were being popularized by Alexander Calder, only Cooke's sculptures were made for the human body. The curator was so impressed by Cooke's aesthetic sensibility and craftsmanship that she took a bracelet and a pair of earrings on sight, and included them in a show featuring modern jewelry.

Seven decades later, Cooke, now 97, is the sole focus of an expansive exhibition. "[Betty Cooke: The Circle and the Line](#)," which opened in September at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore and runs through Jan. 2, is the first major museum retrospective of Cooke's life and work. The exhibition presents a chronological tour through the designs of a preeminent mid-century artist, one who never lost that youthful bravado and ingenuity. "Her guiding principle of 'less is more' has led to an acclaimed body of monumental, wearable minimalist sculpture made throughout more than seventy years of artistic practice," Jeannine Falino, the guest curator of the exhibition, writes in the accompanying catalogue.

The show is named for a quote from Cooke, who once said that she loved to “study what can be done with one straight line. I can spend years with a circle. If you have the ideas and the materials, the results are limitless.”

On a blustery afternoon in October, not long after her exhibition opened, I sat with Cooke in the courtyard outside the Store Limited, the shop that she opened in North Baltimore in 1965 with her husband and business partner, the late artist William O. Steinmetz. The store, which carries clothes, home goods and her jewelry line, turned Cooke into a beacon of style. She was one of the first, for instance, to import the bold, graphic mid-century Finnish fabrics of Marimekko to the city. Cooke still embodies the refined and confident aesthetic for which she is known; on the day we met, she wore a charcoal tunic layered with one of her signature neck-to-waist-length tubular gold necklaces.

Born in Baltimore in 1924, Cooke studied art in the 1940s and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (now MICA). “I’d wanted to take French in college, but the one professor who taught it was fighting in Europe,” Cooke remembered.

In 1947, she bought a house on Tyson Street in the city’s Mount Vernon neighborhood, and turned it into a gallery, studio and residence. The area became a kind of Greenwich Village of Baltimore, and from this narrow 19th-century building, Cooke launched her career. One image included in the exhibition shows Cooke, in the late 1940s, bent over her workbench intently focused on a piece of metal. She wears a wool sweater of her own design, clasped at the shoulder with a clever silver button and leather loop. “I used to make things out of Army blankets because that was the best wool in the whole country,” Cooke told me.

Over the decades, Cooke engaged with the world around her, abstracting what she saw into rings, bracelets, cuff links, earrings and necklaces. There are pins suggesting the birds and plant life that Cooke encountered along streambed walks through Baltimore; with the explosion of atomic energy, her work erupted into radials evocative of the fearfully powerful turn of nuclear physics. Working frequently in silver, brass, gold, leather and ebony, Cooke often incorporated seemingly mundane materials to great effect. An oblong pebble became a dynamic counterbalance to a sterling silver line in a pin, while her clever playfulness with material transformed Plexiglas into what looked like ebony.

Several of her abstract drawings and paintings are also included in the exhibition, showing the symbiosis of her visual art and her craft. She often made abstract watercolors and remembers going to a show at a New York gallery in the 1950s for inspiration. “And there’s Georgia O’Keeffe,” Cooke said. “We talked and laughed, and we both agreed it was a nice show.”

“Her jewelry is elemental,” says Ellen Lupton, who holds the Betty Cooke and William O. Steinmetz Design Chair at MICA in Baltimore. Lupton is also senior curator at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City, which has pieces of Betty Cooke jewelry in its collection. Lupton has known Cooke since 1997 and remembers how the jeweler bucked the trends of overtly feminine design in her work: Where others hoped to re-create the delicate flower of a budding dogwood tree, Cooke told Lupton that she preferred to capture the elegance of the branch. “That says it all to me,” Lupton explains. “Hers is a unique body of work that participated in the mid-century revolution of things with this elemental vocabulary and rejection of any conventional imagery. She remade the fundamentals of jewelry, but in a way that is also very wearable.”

A Betty Cooke piece became a signal, a kind of secret handshake alerting those who recognized it that the wearer possessed a confident style. There are many in Baltimore and D.C. for whom “a Betty” became a rite of passage: a birthday present from a doting parent, an annual gift from a spouse. Cooke has forged decades-long, multiple-generation relationships with her clients, and the exhibition contains items on loan from many avid fans. “I wear a Betty every single day,” Lupton says. “For me it’s like a belief system.”

Cooke’s work, which has earned numerous awards and has been worn by models during New York fashion shows, has been popular enough that she could have easily manufactured it to sell through major department stores, yet she eschewed going mainstream. Today, Cooke works with a select handful of artists who help her fabricate her new designs, which you can’t buy directly online — Cooke doesn’t have a website. Those who know make the pilgrimage to her store, six miles north of the Walters Art Museum. “I have lots of things I have not finished yet, and pieces of jewelry I still want to do,” she told me. “Now the trick is staying around long enough.”

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