



PRECIOUS GROTESQUES The Jewels of William Harper

Les Enluminures New York

23 E 73rd St
Penthouse
New York, NY 1002

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“Two themes emerge in the works selected for the exhibition. One group of objects is distinctly medieval in inspiration: saints and their reliquaries. The other group of objects consists of tributes to artists he admires: Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns and Edgar Munch, and Joseph Cornell.”

Les Enluminures is honored to host an exhibition of twenty of William Harper’s artworks – “precious grotesqueries” he calls them. Yes, “artworks.” They are far more than jewelry. He himself says: “I have always believed that jewelry can be about something, have content, be more substantive than mere ornament. In other words, exist as Art.”

So, what is the art of William Harper about? Having worked as a practicing artist since the mid-1960s, William Harper (b. 1944) has an extensive corpus that defies simple definition. His objects combine the precious with the utilitarian, the natural with the industrial world, the medieval era with modern times. They display a deep personal immersion in art history, yet they are by no means dryly academic or remotely historicizing. They are vivid fantasies, adventures into hidden realms, autobiographical reveries, homages to artistic heroes. Like the grotesques in the margins of medieval manuscripts they are often strange and mysterious, yet comic and pleasing. Vibrant colors are ubiquitous, for William Harper is a supremely talented enameller. Numerous group and solo exhibitions, as well as countless awards and prizes, attest to the esteem with which William Harper’s work is now held. Signature pieces can be found in major museums in North America and abroad, including the Met, LACMA, the MFA in Boston, Cleveland Museum of Art, The Cooper Hewitt Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Schmuckmuseum in Pforzheim, and many others.

Two themes emerge in the works selected for the exhibition. One group of objects is distinctly medieval in inspiration: saints and their reliquaries. The cover image, a brooch of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony as the Artist* (1986) shows the desert saint with one eye, holding a book in the form of a mirror, wearing a halo composed of a bone, his hand and feet made up of teeth. Like Anthony, William Harper works with but one eye due to operations following detached retinas. The beautifully complex cloisonné enamel is a tribute to his immense talent. Some saints lie in their own caskets. The brooch of Archangel Michael (1996, another self-portrait) nestles in a box with wood, leather, nails, bottle caps, buttons, and other found objects.

He's visible through the openwork lid. The other group of objects consists of tributes to artists he admires: Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns and Edgar Munch, and Joseph Cornell. William Harper has been called the "master of the box," and the reliquaries and casks pay obvious homage to Cornell. Ever the colorist, William Harper takes Twombly's 1989 *Petals of Fire* to create his own exercise of petals in smoldering red enamel on a large brooch.

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About Les Enluminures:

Founded in 1991, with galleries in Paris, Chicago, and New York, Les Enluminures is an internationally recognized leader in the field of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, miniatures, rings and jewellery. Its Founder and President, Sandra Hindman, is Professor Emerita of Art History at Northwestern University. She has published dozens of academic books and articles on medieval manuscripts, early printing, the history of collecting, and historic jewellery. In 2023, the French Republic named Sandra Hindman Chevalière de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters).

Les Enluminures is well-known for the level of its scholarship but also for the diversity, high quality, and provenance of the works it offers for sale. The gallery has forged long-standing relationships with major museums and prestigious private collections throughout the world. Among its institutional clients are the Musée du Louvre, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Library and others. The gallery exhibits at many international art fairs including TEFAF Maastricht, Frieze Seoul, the Winter Show and EXPO Chicago (2024).

Please contact us for high resolution images and descriptions of the featured work of art.

PRESS CONTACT: info@lesenluminures.com

William Harper
"The Temptation of Saint Anthony" | 1986

"My metaphorical Self-Portraits first materialized in 1986 with The Temptation of Saint Anthony as the Artist. Fully figurative, their faces always possessed but a single eye, usually in the center of the forehead. In 1990, both of my retinas simultaneously detached. After seven surgeries and laser treatments, I have no vision whatsoever in my left eye, and somewhat limited peripheral vision in my right eye." [W.H.]



Photo credit: Steven DeVilbiss

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver, sterling silver, 14 and 24 kt. gold, aluminum, mirror, opal, tourmaline, bone, pearls, tooth
7 x 2.5 x 75 in.

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William Harper
"Cy's Petals of Fire" | 1995

Based on Cy Twombly's painting *Petals of Fire* on 1989, this is one of a series of jewels that pay tribute to that artist. The combination of gemstone, smoldering red enamel, and high carat gold in a swirling design is dazzling.



Photo credit: Steven DeVilbiss

Brooch
**God cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver 18, 22 and 24 kt. Gold,
sterling silver, red coral tourmaline**
6 x 6.1 in.

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William Harper
"Pages of Saints Volume II" | 1996-1998

One of two volumes, this one starting with 'N' for Nicodemus and ending with 'Z' for Zeno, and including Veronica, this impressive work unfolds like an accordion and is contained in a carrying case which itself displays religious imagery. "These pieces are about religion. They are not intended to be religious jewelry, nor are they anti-religious What makes a saint, who is a savage." [W.H.]



Photo credit: Jenny Gorman

Mixed media paint and collage on board; wood, silk; steel; plastic;
192 x 36 x 32 in.

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William Harper
"Atlantis Jewel" inside "Atlantis Cask II" | 1999

Indebted to Joseph Cornell but also to medieval reliquaries, William Harper's boxes (he calls them "casks" or "treasure boxes") are containers for his jewels (or sometimes saints). He originally conceived them as remnants from the lost city of Atlantis, where the official religion was ART. On the outside they bristle with nails, wire, keys, and miscellaneous findings. They invert both Cornell's boxes, which are self contained, and medieval reliquaries, where the precious materials are on the outside.



Photo credit: Jenny Gorman

Cask
Wood, leather; specimen butterfly; mixed media metals; glass; plastic; bone
11 x 11 x 6 in.

Brooch
14, 18, 22 and 24 kt. gold
5.5 x 3 in.

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William Harper
"Beads for Morgan Le Fay" | 2004-2018

"Over the course of my 50-year career, I have created many different strands of beads, usually cloisonné enamel, high karat gold, but also other organic materials. Each strand would start as a single bead, to me each was similar to a short musical phrase." Traditionally, beads are often amulets and talismans, and William Harper also has this in mind for his strands of beads. He says about amulets and talismans: "... at what point does the hope for supernatural protection stop and the desire for individual adornment begin." [W.H.]



Photo credit: Steven DeVilbiss

Necklace
Gold, cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver, 18,
22 and 24 kt. Gold; pearl
9 x 6 .75 in.

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