

# Harriet Ford As Silversmith

By: Jennifer C. Watson

Harriet Ford (1859-1938) was a Canadian painter of portraits and landscapes, a muralist, a lecturer and writer, and, to lesser degrees, a poster -and stained glass designer, and a painter of china. She was also a jewelry designer and maker in silver as early as 1908-12. Yet, surprisingly little is known about her work in silver. Her grand niece, Janet McArthur, retained a collection of pieces, most of them on view at the Art Gallery of Hamilton some time ago.<sup>1</sup>

The McArthur collection comprises a parure consisting of chain link necklace, brooch, pendant pin and earrings set with pearl, mother-of-pearl and rhodochrosite (Fig. 1). Two belt buckles and a matching earrings set with malachite and rhodochrosite, respectively (Fig. 2); plus two brooches and a pendant set with turquoise, two of them in low-karat gold (Fig. 3). Steven A. Knight, who identified the stones and cleaned the jewelry prior to exhibition, made some interesting observations, particularly relevant when there is little first-hand information.<sup>2</sup> (Ford's family has only a few photographs; no letters survive and her library, which is apparently at York University, is not indexed as such.)<sup>3</sup> Since Ford presumably began working with silver, progressing to the more expensive gold, the two gold pieces must be later in date, which is confirmed by her craftsmanship. We assume the relatively simple belt buckles date earlier than the parure; they show evidence of being burned in the creative process. The turquoise-and-silver brooch is probably also late. More an artist than a jeweler, Ford must have chosen the stone deliberately for its imperfec-

tions. None of the pieces is hallmarked; none is signed.

However, they are not the only pieces known, as the following newspaper excerpt from 1912 reveals: 'Miss Ford is . . . a craftsman (or should it be craftswoman?) and one table of her studio is strewn with the tools and materials for making jewelry. These silver chains with quaintly formed links, the pendants and rings with malachite or turquoise matrix, are all made after the artist-craftsman's own designs, and so are the queer little coffee spoons and soup spoons with round instead of oval bowls.'<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, in light of the above, a second newspaper notice from as late as 1920 states, 'Miss Harriet Ford has returned from England . . . Those who knew Miss Ford in the old days will recall . . . Her hand-wrought jewelry and quaint setting of *Canadian semi-precious stones* [italics mine] were eagerly sought and bought as

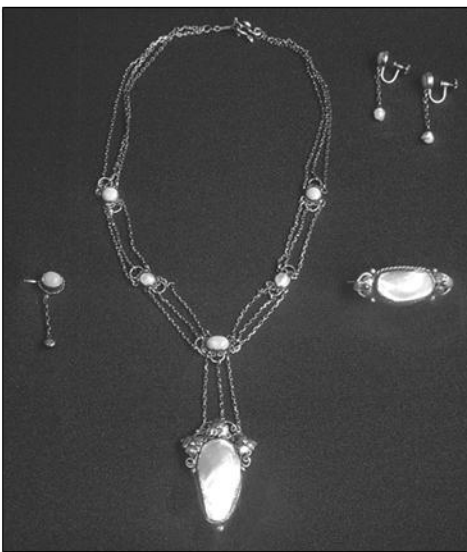


Fig. 1. Parure, c. 1908-12. Silver set with pearl, mother-of-pearl and rhodochrosite. McArthur collection.



Fig. 2. Belt Buckles c.1908-12. Silver set with rhodochrosite, length: 14.5 cm. McArthur-Connidis collection.



Fig. 3. Silver pendant set with turquoise. 3 cm. McArthur collection

<sup>1</sup>Harriet Ford, The Collectors Series no. 2, 18 January-1 April 2001 (extended to 15 April).

<sup>2</sup>Interview, Jewelry Judge, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 May 2001.

<sup>3</sup>Mary F. Williamson, Scott Library, York University, in conversation 11 September 1995.

<sup>4</sup>M.L.A.F., 'Annual Canadian Art Club,' *The Toronto Daily Star*, 27 January 1912, p. 23. I would like to thank Charles C. Hill of the National Gallery of Canada for bringing my attention to the two newspaper articles from 1908 and 1912.

<sup>5</sup>'In the Local Art World Its News and Gossip,' *The Toronto Daily Star*, 30 October 1920.

<sup>6</sup>M.L.A.F., 'Art Notes,' *The Toronto Daily Star*, 20 January 1908, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>I found Vivienne Becker, *Antique and Twentieth Century Jewellery: A Guide for Collectors*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colchester, Essex: N.A.G. Press, 1987) particularly useful; also H[enry] Wilson, *Silverwork and Jewellery*, rev. ed. (London: Pitman, and New York: Taplinger, 1978) for the creative process.

<sup>8</sup>To the author, [September 2000].

All photos by Robert McNair, courtesy of Art Gallery of Hamilton.

soon as exhibited.<sup>5</sup>

The 1912 newspaper describes Ford's new studio on Irwin Avenue, Toronto. But we know from yet another article of 1908 that she made jewelry earlier at her studio in England: 'The jeweler's art is claiming all the attention of Miss Harriet Ford in her studio at Great Marlow, near London. Examples of Miss Ford's hand-made jewelry have been shown several times in Toronto at the exhibitions of applied art with great success . . .'<sup>6</sup> Ford lived in Great Marlow 1899-1910; from 1911 until at least 1914 she lived in Toronto. We can surely conclude she learned jewelry design in England as part of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Typical of this Movement—evident in Ford's work—was the use of silver as opposed to gold; cabochons; turquoise especially when streaked with brown matrix; mother of pearl, baroque and river pearls, frequently as drops or pendants; and collet settings. Necklaces were a favorite form, with loops or festoons of chains; also belt buckles. The leaf motif was prevalent and used distinctively by jewelers, as we see in Ford's brooch and necklace (Fig. 1). Moreover, craftsmen rarely signed their jewels. Unfortunately, the hand-made aspect was a strength and a weakness, for Arts and Crafts jewelry was expensive to produce and failed to appeal to the general buying public.<sup>7</sup>

Now, where did Ford learn this new skill? In 1908-12 she was some fifty years old. Well-known names like C.R. Ashbee, who set up the Guild and School of Handicraft in London, Arthur Gasquin and Archibald Knox, who designed for Liberty, come to mind, but there is no confirmation. We at least know from her grand-niece Sydney Edwards that Ford 'was a friend of many artists in Britain before and after World War One. Among them was the skilled engraver and calligrapher, Eric Gill.'<sup>8</sup> As well, her long-time companion, Edith Hayes, was an English painter and wood engraver. Judging by the pieces in the McArthur collection, Knight believes Ford probably had little formal training.

It would be interesting to hear from readers if the rings, coffee and soup spoons, and other jewelry by her which were bought at exhibition remain in Toronto collections. Since Ford clearly made jewelry in England, more might also be discovered there.

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