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Suggested citation:

Vickerson, Ken (2008) Donald A. Stuart - Doors from the Past. *Metalsmith*, 28 (1). p. 58. ISSN 0270 1146 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/434/>

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Donald A. Stuart - Doors From the Past

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The following article originally appeared in the publication [Metalsmith](#).

MLA Citation:

Vickerson, Ken. "Donald A. Stuart - Doors from the Past." *Metalsmith* 28.1 (2008): 58–58. Print.

REVIEWS

"DONALD A. STUART - DOORS FROM THE PAST"

ZILBERSCHMUCK, TORONTO, CANADA

FEBRUARY 27–MARCH 24, 2007

by KEN VICKERSON

With this solo exhibition, billed as "an eclectic showing of jewellery inspired by ancient civilizations...and the major Western art movements...", Don Stuart has a lot cut out for himself. Though one might question Stuart's aesthetic considerations, one must respect his mastery of the goldsmith's art. There are 22 major works of jewellery present, most of which were produced in the two months prior to the exhibition. There is plenty here for the professional goldsmith, the art historian, the collector, or the casual observer to appreciate.

One of the simpler and more pleasing works was the first, titled *Ur* necklace, which takes its inspiration from ancient Mesopotamian jewelry, employing embossed gold leaves and colored stone drops on a gold cable. This is classical goldsmithing at its best: a compliment to the wearer, a tribute to the past, and, as with all his work, cleverly constructed and immaculately finished.

Three fibulas dominate one case, taking the traditional safety pin from the Classical world to the present day. These fibulas speak of Stuart's love of travel and the goldsmith's corvine tendencies to collect bits and pieces of the world in order to invest their work with the personal significance of memory. Pebbles from Collingwood, Ontario, and the Stikine River, which winds through Alaska and British Columbia, and inlays of gold ore, ebony, and opal adorn this trio, and are displayed alongside an ancient Roman fibula from Stuart's personal collection. These works acknowledge geography as well as history.

Stopping briefly in the medieval world, Stuart salutes the Celts with a penannular brooch and torc, its large terminals are encrusted in the type of stone inlay Stuart is famous for. Concealed within the terminals are recessed rare earth magnets which act as the clasp, a device evident in a number of these works. Another appealing jewel is a small circular brooch titled *Canadian Gothic*. Maple leaves fabricated from various colors of 18k gold encircle the brooch, and a variety of Canadian gemstones reinforce the hues one would see on a walk through the woods in the fall.

The Renaissance and Elizabethan eras are represented by works that focus largely on pearls, including a dove stickpin that employs a large baroque pearl for a wing, much in the style of *The Canning Jewel*. Chatelaines stand in for the Baroque, and a truly over-the-top heart-themed necklace refers to the end of Victoria's reign. The most successful of these works is an interpretation of the Whitby jet jewelry. Stuart's *Victorian Lace Necklace* is made of lozenge-shaped black onyx beads and inlays of gold ore and is studded with diamonds; this work is as bold and commanding of attention as its historical models.

Stuart moves through the Art Nouveau and the Art Deco periods, which seem natural sources of inspiration. A very imposing work titled simply *Deco Bracelet* is full-on Stuart. Constructed of 18k gold in a geometric style and thoroughly inlaid with a dozen different types of precious stone, exotic woods, shell, mokumé gané, and a large piece of meteorite; like a sock on the jaw, it refuses to be ignored. The final piece, the *Orbit Necklace*, pays homage to the space race of the 1950s, featuring various inlaid stone discs that float on a series of draped stainless steel cables and a most intriguing clasp.

The work is sparsely displayed alongside black-and-white photos of the historical works that were the source material. This is a good thing, as many of the works are dense, in the way *Death by Chocolate* is. This exceptionally ambitious project has been carried off with seeming ease and clarity of vision.

KEN VICKERSON is an associate professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design with a goldsmithing practice in Toronto.



Collingwood Fibula, Stikine Fibula and Galaxy Fibula, 2007
14k gold, pebbles, various inlays
height 2 3/8-3 1/8"

Victorian Lace Necklace, 2007
18k and 14k gold, onyx, diamonds, inlays of gold ore
9 1/4 x 6 1/4"

Orbit Necklac, 2007
18k and 14k gold, stainless steel cable, diamonds, labradorite, onyx and carnelian beads, various inlays (lapis lazuli, gold ore, onyx, malachite, graphic rock).
9 x 9"

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