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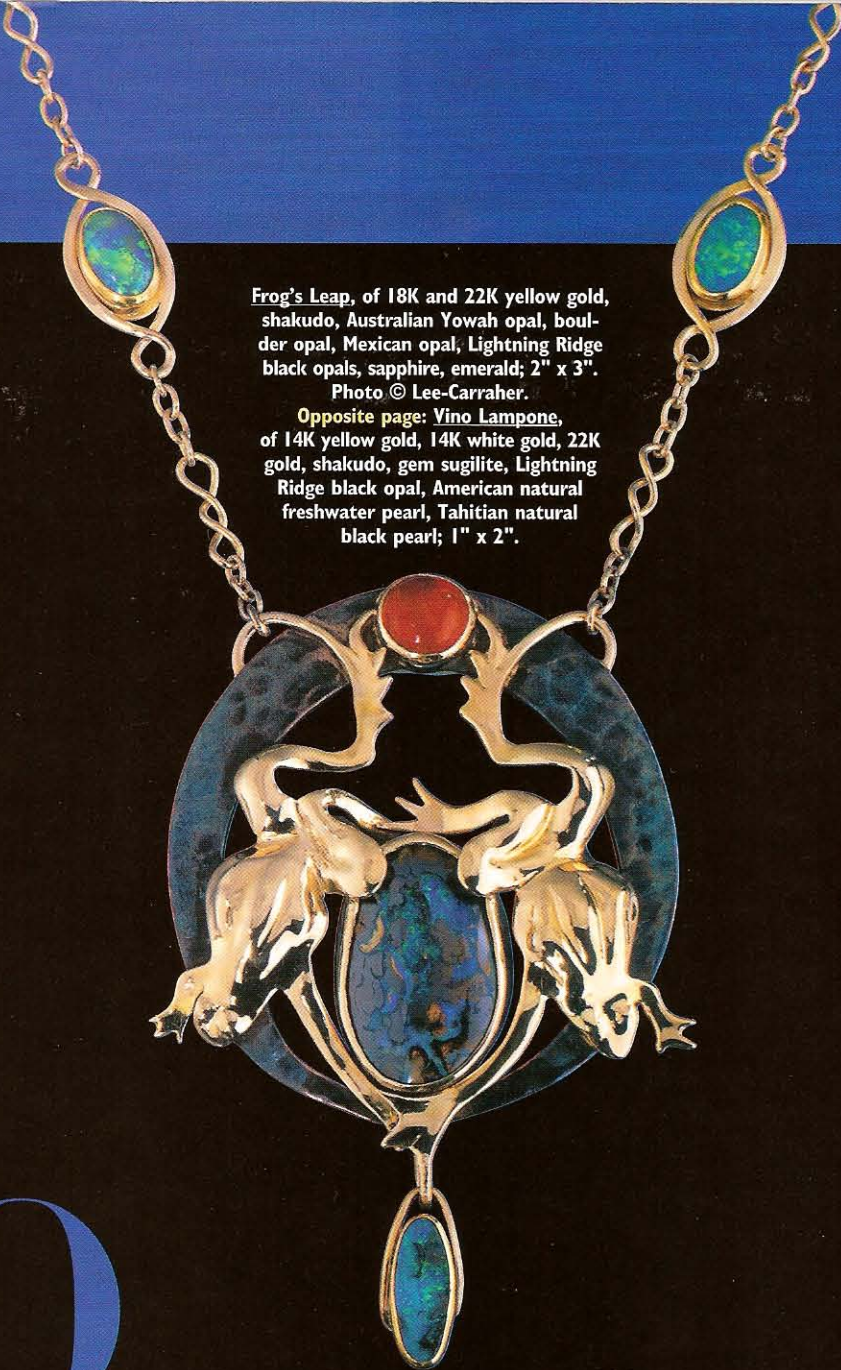




THINGS OF BEAUTY

**Nature inspires
elegant forms
for designer
Karen Olsen Ramsey**

By Annie Osburn



Frog's Leap, of 18K and 22K yellow gold, shakudo, Australian Yowah opal, boulder opal, Mexican opal, Lightning Ridge black opals, sapphire, emerald; 2" x 3".
Photo © Lee-Carraher.

Opposite page: Vito Lampone, of 14K yellow gold, 14K white gold, 22K gold, shakudo, gem sugilite, Lightning Ridge black opal, American natural freshwater pearl, Tahitian natural black pearl; 1" x 2".

O

One of the most enjoyable aspects of writing about a jewelry designer is following the artist into the studio, embracing how her unique style permeates her daily environment — and vice versa, discovering how the artist's creative space is reflected in the work that is produced there. Although when I interviewed artist Karen Olsen Ramsey, I was unable to visit her in person, I was treated to a virtual visit that was nearly as good.

"If our interview had been in person," she wrote to me, "I would have shown you the places that I am including photos of, and I would have invited you to a sumptuous lunch made from many of my garden vegetables and eaten on our deck overlooking Woodpecker Ravine. So, when you open the virtual tour file, imagine that you are here and I am showing you my digs."



Bosco en Luce, of 14K yellow gold, 14K white gold, 22K gold, shakudo, gem rhodocrosite, Mexican fire opal, ruby, American natural freshwater pearl; 1 1/4" x 2 1/4"
Reverse side shown below.



I can't remember when I had a warmer welcome or a more sumptuous lunch — at least one that only occurred in my vivid imagination!

At home in Grass Valley, California, Olsen Ramsey's design repertoire is a virtual well of flora and fauna. Her images convey an explosion of naturelike arms, hands, and fingers that embrace her chosen stones. In layers of multi-colored metals, I spy leaves of ivy and autumn maples. Hand-fabricated chains spin twisted detail like the tendrils of my daughter's hair. More abstract forms emulate segments of Louis Comfort Tiffany's stained glass lamps, Art Nouveau Paris Metro entrances, moth wings, or the angles of cricket legs. Elaborate handmade gold clasps appear like fine lines of honey drizzled from a pin-narrow spout. A chrysalis of opals and gold encase muted chrysacolla and rhodocrosite — ethereal colors in pendants that drip pearls, emeralds, and sapphires.

MAGIC WORKER.

All of this bounty springs forth from a wood-shingled studio in a thicket of black oaks, live oaks, pines, and poppies. Magical paths and stone steps lead to a burst of wisteria, rock art formations created by Olsen Ramsey, and flagstone landings. Inside the artist's studio, recycled leaded glass and diamond-paned windows transport the space to earlier times.

Nestled among the trees, her studio is a virtual treasure trove of natural forms in progress. She admits that daily, she can't wait to get to her studio. "It's never hard to get me there," she says, "I get my daughter to school and try to be in the studio by 9 a.m. I try to commit myself to a certain number of hours. I'm in my studio five days a week, six-to-seven hours a day. It's hard to pull me away."

Olsen Ramsey's background as a woodcarver and sculptor, along with the influence of her husband, Ron Ramsey, a professional woodcarver and sculptor, adds to her natural flair for bas relief detail. "My husband taught me his techniques and he has had quite a bit of influence on my designs. He does very high relief carved doors and mantels," she says.

Hailing from the Chicago suburbs, Olsen Ramsey studied art at the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. Burnout and disillusionment with the art department nudged her toward jewelry classes and metalsmithing, although it would be 15 years until she would return to the craft and attend the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in San Francisco, in 1998. Still working closely with her husband's woodcarving business, Olsen Ramsey began building a small jewelry studio of her own in 1999.

"I waited until my daughters were old enough for me to go back to school," Olsen Ramsey reflects. "I think I knew when I was five years old that I would be making jewelry. Every little step I took, I knew that I would be making jewelry in my own studio one day."

In the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, Grass Valley is known for its alternative health community, progressive schools, and many artists and theatre professionals — the perfect landscape for a jewelry designer and a wood carver. Add to that a little history with one legend holding that millions of dollars of gold still lays buried beneath Grass Valley, undiscovered by gold rush miners in 1849.

"I want the whole piece to work together

"I began developing my designs shortly before I started at Revere. But it wasn't until the end of 2002 that I dedicated a year to developing a collection. At Revere, I took all of the basic fabrication classes, setting, casting, platinum, and gemology courses. But they didn't offer repoussé," says Olsen Ramsey. "I use the repoussé and chasing techniques that I learned when I was in college. I also added shakudo as I developed my designs and wanted a contrasting metal behind my main images." Shakudo is an ancient Japanese alloy of gold and copper, valued for its beautiful patina and lovely contrast to gold. Olsen Ramsey alloys her own shakudo, melting the copper and gold together and pouring them into an ingot, which she then rolls into sheet.

"I like the way copper changes color as it oxidizes, but I wanted a different color behind my gold," she says. "I'm also interested in Japanese art- and metalwork. When I saw the metal shakudo and found out it was mostly copper, I realized that I was doing a lot of the same oxidizing as copper, but shakudo has a gold content that makes the piece feel more precious."

Since developing her first major collection, Olsen Ramsey currently sells her work independently with success, although selling in galleries isn't out of the question. The price range for her necklaces and pendants is \$2,000 and up. She works in limited editions of 12, with other pieces being one-of-a-kind.

"My favorites are pendants," she says. "I love having a concept where I'll start with a bird, a butterfly, or a bug. Choosing the appropriate stone combination is my favorite phase of the design process. After my design is completed on paper, I pull out my collection of stones and start the search. Often I have a general idea of the central stone color that I want to use in the piece. Usually I'll cut the main stone from rough that I select during my trips to Tucson. I look for high-quality stones that have character and beauty, and that help convey the feeling of the designed piece. I usually agonize over the choice of accent stones and pearls. I feel that when a combination is right, it will sing to me, and I am not satisfied with my choices until I see a glorious harmony of shape, color, and size."

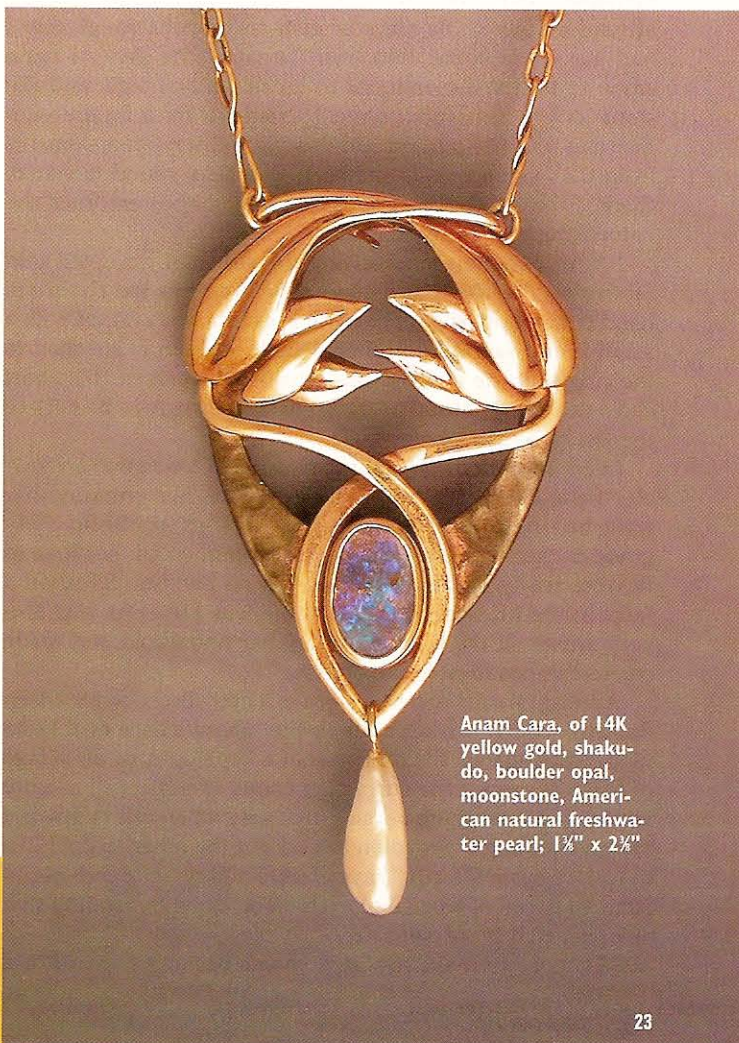
Function and craftsmanship are important to Olsen Ramsey, and she'll often make a prototype to work out the fabrication process and check the wearability before executing the final piece. "I want my work to be passed on to future generations, so the extra time involved in careful planning, fitting, and finishing is as important to me as appealing design."

That attention to detail carries through to details that many observers may never see — small things that work to make each piece a personal treasure, of intimate importance to its wearer. "The backs of my designs always have some element that is reflective of the front. I want the whole piece to work together and move from one area to the next," says Olsen Ramsey. This element could be a simple stone added to the back to make sure the piece remains beautiful and appealing even if it were to flip to the reverse. But, "Mostly, the designing of the back side is a personal design meant for the wearer alone. She may share it, if she chooses, but she may never reveal it to anyone, either. One woman told me, 'I love my little secret! When I wear my necklace, I smile in the knowing that I have something exquisite and precious touch-

and move from one area to the next,"



Athar Imbas, of 18K yellow gold, 22K gold, shakudo, Holly Blue chalcedony, Lightning Ridge black opals, Mexican fire opal, diamond, American natural abalone pearl; 2 1/4" x 3 1/2"



Anam Cara, of 14K yellow gold, shakudo, boulder opal, moonstone, American natural freshwater pearl; 1 1/2" x 2 1/2"

ing my skin, so close to my heart, that no one knows about but me.' When I am commissioned to make a piece, I will show the client the design for the front, but I never show the back until it is presented as a completed piece. I also design something beautiful on the backs of ring shanks, visible only when the wearer opens his or her palm." In the necklace *Bosco en Luce*, for example, the back reveals a dragonlike power and fire that belies the cool hues and calm posture of the face.

STONE CHOICES.

Olsen Ramsey does most of her buying at the Tucson gem and mineral shows. She buys a lot of rough stone and cuts her own. "I don't really have the option to use pre-cut stones. I usually end up with something that's not available. I buy a lot of rough due to how my designs develop in the moment. I don't have the luxury of waiting for the show. Even if I did, I probably wouldn't find the right stone!"

"Opals are my favorites. They're mysterious. There is so much variety and they speak to a lot of the designs that I work with, such as the luminous qualities of a bug. Opals are actually the only cut stones that I tend to buy, although I often recut them to the shape I need. My cutting skills I learned on my own. Working with wood has helped me to see things in three dimensions. You need to see things in the round. I want my designs to literally fit on a person's body, to hug the body."

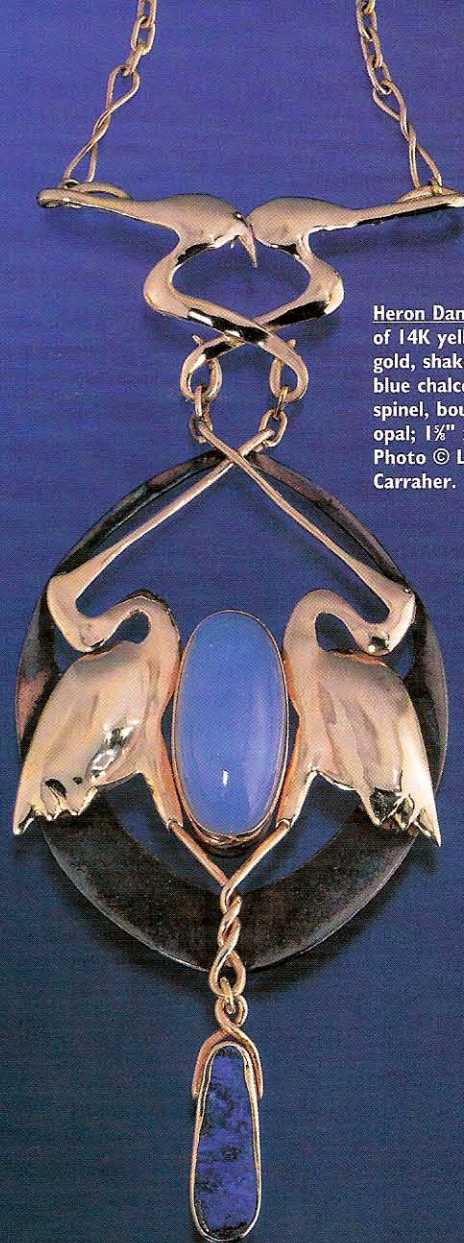
The names of Olsen Ramsey's jewelry pieces derive from Gaelic lore and Italian. In *Ailean Muir* (Blue Sea), for example, Olsen Ramsey combines 18-karat yellow and white gold and shakudo to create layers of metal in varying colors. Together with gem chrysocolla, Lightning Ridge opal, tanzanite, sapphire, and American natural freshwater pearl, this pendant demonstrates her breadth of ability. "I designed this necklace around an incredible piece of gem chrysocolla rough that I had just come home with from Tucson," she says. "I cut a stone to utilize the material to its best advantage, and the stone looked like water to me. It cried out for a fluid design that had a feel of motion. On this piece, I wrapped elements from the front across to the back, and set a round tanzanite there. Fabricated and repousseed leaf shapes embrace the natural freshwater pearl."

"After polishing and setting the stones, I designed and fabricated the chain and clasp. The beads in the chain are hand cut and polished. The clasp is granulated and set with a small round sapphire. A short length of chain is attached to the ring that the clasp hooks into. At the end of this short chain is a small natural pearl, set to secretly caress the neck of the wearer as she moves."

In addition to major influences such as renowned art-jeweler René Lalique, Olsen Ramsey credits her grandmother with having great impact on her design aesthetic. "My grandmother was one of my greatest influences; her love of flowers really made an impression on me. She lived on a farm in the Midwest; her last name was Lily. She was also very artistic in the way she set up her household and made creative things from found objects."

Adding enamel to her designs is a new direction for Olsen Ramsey, which further adds to the magnificence of a Luna moth wing against the brilliance of a large opal, or the image of feathers among the surprising colors of insects. "I usually have two pieces going at once, that way when one is down, I have something I can go on to and put the other aside. I like to work back and forth," says Olsen Ramsey, who puts about 20 to 40 hours of work into each piece, notwithstanding that all of her chains are handmade.

"I choose to make my own chains because the feel of a



Heron Dance, of 14K yellow gold, shakudo, blue chalcedony, spinel, boulder opal; 1 1/2" x 4". Photo © Lee-Carraher.

**"I love having
a concept
where I'll
start with a bird,
a butterfly, or a bug."**

handmade chain carries on the intention of my pieces being entirely handmade. Making my own chains is a very repetitive process. It's a very meditative process that really pulls me right into my bench. The phone can ring and I don't hear it. It doesn't matter what's on the CD player. The world is right at my torch tip." ♦

Karen Olsen Ramsey is based in Grass Valley, California, and may be contacted by e-mail at karen@artjeweler.com, or through her Web site at www.artjeweler.com. Annie Osburn is a New York-based freelance writer. A frequent contributor to *Lapidary Journal*, she writes regularly for national magazines on the arts, travel, and health.