

SPYGLASS

ALISTAIR McALPINE

continues his journeys of the eye with a visit to the workshop of Susan Cross, 'an armourer in gold and silver'

AT a dinner party when I was a small boy, a middle-aged woman fixed me with her eye. 'Little boy, what are your hobbies?' she boomed. 'Collecting armour,' I replied. 'How boring' was her retort, which revealed her to be, in my estimation, a woman of abnormal ignorance as well as abnormal rudeness. Clearly she had never encountered the work of the Negroli, who produced armour as close to art as it was possible to get.

In those days, although I dreamed of Negroli pieces, I contented myself with collecting Oriental armour and fragments of chain-mail, bought for shillings in the local junk shops. What I did not know at the time was that, until after the First World War, the highest price ever paid for a work of art at auction was for a suit of armour.

No one who cares for armour could resist the jewellery of Susan Cross: she is, in effect, an armourer in gold and silver. Her jewellery, made of small rings in precious metals, soldered together, has the appearance of armour in miniature, combining both ancient and modern. There is a touch of medieval Islam about the beads that make up her necklaces, yet they look and feel modern and undeniably European. A neckpiece in worked gold (*right*) looks almost as if it could have come from around the neck of an Ashanti king.

As a child, Miss Cross enjoyed sewing, encouraged by her mother, who made children's clothes and toys. Crochet—a more tangible link with chain-mail and her type of jewellery, also featured in her childhood: her maternal grandmother was 'always crocheting wonderful big edgings for tablecloths and lacy cotton gloves'.

Miss Cross learned the art of patience as she learned to sew. This was to be her greatest asset as a jeweller, as some pieces take months of repetitive, time-consuming construction. 'I do labour in certain things to get them just as they should be,' she says. 'I would undo a whole section if it wasn't right.'

Born in Herefordshire in 1964, Miss Cross studied design at Herefordshire College of Art and Middlesex Polytechnic before opening a workshop in London in 1986 and one in Edinburgh in 1989. She now teaches jewellery design at Edinburgh College of Art. She has exhibited frequently in Britain, Europe and America, has won many awards, and her work is represented in public collections, including those of the V&A.

What attracted her to jewellery, she says, was 'a love of metal and small-scale working'. Her influences include jeweller Jacqueline Mila ('a brilliant craftswoman, always pushing jewellery to new boundaries with inventive techniques') and fashion designers Fortuny and Paco Rabanne. 'I

am always moving my work forward and developing it,' she says. 'Like most serious artists, I try continually to better the last piece, so it's a constant journey.'

Over the years, she has gradually increased her use of gold, either 18ct or 22ct. 'I have also become interested in making larger pieces, neckpieces and necklaces,' she says, 'and started to explore the techniques used in textiles. My work has shifted towards becoming more abstract.'

Susan Cross's work is available from the Flow Gallery in London (020-7243 0782) and the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh (0131-558 1200), both of which can also take orders.

Photograph: Ian Atkinson, courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.



Inspired by chain-mail or crochet? An 18ct gold neckpiece by Susan Cross, 1997