

## The goldsmith Christa Lühtje A eulogy

One can recognize her by her kind, mischievously twinkling eyes and by the way she laughs. Christa Lühtje is a woman with a positive approach to life. She radiates a hearty warmth and youthful freshness, without any affectations.

She is open and personable, lively and reliable, caring, a wonderful person to talk to, a good friend and, for many, a good teacher.

The fact that she became a goldsmith—and one who can meanwhile look back on over forty years' experience in this profession—is due largely to the influence of her teacher Franz Rickert, under whom she studied at the Munich Academy in the sixties after serving her goldsmith apprenticeship in Hamburg. Rickert was at once a challenge and a guardian, and Christa Lühtje still reveres her former teacher as someone who helped her to come to terms with herself. The training given at the Munich Academy differed greatly from normal practice at that time. It moulded the mind. The history of art opened itself up to her like a hitherto unknown world. Christa Lühtje's first big journey abroad, in 1961, took her to Greece. But Egypt, in 1968, was more important. Jewellery had a lot to do with the origins of civilization, with the early cultures of the regions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean; the classical and the archaic existed side by side. Jewellery ennobled, symbolized the divine, possessed magical powers of protection, helped its wearers to cross the Acheron. After Greece came the Byzantine Empire, renowned for its great ornamental accomplishments to the glory of God and the saints. Although Christa Lühtje has never worked in enamel herself, she nevertheless recognized a kindred spirit in these early works of ornamental art. She for her part had learnt to use precious metals and stones economically for optimum effect. To this end, surfaces had to be smooth. Heavily scorched or thickly applied, wrinkly materials were not her thing. Like Rickert, she sought what was natural in whatever material she chose—and this chosen material was, from the very beginning, gold.

Towards the end of the sixties, European designers and makers of jewellery were going through a very bad patch, but this did not deter Christa Lühtje, for she had no wish to give up everything and start afresh. A brief excursion into the realm of plastics was all she allowed herself. The pieces which she submitted for a jewellery exhibition

# C.H.R.I.S.T.A LÜHTJE

in the Albrecht Dürer Year 1971 already manifested the quality she was striving to achieve: sheer clarity of line and form—gold combined with only a few semiprecious stones, either rock crystal or jade. Of extreme beauty and lightness, they expressed an optimum mechanical solution which was never in any way pretentious. Much was called in question at that time, but the thought of being purely experimental and nothing else, and running the risk of being banal as well, seemed unbearable to her.

A not insignificant turning point in her career was her participation in the Hamburg Christmas Fair in 1965. In the first place, she discovered the works of the ceramic artist Bontjes van Beek, who was to make a lasting impression on her; and then she suddenly found herself being measured against other participating goldsmiths, such as Wolfgang Tümpel and Herbert Zeitner, whose names were already legendary, and she was successful, too. The director of the Christmas Fair, Heinz Spielmann, otherwise famous as an art and architectural historian, was immediately attracted to her work, as were the many architects in Hamburg who still count among her loyal customers today. Her circle of customers—and, by the same token, recognition of her work – grew over the years. In 1967, she received the Prize of the Hamburg Senate, and in 1972 the Bavarian State Prize—one year after Ariana Giacchi, in a review in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, had described her as one of Germany's greatest post-war talents.

Christa Lühtje's life and work as a goldsmith during the two decades that followed were spent away from all the theoretical debates that had such a strong influence on jewellery design at that time. Like her teacher, Franz Rickert, she distrusted theory, especially when it outweighed practice. Because she was still working in gold, her opportunities of exhibiting in Munich had become fewer and fewer, but this was something she just had to accept

The eighties saw a gold revival among the Paduan goldsmiths—Giampaolo Babetto is one of the goldsmiths whose work she has been admiring ever since—and this was followed by a much less »restrained« attitude towards gold among her fellow goldsmiths in Germany, especially among the younger ones. Christa Lühtje is convinced that the classical goldsmith's art will never lose its significance—one just has to approach it with the utmost care.

It is not obvious in all her pieces, but from time to time we are able to recognize Christa Lühtje's actual teacher: nature. The apple trees in her grandparents' orchard

# C.H.R.I.S.T.A LÜHTJE

on the outskirts of Hamburg belong to the fond memories of her youth; today she tends her own garden with loving care. In her sketches and watercolours of leaves and blossoms she fathoms the mysteries of nature, studying forms and outlines, capturing the processes of wilting and withering. In their own small way, leaves and blossoms testify to the immense power of nature, and yet they themselves are unspectacular, transient. They contain the entire energy of the tree, and yet they live but for a short time. Christa Lühtje sees them as allegories which help her to understand and interpret the peculiarities of organic nature. In some of her pieces we can still make out the shape of a leaf, in others it has been turned into a geometrical ornament, like that of an Anatolian kelim.

Christa Lühtje's work is succinct but not laconic; it is reduced to essentials, though not without depth of feeling. Like an aphorism, it is able to put what it has to say in a nutshell. Its consistency moves and impresses us.

Outwardly, Christa Lühtje is a rational person, and not even her forty years in Bavaria have managed to change her North German ways. She loves the bright and sunny side of her life and work, but she is also familiar with the dark side of art and its dangers. The will alone can create nothing new of lasting value. The creative process demands one's whole person, one's whole life. The present forever demands the new, while the past acts as a corrective. Christa Lühtje sees herself as a goldsmith of her time, and hence of our time, too; as with all art forms, the goldsmith's art is passed on from generation to generation—ust like gestures or language.

RÜDIGER JOPPIEN