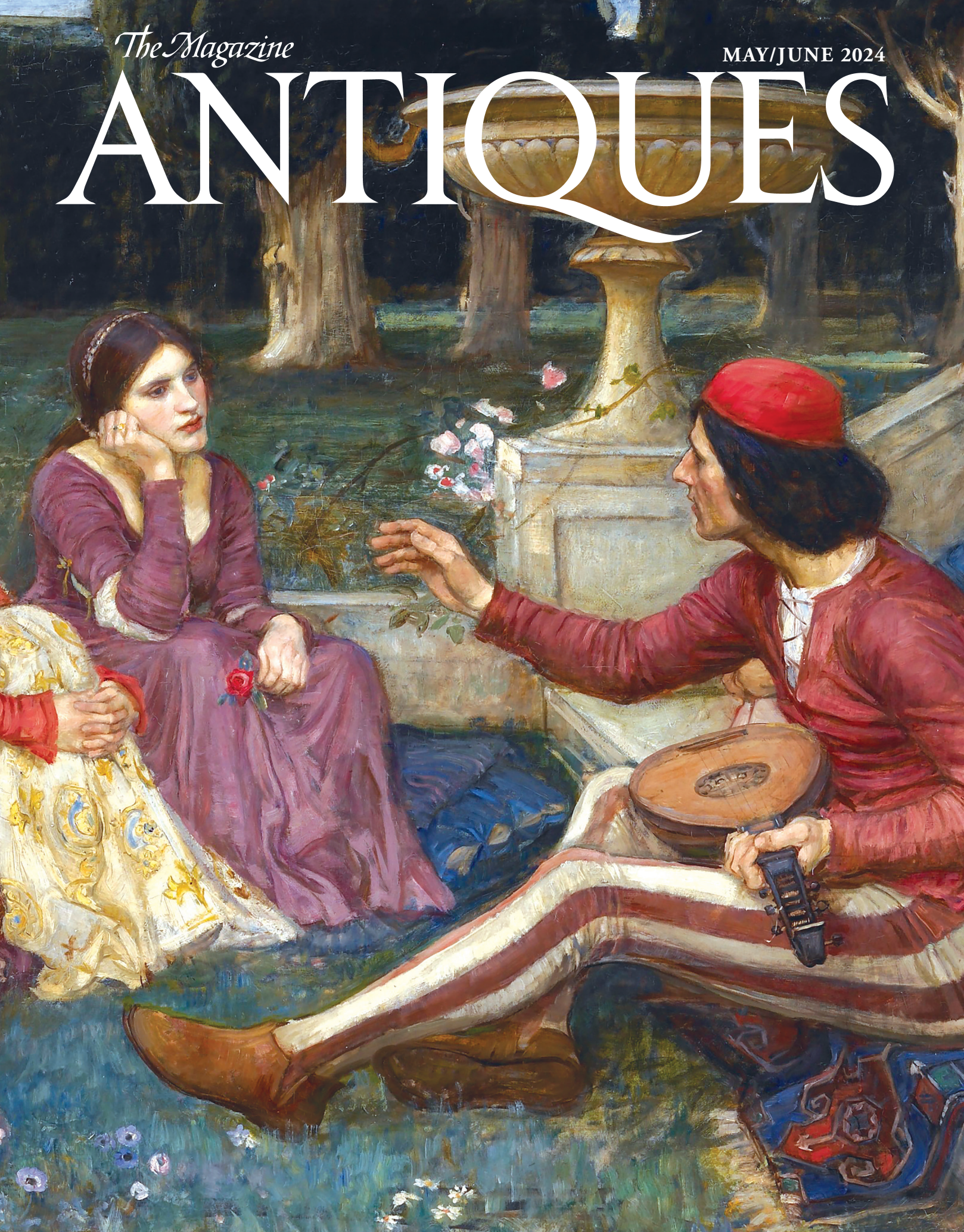


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# ANTIQUES





## Tempting Providence



THE RISD MUSEUM  
FLESHES OUT ITS  
JEWELRY COLLECTION  
WITH SMART  
ACQUISITIONS AND  
COMMISSIONS FROM  
CONTEMPORARY  
MAKERS THAT  
HEARKEN BACK TO  
RHODE ISLAND'S  
METALWORKING PAST

*Bee Wing Lace necklace  
by Luci Jockel (1991–), 2021.  
Honeybee wings, PVA glue.  
All objects illustrated are in  
the RISD Museum, Providence,  
Rhode Island. Museum  
purchase, gift of Joseph  
A. Chazan in honor of John  
W. Smith.*

**W**ith more than one hundred thousand objects from around the globe, the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD Museum) is a public-spirited museum with a strong teaching component. Yet, like many American museums, it has been slow to build its jewelry collection. Until now.

Associate curator of decorative arts and design Emily Banas is assessing the ornaments that are scattered among the museum's departments with an eye to meaningful expansion. She hopes that her efforts will enable the RISD Museum to join other institutions across the country that have begun to recognize the importance of this art form.

The school has long enjoyed a strong connection to the jeweler's art. Classes on jewelry and silverware design have been part of the curriculum since its founding in 1877. By 1903 a three-year course offered freehand drawing, modeling, designing, and other more complex metalsmithing tasks such as die cutting, as well as academic lessons on the history of ornament. The school's educational offerings followed the example of the South Kensington School of Art and Museum (today's Victoria and Albert Museum) in England, which trained students to work as designers, modelers, and manufacturers in American industry. Since Providence was home to a number of metal industries, the largest being the



Gorham Manufacturing Company, this was a welcome development.

One historic ornament that Banas recently added to the collection is a gold brooch with matching earrings that incorporate brilliant green beetle shells. Insects were frequently the subject of jewelry beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe and elsewhere, and beetles were of particular interest. The ancient Egyptians believed that the daily rising and setting of the sun was mirrored in the work of beetles, who rolled tiny balls of dung away for consumption or to use as repositories for their eggs. For

this reason, the beetle became a symbol of the eternal circle of life, and, by extension, a signifier of protection and good fortune that still survives in Egyptian ornaments, funerary art, and amulets. As budding naturalists and specimen collectors, and armchair students of ancient civilizations, Victorians saw to it that the beetle became one of the most popular insects to appear in jewelry, design, and fashion of that era.

Along with such thoughtful acquisitions, Banas has commissioned jewelry from several artists, mostly graduates of the school's department of jewelry and metalsmithing, to create original works informed by the museum's wide-ranging collections. The results are exhilarating, fascinating, and quite beautiful.

The wings of honeybees are the subject and substance of the *Bee Wing Lace* neckpiece made by Luci Jockel. The bees lived in hives on school property and many had died of natural causes during the 2019–2020 winter. Jockel used their wings to create a form of modern mourning jewelry that honors the lives of these tiny, overlooked creatures who do so much for humanity.

For inspiration, Jockel turned to examples of lace in the museum's collection, such as the delicate collars fashioned in Flanders or Italy that appear in Dutch portraits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jockel's completed necklace has a Federal flair with its elliptical shape and large bow, and uses only glue to create links between the bee wings. The incomprehensible delicacy of the neckpiece is a reminder that the bee population is a fragile one, struggling to survive in the face of pesticide use and climate change.

Another commission was for a necklace and matching pair of earrings by Valerie James. The ornaments are a meditation on and homage to the Providence silver industry and its talented engravers. Using the museum's highly regarded collection of Gorham silver, James created earrings shaped like the blades of Gorham fruit knives, and a scalloped necklace drawn from the many contours of

*Portrait of a Young Girl by Cornelis de Vos (1584–1667), c. 1633–1635. Oil on canvas, 47 ¾ by 32 inches. Gift of Manton B. Metcalf.*

Set of earrings and brooch, 1860–1899. Gold with Brazilian beetle shells. *Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund.*

Fruit knife from the Furber service, Gorham Manufacturing Company, 1879. Silver, gilt silver; length 6 ¾ inches. *Gorham Collection, gift of Textron Inc.*







*Standards (Compote/Entrée Dish) necklace and Standards (Fruit Knives) earrings by Valerie James (1994–), 2023, with (top right) detail of the necklace, showing maker's mark engraved in nineteenth-century style. Sterling silver, 24-karat gold foil; earrings 3 3/8 by 3/4 inch (each). Gift of Joseph A. Chazan.*

*Romantic Subjects necklace by Mallory Weston (1986–), 2023. Anodized titanium, leather, cotton. Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund.*

platters and trays produced by the company. The diamond flash of the bright-cut, hand-engraved decoration of the necklace, which was assembled from fragments of shiny metal and is further enlivened with the occasional gilded surface, acknowledges a clear debt to the past while remaining attractive for a modern audience.

A final commission brought unlikely materials together to scintillating effect. In preparation for a forthcoming exhibition on historic wallpapers at the museum, Banas invited Mallory Weston to interpret the vast and lavish prints that will be on display in a work of her own design. Weston creates large-scale wearable jewelry that combines lightweight, anodized titanium in vivid colors with textile techniques for securing those elements to a flexible substrate, such



as leather. During the pandemic, Weston created jewelry in the form of large leaves to acknowledge the popularity of houseplants as a means of coping with confinement during this stressful period. Finding similar inspiration in the lush and richly colored wallpapers earmarked for the exhibition, she selected images of flowers and leaves from the papers and recombined them into a new composition on anodized titanium in a colorful, flexible necklace.

Curators and artists, along with the author, are finding that introducing a bit of the old world to the new has yielded impressive results. Here's to future commissions!

