

Well-Worn Narratives: The Mia McEldowney Jewelry Collection

Mia McEldowney (1950–2013), an influential gallerist, curator, and arts leader, worked to advance the Northwest arts scene for more than three decades. Her bold vision for a strong arts community and her eclectic taste continue to influence the evolution of Northwest art.

She operated the admired and respected MIA Gallery in Seattle from 1984 to 1997, which often featured folk art and ethnographic works. McEldowney championed narrative art and its power to connect people through shared experiences. She was captivated by the rich textures, strong colors, and evidence of the maker's hand in folk art traditions.

McEldowney collected and wore studio art jewelry that she often purchased from her own gallery. Her long-time friend and former gallery director Meg Shiffler recalled, "There was never an issue of whether or not she could pull off a large piece of jewelry because at just 5 feet tall Mia had the kind of glowing spirit and commanding personality that would light up a room. People noticed what she wore and how it made her feel, and often the jewelry became a conversation-starter in social situations."

At Tacoma Art Museum, McEldowney brought increased attention to Northwest studio art jewelry. She curated the exhibition *Under the Influence: Northwest Jewelry and Ethnographic Objects* in 2000, and she supported major acquisitions of jewelry, including works by Sharon Boardway, Ron Ho, Micki Lippe, and Mary Lee Hu. She was also a key patron for the open storage jewelry cases in this gallery. Her bequest of 35 works of studio art jewelry memorializes her support of Northwest jewelry artists and her commitment to this form of artistic expression in the region.

This exhibition is organized by Tacoma Art Museum.

Biography

Mia McEldowney was born in Oklahoma City. She studied ceramics at the University of Colorado Boulder and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1972. After travel to Indonesia to study textiles, she moved to Seattle to study art history and anthropology at the University of Washington. She received a master of arts degree, and continued her studies in the museology program. She then taught fashion and textile history at Edmonds Community College.

In late 1984, McEldowney presented her first commercial gallery exhibition *Textiles from the Island of Sumba*, in a small space in Seattle's Queen Anne neighborhood. It was soon followed by her exhibitions of traditional bags by Native American women of the Columbia Plateau tribes and Haitian vodou flags. In May of 1985, she moved MIA Gallery to Pioneer Square, presenting up to 12 exhibitions every year. In addition to folk and ethnographic works, she featured more than 75 artists working in ceramics, jewelry, painting, and mixed media. Many of these artists lived and worked in the Northwest. In May 1997, she closed her gallery with the exhibition *So Long Salon*.

She continually invested her time and effort in improving the artist community. She was a founding board of trustee member of Artist Trust and would later serve as president. McEldowney was also a founding member of the Seattle Art Dealers Association. She served on the Craft Emergency Relief Fund and frequently was asked to be a juror for grant selection committees for the Visual Arts Councils of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana as well as the Flintridge Foundation. The Seattle Metals Guild honored her with their most prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. Artist Trust honored her with a Creative Catalyst Award in 2012.

The exhibition *Lessons from the Heart* at Vashon Island's VALISE Gallery in 2013 was her last exhibition she curated.