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A BRUSH WITH GREATNESS

The Extraordinary
Objets d'Art
of Daniel Brush

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HAWAII'S PRIMAL
PARADISE**

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BOUILLABAISSE**

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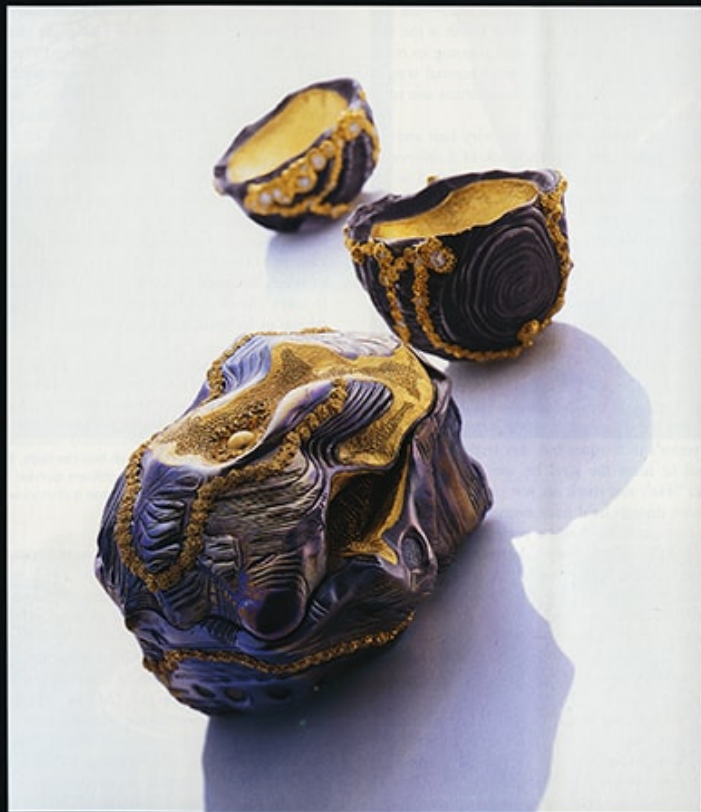
**ROADSTER RALLY:
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A Brush WITH Greatness



This steel and granulated gold box boasts one of the largest granulated gold domes in the world. To create it Daniel Brush had to fashion 78,000 granules of gold by hand and arrange them in geometric patterns over the dome's pure gold surface. The granules and gold background were then coated to

a uniform temperature of 1600 degrees Fahrenheit before being fired with a swift sweep of the torch. Opposite: Two boxes of carved steel and gold—the one in the background inlaid with diamonds, the other worked to bring out different colors in the steel—show an expressionist side of Brush's imagination.



Daniel Brush's compelling objets d'art reflect an utter mastery of archaic craft technique as well as an imagination that knows no earthly bounds.

By Marion Fasel and Penny Proddow. Photographs by Francesco Mosto.

Daniel

Brush

defies categorization—professionally and personally. Gain entrée to the New York loft of this intensely private man and you'll be greeted with the warmth and enthusiasm one usually reserves for close friends. Evince a lack of empathy with his artistry and doubtless you'll be shown the door. The jewelry, precious objects, and small sculptures he makes in gold, ivory, and steel—each a technical tour de force—are like the artist himself: not easily pigeonholed. And Brush is the first to admit it: "You generally don't say an artist is going to make a steel-and-diamond sculpture. It's not in your normal way of thinking. Jewelers use diamonds and sapphires; artists use marble and steel. Somehow I'm in between."

To illustrate his point, Brush, whose wild wiry hair and intense eyes framed by glasses give him the look of a disheveled scientist, brings out a few of what have been referred to by admirers as his "intimate sculptures": a perfume flacon of steel and gold mosaic work dotted with diamonds and adorned with two steel and pure gold butterflies; a rounded box of carved steel with gold and diamond details; a steel and gold box with granulated gold dome.

The superb quality of this work and his other creations in precious materials spurs some jewelry experts to compare Brush with the great jewelers of the past. "Like Lalique, who mastered metals, organic materials, stones—precious and semiprecious—there is a range to Daniel," says gem specialist and avid Brush collector Ralph Esmerian, referring to the fact that Brush is not only nimble with jeweler's techniques but also wields a hammer and chisel to form the steel he uses in so much of his work. "He's not stuck on just one way of doing things, even though he'd have every excuse to remain in any one genre he does to perfection."

There is one big difference, however, between Brush and a jeweler like Lalique. Lalique had a workshop, a brilliant foreman, and a slew of specialists to help fabricate his Art Nouveau jewelry. Brush works alone in his loft, without even one assistant. "There's no outside labor for anything," says Brush. "And that's because I'm impatient and have never been able to find anybody able to do what I want to do—so I have had to learn to do everything myself."

People who try to describe Brush do so in terms reserved for artists: "Daniel gets inside the substance he deals with like Michelangelo gets into stone," says Paul Gottlieb, editor in chief of the New York art book publisher Harry N. Abrams.

Or performers: "Daniel is spellbinding and hypnotic," says Gottlieb. "He grabs you."

Or powerful orators: When Brush lectured at the Hôtel des Bergues in Geneva, David Bennett, the deputy chairman of Sotheby's Switzerland, recalls, "there were two or three people in the audience practically in tears, so profoundly were they moved by Daniel's words about his work."

It is Brush's sincerity and his depth of feeling that so affect those who come within his orbit. "What I was leading up to all the years was trying to find some way of speaking, find the language," he explains. "It moved from jewelry to objects of

vertu to collectors' fancies—things like that. I loved scholars' table objects more than any of it.

"I do not do what jewelers do traditionally—wax, cast, file," Brush continues. "Everything I do is handwrought, and everything is done here, except some steelwork where the temperature goes up to six thousand degrees Fahrenheit. The metals are alloyed here. All finishing, polishing, everything.

"Most of my steel is chiseled from billets, forged and heated. I couldn't buy my tools, so I made them. I work on one thing at a time. The momentum stops. The piece dwells in the studio. I walk by, I recut it. The momentum picks up. It's endless." Gesturing toward two steel boxes with gold mosaic work and two fibulae (ornamented brooches) of steel and granulated gold, Brush says, "These are all hand-carved—no machinery, nothing. A billet of steel, pure gold. Hand-carved. Inlaid."

You might expect Brush to be obscure and theoretical in discussing his work. But when asked how he creates these wonders, he replies: "There is no secret. No mystery. Just a hammer and chisel. And surgical binoculars, which create a particular kind of vision, from microscopic to macroscopic. These are all in relief. So under a forty-power loupe they are all sculpture. It takes chisels harder than steel. Working with steel is like taking an icebreaker through Antarctica."

Daniel Brush's perfume flacon of steel, gold mosaic work, and inlaid diamonds (opposite, top left) is topped off by two steel and pure gold butterflies. Rare earth magnets make the insects cling to the vessel's surface. One of the artist's "intimate sculptures" of steel (top right) boasts a sheet of pure gold and delicate goldwork resembling pointillism. Bottom left: Brush used his antique lathes to create these two boxes of mastodon, or fossil, ivory and granulated gold; they were designed to hold English lavender buds. This object of vertu (bottom right), called Blue Dome because of its magnificent rounded blue steel top, has a steel body with gold details. The granulated gold base is rimmed with mastodon ivory.

It was a long path that led Daniel Brush to this New York loft. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1947, he had anything but a standard Midwestern upbringing. His father was a merchant, his mother a writer and photographer who took him on expeditions to museums. When Brush was 12 she introduced him to London's Victoria and Albert Museum, where he was overwhelmed by a display case of Etruscan goldwork. This was the defining moment of his life: "My heart pounded the way it has not since then. I was insane to learn how it was made."

But before he pursued his boyhood dream, Brush achieved success in academia and painting. In 1969 he received a BFA at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and in 1971 an MFA at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. And in the late seventies he became a tenured associate professor of fine arts and philosophy at Georgetown University. During the seventies he exhibited his Noh-theater-inspired canvases at The Phillips Collection and Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. One art critic said of his painting, "Brush stands high for devising a method, a system . . . that to a degree transcends considerations of school and style."

It was also in the seventies that Brush took up goldwork. "Painting was so conceptually spiraling that I needed some way to calm down," he explains. "I needed a crossword puzzle."





Considering he had no training whatsoever in handwork, it is astonishing he chose to solve the puzzle at the core of ancient goldwork, the technique of granulation: the attaching of tiny gold balls, the size of grains of sand, to a gold surface without any solder. His only previous experience with a precious metal was the wedding band he'd made for his wife, Olivia.

Like so many things in his life, granulation became a quest. Brush studied treatises on the subject from late antiquity at Dumbarton Oaks Library in Washington, D.C., and he sought out experts in the field.

"I have gone for two or three days—until my toleration stopped—with anybody who knew anything about gold, anywhere in the world," says Brush, "and I found they were all very good but they didn't help me. I couldn't understand it. Their hearts, their heads, and their minds were different from mine, so I forgot everything and started off on my own."

The result of all this work can be seen on the opening page, one of the largest granulated gold domes in the world (measuring some five inches in diameter and resting on a cylindrical steel box). It is a high-wire act of technical bravura, one that required the attaching of 78,000 separate granules. Hundreds of thousands of gold granules were used for the entire piece.

Though machine-made granules in uniform sizes are available commercially, Brush, characteristically, decided to make those for the dome by hand. The next step in the procedure, arranging the granules in geometric patterns over the gold hemispherical surface, required the ultimate in precision and patience. Brush says working up the courage to do the final stage—heating the gold granules and gold background, coaxing both to a uniform temperature, and then firing the object with a swift sweep of the torch—took almost as long as preparing the piece.

If anything goes wrong—say, the granules fall off—months of work are gone in a flash. Describing the odds of failure, Brush says: "At thirty seconds it succeeds, at twenty-nine it fails, and at thirty-one it melts."

Brush's restless imagination has led him to master many other arcane skills. He is, for instance, extremely knowledgeable about the art of turning—a craft that he learned in order to incise detailed patterns on metal and precious materials. But because he's such a purist, Brush eschews electricity and uses only antique lathes, as did Louis XVI and the French, German, and English nobles of the 18th and 19th centuries who also practiced this art.

Brush scoured the world to find antique lathes. And eventually he put together in his New York loft the largest and finest private collection of them in the world. Three of his 18th- and 19th-century lathes are by the John Jacob Holtzapffel firm. The acknowledged leader in the field, Holtzapffel produced only 2,553 lathes; the first and last on record belong to Brush.

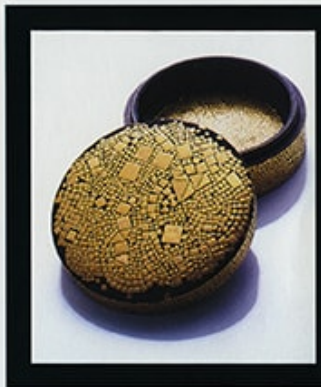
Brush also sent letters to "virtually every bibliophile in Europe" to find original texts of machine manuals. "I've read everything," he says. When antique lathes arrived in pieces Brush put them together using his first editions as "How To" guides.

Even though turning was once a hobby of the leisure class, it is by no means easy. To incise patterns on a highly detailed circular box of 40-million-year-old mastodon ivory, Brush had

to operate three things simultaneously: the foot lever for setting the gears in motion, the headstock for holding the ivory, and the tool rest that positions the carving blade. A virtuoso display of lathe work, Brush's ivory box boasts numerous patterns on multiple planes. On the top are overlapping ovals. On the sides an intricate fluted pattern evokes classical architecture. On the bottom the oval, or barleycorn, pattern is repeated and there's a rosette. The same pattern appears on the inside. A gold granulated disk crowns the top of the box. The combination of granulation and turning brings together antiquity and the Age of Reason in a pastiche of historical techniques. There is probably no one else in the world capable of executing these two techniques on a single piece.

Brush's spacious loft reflects the many sides of his personality and his broad interests. The first thing you notice is an impressive Indian motorcycle. ("I put it together with my son, Silla, when he was ten because I thought it was important that he learn to use his hands," Brush says.) A Victorian Meeks chair and display cabinet are remnants from his own childhood. Next

The gold mosaic work on this steel box (right) was inspired by the mosaics at San Vitale and Galla Placidia in Ravenna. Opposite: Brush's fibulae, or ornate brooches, display intricate patterns of gold granulation and were inspired by those worn by the ancient Greeks and Romans.



to his collection of lathes is a 1932 pool table, formerly the property of New York champion Ruth McGinnis. Brush bought it because of its fine craftsmanship—nevertheless, he enjoys playing on it.

Though Brush doesn't hobnob much in the New York art world, he does occasionally lecture—as at Sotheby's last November—and attend social functions, such as an autumn event at Christie's where one of his more whimsical pieces, his delightful Bunny Bangle of Bakelite and pink diamonds, was on display.

Describing the difficulties involved in creating such a piece, Brush explains that the technical skill must bow to the overall concept, which should be "smile-producing."

"If I can make you smile a bit, or make you have some referential context, that's enough of a meaning for a bibelot or object of vertu," says Brush.

Sometimes he and Olivia will go on artistic pilgrimages abroad for inspiration. Objects at the Petit Palais in Paris led to a series of ornate boxes, and mosaics at San Vitale and Galla Placidia in Ravenna precipitated steel and gold mosaic work.

Brush is fiercely protective about both the purchase and the presentation of his work. He will sell only to clients who have the "sensitivity, courage, and financial ability" he deems necessary for ownership. "I will not engage in casual talk about the purchase of my pieces," says Brush. (continued on page 174)



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Daniel Brush

(continued from page 135)

"What I'll do is discuss seriously the transfer of custodianship." Those with financial ability alone are turned away at the door. "People like that can only give me money," says Brush. "I'm not concerned with money. I'm concerned only with clarity."

He wants an exchange of ideas from clients. "There was a man," states Brush describing an ideal custodian, "who came here and said, 'I cannot understand what you are doing. I'd like to buy some pieces, leave them in your studio, and when I come to New York we can get together and talk and learn together.'" After five years the man took the pieces home.



Shadows of genius: Daniel Brush at work in his loft.

Brush has turned down some stellar proposals. He won't allow certain curators to purchase his work (much less set foot in his loft), and he won't manufacture pieces for precious jewelers. When queried about taking a commission, or even replicating his own work, he snaps: "No! I'm not a craftsman! I'm not a tradesman!"

Though Brush refuses to participate in group museum shows he has agreed to be the subject of a 1998 one-man exhibition at the Renwick Gallery, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is the perfect setting for Brush, because categorization is not an issue.

"The program here includes American art from colonial times to the present and 20th-century crafts and jewelry," says museum director Elizabeth Broun. "We don't

make a distinction between the branches."

"Brush's work will show the highest standards in craftsmanship," says Renwick curator Jeremy Adamson. He is quick to point out, however, that Brush's work is more than the sum total of perfectly executed techniques, citing in particular the small steel sculptures made with hammer and chisel. "If I were Alexander the Great and had fought my way across the Indus, to restore my equanimity I would retire with one of these objects," says Adamson. One might say they have the same emotional impact as a great work of art. And in creating them, Brush has redefined the concept of preciousness.

"Precious things take many levels: They can be small stones you buy, pictures from your past, memories," says Brush. "Something precious is romantic, heartfelt. I've thought about simple, beautiful materials like marble and steel that have no association with the realms of jewelry and objects of vertu. If I can put something in your hand—sapphires, marble, or steel—and you close your eyes and don't even look at it but can feel and hear your heart pounding, I've redefined preciousness.

"That was what I was looking for," he continues. "And that's what drives me. I wanted to find out why my heart pounded when I was twelve years old. Something touched me.

"So it's a linear path. I am still trying to learn. I have never done this work for reasons of practicality or commerciality. I have done it only to understand myself. It had nothing to do with my hands, it had to do with my heart.

"How do I feed back? I let somebody look. I grant an occasional interview. I don't know enough to teach. I can only keep thinking.

"That is what I am looking for." ■
MARION FASEL AND PENNY PRODDOW WROTE ABOUT PURCHASING A DIAMOND IN THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1997 ISSUE. Daniel Brush, whose work is found in royal, public, and private collections, is not represented by a dealer or gallery and does not accept commissions. He has few objects available at any one time. To obtain a piece, write to Daniel Brush, Box 2005, New York, NY 10185-2005 or e-mail DWORKSHOP@aol.com. If Brush concludes that your approach to art is sympathetic to his work you may be able to visit his studio. Brush's work commands prices in the range of special Cartier and Fabergé objects.