



*All photographs by John Hession, except where otherwise noted. Above: enamel on copper, 1945-1960, private collection.
Facing page: Karl Drerup, Lorne Findley photo.*

Into the Enchanted Garden

An American Master Returns Home

by Nick Mathis



In his small studio, the artist created a unique world of his own, an *Enchanted Garden*, in the imaginative imagery of his enamel plaques, bowls, and trays. The works in the exhibition are on loan from several large private collections, the Currier Museum of Art, and Plymouth State University.

—Jane L. Port

The upcoming exhibition, *Enchanted Garden: Enamels by an American Master* is a celebration of the art and legacy of artist, craftsman, mentor, and teacher Karl Drerup, that returns his work to the public view.

On display at PSU's Karl Drerup Art Gallery from August 15, 2007 through October 27, 2007, the exhibition will feature the jewel-like painted enamels that brought national attention to Drerup in the mid-20th century. The exhibition will also include examples of Drerup's graphic art, painting, and ceramics to illustrate the intellectual and aesthetic unity and artistic virtuosity of the artist's body of work.

Portrait of the Artist

Born in Germany in 1904, Drerup studied drawing and engraving in the

applied art school in Munster. He earned a graduate degree in graphic arts from the Unified State Schools for Fine and Applied Arts in Berlin and a second graduate degree in painting from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, where he became interested in *majolica*, glazed earthenware vessels and tiles with colorful painted decoration. By the early 1930s, Drerup was exhibiting his *majolica* pieces in Italy and Germany.

It was around this time that Drerup met and fell in love with Gertrude Lifmann, a young German woman studying in Rome. Gertrude was Jewish and the 1930s were a dangerous time for German Jews. To escape the fascist menace, Drerup and Gertrude moved first to Madrid, then to the Canary Islands, where Drerup became part of the artistic community and exhibited

paintings with such renowned modern artists as Salvador Dali, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Max Ernst. By 1937, even the Canary Islands were not safe, and the Drerups left for New York City and security.

Success in the States

Once in America, Drerup enjoyed almost instant success as a painter of ceramics. In 1939, he won an important prize at the eighth National Ceramic Annual and was featured in three art periodicals. Drerup also exhibited ceramics at the New York World's Fair of 1939–40. By this time, he had begun studying enameling, the process of fusing powdered glass to a metal support that goes back to the ancient Egyptians, Celts, Greeks, and Chinese.



Left: enamel on steel, 1945–1960, private collection.

Below: enamel on copper and brass, 1940–1945, private collection.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, his enamels won prizes at the National Ceramic Annual shows and other exhibitions; he had one-man shows at museums in Baltimore, Seattle, San Diego, and elsewhere; *Craft Horizons* (now *American Craft*) featured him in its February 1957 issue, and in 1958, he became one of several dozen craftsmen to represent American craft at the Brussels World's Fair. Arts and crafts scholars generally credit Drerup with reviving interest in enamels in the United States and of establishing the highest standards of enameling practice.

Drerup was instrumental in the developing American crafts movement, and in 1945 he accepted the invitation of the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen director to move to New Hampshire. He and Gertrude settled in Thornton, and Drerup soon began offering drawing workshops at Plymouth Teachers College. In 1948, Drerup founded the art department, which he directed and developed over many years.

According to art professor Terry Downs, Drerup was a reservoir of energy, ideas, and motivation. He was preparing future art teachers and trained students in all the arts: drawing, painting, print-making, sculpture, and ceramics. He was, Downs said, “the epitome of Plymouth’s

motto, *Ut Prosim* [That I May Serve], an artist in service to other artists.”

The impact of Drerup’s service to other artists extended well beyond Plymouth, as Drerup Art Gallery Director Catherine Amidon noted. “It’s fitting that this exhibition coincides with the 75th anniversary of the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen, to which he contributed so much through his mentoring of New Hampshire crafts figures like Gerry Williams, and his friendship with Ed and Mary Scheier at UNH. Through his regional ties and national exhibitions, he truly was a catalyst for the American craft movement of the mid-20th century.”

A Living Treasure

For over four decades, Drerup helped guide the careers of a generation of ceramicists and enamelists, and continued to produce significant works of art and to be a force within the now well-established American crafts movement. In 1961, Drerup was one of eight craftsmen chosen by the Brooklyn Museum of Art as a Master of Contemporary American Crafts. In 1986, Plymouth State named its art gallery after the renowned artist and awarded him an honorary doctorate, and in 1989, Drerup became the second recipient of the New Hampshire Living Treasure award presented by the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts and the governor. In 1995, he was

elected a Fellow of the American Craft Council, one of the highest honors bestowed on craftsmen in this country.

Karl Drerup died in 2000, leaving an indelible mark on American arts and crafts and on the memories of countless colleagues, students, and friends across campus and throughout the world.

This article is heavily indebted to “Enchanted Garden: Enamels by an American Master,” an essay by exhibition curator Jane L. Port that will be featured in the Enchanted Garden exhibition catalog. The catalog will also feature an essay by Jeannine Falino, an independent curator and the former Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, and a foreword by Karl Drerup Art Gallery Director Catherine Amidon.

To request a copy of the exhibition catalog, please contact Catherine Amidon at camidon@plymouth.edu.

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