

# ELIZABETH TRESKOW – A MASTER GOLDSMITH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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It is a strange phenomenon in the European history of jewellery that artists who are household names in their own country, often are unknown abroad. French jewellers, the creators of the marvels of Art Nouveau and Art Deco jewellery, seem to have been an exception to this rule. However, when it comes to countries such as Denmark, England, Germany or Holland, each country seems to have its own jewellery tradition, strongly dependent on its own development of fashion.

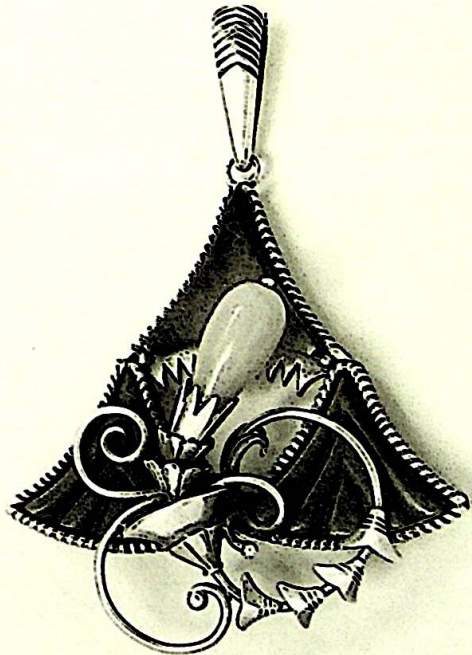
So far, to an international public, the history of German jewellery of the 20th century has escaped notice, though Germany's achievement in this field, based upon a long tradition going back to the guilds, is by no means small. But even in its own country German jewellery of the 20th Century does not yet seem properly mapped out due to a variety of factors. Jewellery avoided the public gaze by being locked in treasure vaults or was taken apart to be used again for new pieces. This was a fact both here and abroad. However German jewellery suffered more specifically from two wars and the social upheaval that followed in their wake, as well as from the paucity, so it seems, of highly important objects, owing to emigration and the country's unstable economical situation at least during the first half of the century. Furthermore, one of the strongest obstacles against an overall survey of German jewellery must be sought in the country's cultural diversity which has always lacked a dominant centre, such as Paris or London, even at the short-lived period, when Berlin was the capital. Next to Berlin there were other important cities such as Munich, Frankfurt, Dresden, Hanau and Pforzheim, which produced fine jewellery – last but not least there was Essen, capital of the Ruhr district, which artistically became a lively place in the 20's. In the nearby town of Hagen, the collector Karl Ernst Osthaus, nowadays more popularly associated with the creation of the Folkwang Museum, in 1910, founded a silversmithy to work along a design-line similar to that of Georg Jensen and the Wiener Werkstätten. Financed by Osthaus, it kept going until World War One, when its two major artists, J.L.M. Lauweriks and Frans Zwollo, returned to their native Holland.

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It was here that Elizabeth Treskow, native of Bochum, also

of the Ruhr area, born in 1898, entered the world of precious stones and metals. In 1914 she took courses in chasing and copying many of the available designs. At the same time she visited the School of Decorative Arts in Essen, where Jan Thorn Prikker became her teacher in drawing and painting. In 1916 Elisabeth Treskow continued her studies at the Fachschule für Edelmetall at Schwäbisch Gmünd, only to move to Munich in 1917 to begin an apprenticeship with the well known jeweller Karl Rothmüller, admired for his colourful, partly historic jewels and his distinguished clients. In 1918 Elisabeth Treskow finished her apprenticeship executing her "journeyman's piece", and after another half a year with her master, Treskow decided to return to Bochum and open a studio of her own.

Using the facilities of her father's premises as a photo-chemist, Elisabeth Treskow attempted to make herself known through jewellery pieces in modern styles, experimenting both with the floral forms of the Wiener Werkstätten and the spiky, radiant idiom of German expressionism. The latter preoccupied her for a number of years (fig. 1). Of great importance to her career was



1. Pendant. Elisabeth Treskow, Bochum 1921. Silver, gold, coral, ebony, H. 8 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.



her move to Essen in 1923, transferring her studio to the Margarethenhöhe, a suburban garden city, which had been founded by Margarethe Krupp on a social and architectural reform scheme. Elisabeth Treskow was one of the first members of what was to become an artists' colony, expanding over the years and finally including a potter, a sculptor, a book-binder, a printer, an enamellist and most notably, the photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch, whose documentary portraits of the Ruhr scenery have since achieved international fame. As a neighbour of Elisabeth Treskow's for fifteen years he photographed many of her works which she liked to keep as records. These photographs, together with those by others, whom Elisabeth Treskow commissioned for documentation, are in the Museum for Applied Art, Cologne. Contained in six albums, they represent a valuable reference to Elisabeth Treskow's oeuvre.

In 1924 Elisabeth Treskow passed her examination as a master goldsmith, a qualification which allowed her to employ apprentices and journeymen. It was from this moment that she began to set up a proper workshop, which after a distinguished career she only closed upon her retirement from the School of Decorative Arts in Cologne in 1964. For forty years with the help of two to six assistants, she produced hand-made jewellery and plate and rose to become one of Germany's most outstanding craftswomen of the 20th Century.

In Essen, Elisabeth Treskow soon began to attract the well to do middleclass. Her jewellery, most elaborate in sawed and pierced work, was expressive and adventurous, adding new elements of design to her brilliant craftsmanship. In about 1926 she became fascinated with the sumptuous effects of Burgundian court jewellery, probably through the treasure of the Essen Münster — only to strive for more simplistic forms a year later, when she discovered Merovingian and Celtic jewels, probably during a trip to Paris (fig. 2). At the same time a strong trend of geometricism became apparent in her work, showing a temporary inclination for Art Deco.



2. Bangle. Elisabeth Treskow, Essen, 1928. Gold, rose diamond, decorated with gold wire and granulation. Location unknown. Photo: Reproduction from historical photograph.

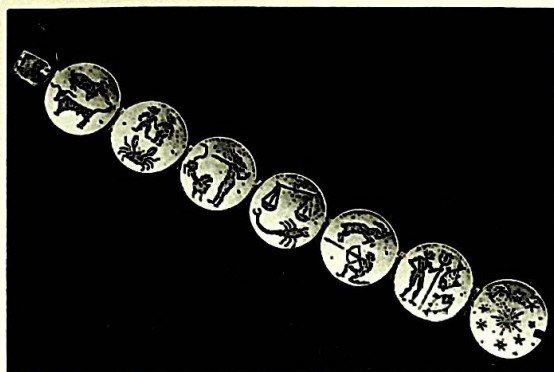
The late 20's were perhaps the most innovative and creative years in Elisabeth Treskow's career as a goldsmith, in which she not only experimented with a great many stylistic trends, but eventually arrived at a style that was totally her own. Her fascination with historic jewellery soon made her respond to the beauty of classical jewellery, and set her mind upon the effects of gold grains as an element of decoration.

During the years of economic depression, when there were few commissions, she took the opportunity of experimenting with different alloys of gold for granulation. Its rediscovery had long been looming in the air. It was known that the Etruscans had practised this technique to its utmost perfection, and passed it on to the Romans; however, with the latter the fineness of the grain, consisting only of fragments of a millimetre, could never be achieved again. The Castellani's, master goldsmiths of the 19th Century, focused on this technical mystery, but were not able to solve it properly. The Etruscans had succeeded in fastening an infinite number of minute, almost invisible grains upon the surface of their jewels, obviously without using solder, which, when exposed to the fire, would have melted with the grains. After much theoretical and experimental work in this direction, which was resumed at the beginning of this century, it was Munich goldsmith Johann Michael Wilm who came closest to the techniques of the Etruscans by using a copper (copper oxide), which, when heated, turned into a thin film of pure copper between the joining elements and thus "glued" the grains to the ground. Independently of Wilm who was able to keep this technique a secret for ten years, Elisabeth Treskow experimented with the effects of "dust granulation" and in about 1930 had mastered the technique so as to claim reinvention in her own right. Giving granulation a perfection of its own, she became one of its great exponents, a fact which greatly contributed to her early fame.

In 1933, only 35 years of age, she came first in a nationwide jewellery competition, organised by the German Goldsmiths' Society, an achievement which she repeated in 1935, 1936 and 1941. The prize piece in 1933 was a ring showing on its top, the granulated image of a horseman holding a laurel in his upraised arm. In 1937 Elisabeth Treskow won a gold medal in the Great Exhibition at Paris, and in 1938 she became the first woman in Germany to be given the "honorary ring" an annual award of the German Goldsmiths' Society. In 1936 she and Wilm participated in a conference on the subject of granulation held at the Goldsmiths' Hall, London, in which H.A.P. Littledale lectured upon this technique. In 1941 Elisabeth Treskow won the competition for a "goldsmith's sculpture", again organised by the German Goldsmiths' Society, representing a dove in silver with a golden laurel in its beak. As a traditional image for peace this was certainly a remarkable choice of subject matter at the height of World War Two.

Fortunately for her career and for the course of German jewellery, Elisabeth Treskow was able to abstain from





3. Bracelet. Elisabeth Treskow, Essen, ca. 1933. Gold, granulated with the signs of the zodiac. Location unknown. Photo: Gertrud Hesse, Duisburg.



4. Bangle. Elisabeth Treskow, Essen, ca. 1934. Gold, with granulated figures, diameter 6.4 x 5.2 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

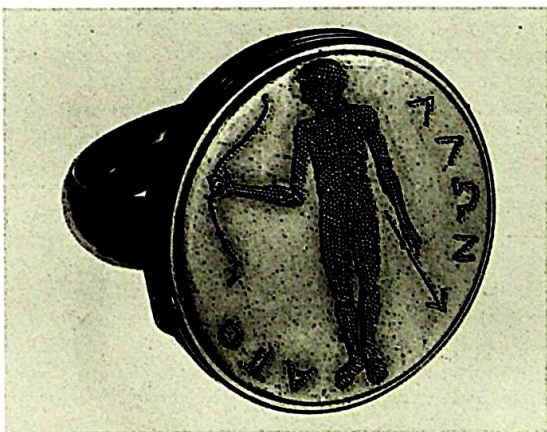


5. Brooch. Elisabeth Treskow, Essen, 1941. Gold, with granulated figures, topaz, diameter 4.7 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

commissions of the Nazi party. It may have been her ever increasing love for classical antiquity and mediterranean culture, which instinctively kept her aloof from an overt adoption of Germanic and Nordic symbols. The subjects of her granulation work were often developed from personal symbols, meaningful to the bearer and imbued with a sense of timeless narration.

Important commissions which reached Elisabeth Treskow during the thirties for example came from Dr. Hans Luther, Lord Mayor of Essen. A bracelet executed for him in about 1932 (first illustrated in 1934) represents the figures of the zodiac, a motive which the artist often repeated (fig. 3). Wherever a jewel, a ring, cufflink, bracelet or necklace offered an even surface, Elisabeth Treskow decorated it with elements of plants, flowers, insects, as well as with animals of water, earth and air. Among her most successful designs are a couple of bangles with hunting scenes: a Diana-like amazon, spear in hand, and leopards, chasing after stags (fig. 4). Animals in motion, dogs, horses or deer, became one of her favourite subjects, and numerous studies in pencil and ink have survived for these. Elisabeth Treskow's life long interest in drawing helped her in fact to develop a very fluid hand, which rendered her objects natural and graceful, particularly when in movement. It certainly was the liveliness which she bestowed upon her figures, which made her granulated work so popular.

Only in the early forties did Elisabeth Treskow increase her attention to friezes of human figures, which began to have a distinct classical ring about them. Among the bucolic figures of a brooch executed in 1941 one finds a youth blowing the aulos flute and another one holding a Thyrsus staff (fig. 5). Rarely has Elisabeth Treskow achieved a greater lightness, a greater sense of inspiration. There is nothing artificial about the granulated figures, she avoids irregular contours, but gives them a graceful, flowing line. Classical in spirit is also a capsule ring: with the granulated figures of Apollo on the outside and the dancing Dionysos on the inner lid (fig. 6), an important



6. Ring. Elisabeth Treskow, Essen, 1942. Gold, with granulated figures, H. 2.8 cm, diameter of the capsule 2.3 cm. Museum of Applied Art (Museum für Angewandte Kunst), Cologne. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.



work not only for its conception but also for the existence of several preparatory drawings demonstrating the artist's careful rendering of the idea. One of them is executed in white chalk on black paper, a peculiar characteristic which actually links this design with a number of other "black" drawings showing images of death, as skulls and skeletons. The latter the artist drew while Essen was being bombed in the Spring of 1943. The black paper, not used by the artist at any other stage of her working life, must thus be interpreted as a symbolic expression of despair and mourning in the face of the war. Considering the fact that dealing with the devastation of the war was strictly forbidden under Nazi rule, these drawings show a very personal, clandestine aspect of agony.

It was in the summer of 1943 that as a result of the war Elisabeth Treskow lost her workshop in Essen, only to find a temporary abode in Detmold, a quiet town in the Teutoburger Woods. Cut off from supplies of precious metals and stones, her work from this period is simple and inventive.

A change for the better occurred in 1948 when Elisabeth Treskow was appointed to take over the department of gold and silver smithing of the School of Decorative Arts at Cologne. The fact that she had not compromised herself during the Nazi rule made her appointment a particularly convincing one. It was in the Cologne period, teaching as professor from 1948 to 1964, that Elisabeth Treskow reached her greatest influence both as an artist as well as a representative of the craft movement in post-war Germany.

Over the years she received a variety of high honours, including several state prizes, the distinction "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" by Pope Paul VI, the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as the Jabach medal from the city of Cologne in recognition of the gift of her own jewellery collection to the local Museum of Applied Arts.

An admired teacher, she instructed a great number of students not only from Germany, but also from other European countries. Already in 1948 her class had gained so much recognition that it was asked to execute the trophy of the German Football Association, which now, more than forty years later, is still being used and presented to the champion each year.

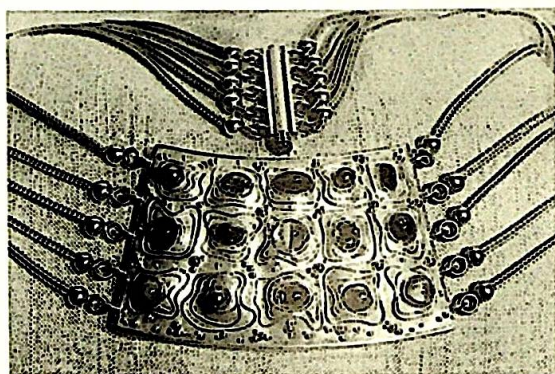
Right from the beginning of her Cologne period, Elisabeth Treskow was entrusted with the execution of church plate; this had not only been depleted throughout the war, but was now badly in need of modernisation. In 1949 for example she finished a golden chalice for the Benedictine's abbey of Maria Laach, and in 1958 she conceived a modern cross-reliquiary for Cologne Cathedral.

Treskow's sound knowledge of styles and techniques of earlier periods also made her an ideal choice for restoration work. Thus in 1948 she undertook the first post-war restoration of the shrine of the Three Holy Magi by

Nikolas of Verdun in Cologne Cathedral, dating from the early 13th century; likewise she was called upon to restore other Rhenish shrines of the 12th and 13th century, as well as the Romanesque antependium of the church of Crokomburg.

Through Elisabeth Treskow was a Lutheran by birth and only converted to catholicism in 1961, her breadth of knowledge in all matters of gold and silversmith work gained her an absolute recognition among the catholic clergy.

While many of these commissions Elisabeth Treskow undertook in conjunction with her students, she remained a jewellery goldsmith at heart and soon attracted illustrious patronage. The family of Konrad Adenauer belonged to her clients as did the actress Magda Schneider and her daughter Romy, then still a youngster. Elisabeth Treskow, whose work in the thirties had been dominated so much by granulated figures, with only a few precious stones set between, reversed her priorities in the fifties. Though she continued to execute jewels with granulated work, mostly for special decorative effect around the settings, her real interest turned more and more to the qualities of precious gemstones (fig 7). According to a later statement by her, she never used these with a symbolic meaning in mind, but simply for their decorative propensity. Many of her outstanding jewels, necklaces, earrings and bracelets, she decked lavishly with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, but also tourmalines, topaz and beryls. These she often combined with oriental pearls. She delighted in cut and cabochon stones, and was fond of changes of colour in pearls, reaching from the pure white to yellow, pink, dark grey and even black.



7. Necklace with centre-piece. Elisabeth Treskow, Cologne, 1958. Gold, partly granulated, Chrysoberyll cat's-eye, tourmalines, demantoid garnet, oriental pearls. Centre-piece H. 3.7 cm., W. 6.5 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

In terms of design, Elisabeth Treskow showed a special inclination for natural forms, with motives taken from botany such as leaves, flowers, blossoms and fruit. Twice in her career, in about 1941 and 1958, Elisabeth Treskow conceived a brooch in the form of grapes and vine leaves, but interpreted them in quite different ways. Other works reveal her enduring interest in forms of the animal kingdom, as is the case with a fish brooch, recently





8. Brooch, Elisabeth Treskow, Cologne, 1967. Gold, granulated, cabochion sapphire, opals, H. 2 cm., diameter 4.4 cm., Museum of Applied Art (Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Overstolzengesellschaft), Cologne. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum (1953) or the brooch in the form of a stylised shell, now in the Museum of Applied Art in Cologne (1967) (fig. 8).

After her retirement from the Cologne School in 1964 Elisabeth Treskow concentrated solely on the design of her work, leaving the execution to students and assistants, who had been trained to work according to her instructions. In 1971 she moved to Brühl, a small town just outside Cologne, where she continued to do design up to about 1980.

During thirty years from about 1950-80, Elisabeth Treskow's works were conceived in the forms of stylised nature and organically shaped. Her jewels are rich and profuse in character. Concentrating almost exclusively on gold and on the purity of the coloured gemstones to make them look regal, reminds one vaguely of goldsmith's works from the Carolingian or Romanesque period. In all her works Elisabeth Treskow followed the concept of jewellery to decorate its wearer. Most of her work, and certainly all major pieces, were undertaken upon commission, always taking into account the wearer's personality, complexion and the colour of his or her hair, and often there are hidden references to some personal historical or literary meaning.

Whatever the nature of the commission, whatever the combination of elements or the techniques and materials employed, in all works one recognises the style of the artist. During the Cologne period the work of Elisabeth Treskow attained a supreme quality which even, where she repeats herself, never loses its extremely appealing decorative effects. That she could project her kind of jewellery of gold and cabochion stones upon some of the most important patrons of her time, who otherwise might have chosen top quality diamond or brilliant jewellery, produced by the big "haute joaillerie" firms of France, Switzerland or Italy, is ample proof of the influence which she exerted, if only for a limited period of time.

A major contribution that Elisabeth Treskow made to German jewellery of her time, which has not yet been mentioned, was her preoccupation with classical engraved gems and coins, both of which she used in some quantity, particularly from the mid-fifties onwards, when her work became so much in demand that she had to devise some economic way of meeting it. There were not only the high and mighty clients of the Rhineland that were keen on her work, but also the ambitious ones with smaller incomes, who strove for at least one characteristic example of her work.

In about 1941, at a moment when Elisabeth Treskow's interest in antiquity had begun to intensify, she designed a ring with an engraved gem of a satyr playing with a child, dating from the 1st century B.C. In 1942 she had taken part in an exhibition in Berlin with Johann Michael Wilm and the gem engraver Martin Seitz of Passau, one of Germany's most outstanding glyptic artists of this century. Elisabeth Treskow soon became interested in Seitz's art and over the following years and decades included many of his gems in her pendants, cufflinks or rings. At about the same time, Elisabeth Treskow exchanged gifts with the Berlin silversmith Emil Lettré, for whom she made a golden disc decorated in granulation with a boy playing the flute, while the latter gave her a ring, into which he had set an intaglio dating from the first century A.D.

Elisabeth Treskow's next encounter with the world of ancient intaglios took place in 1948, when she was working on the Shrine of the Three Holy Magi. While dealing with its restoration, a member of the chapter of Cologne Cathedral, Mons. J. Hoster with whom Elisabeth Treskow soon became friendly, began a study of the roughly 2000 ancient gemstones on the Shrine. Accustomed to small sized figures and animals through her granulated work, Elisabeth Treskow was surely fascinated by the richness of imagery which she encountered in the engraved relief of the gems.

In 1954-55 Elisabeth Treskow was commissioned to make the official chain of the Lord Mayor of Cologne, which turned out to become one of the most ambitious works of her career. The chain had more than a dozen gold and bronze coins of classical antiquity, depicting Roman emperors such as Augustus, Germanicus, Claudius, Trojan, etc., all of whom at one stage had been involved in the city's history. Some of these coins, which were assiduously collected by the then director of the Römisch-Germanisches Department of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Prof. Dr. Fritz Fremersdorf, are of great numismatic rarity.

That these coins had an influence upon Elisabeth Treskow's work, is apparent from her making increasing use of them as part of her other jewellery from about 1955 onwards. Like engraved gems they became included in rings, bracelets or pendants. But not all minor works of art from classical antiquity which Elisabeth Treskow began to collect, became mounted. She left more valuable or interesting ones in their "natural" state, accepting their importance as collector's items.



Before long Elisabeth Treskow also collected classical jewellery itself, such as rings, earrings and necklaces, many of which she also restored. Though Treskow was certainly not in want of designs for copying, her own jewellery responded to classical models. No doubt, Elisabeth Treskow found classical jewellery most akin to her own temperament and artistic intentions, a relationship that actually warrants a study of its own.

It was from the fifties onwards that Elisabeth Treskow regularly visited Italy, Sicily, Greece and other parts of the Mediterranean world, though in 1933 she had already paid a visit to the Villa Giulia, in Rome. She took a special interest in ancient mythology and its partial reemergence in images of early Christian faith. Like so many German artists of her time, she was fascinated by ancient art, and shared its preoccupation with the human figure. Gems and coins to her meant ancient art in a nutshell, and she used them both as inspiration for her own work, as well as demonstration pieces for her students.

When in 1956 the first great post-war exhibition on Etruscan art in Germany took place in Cologne, Elisabeth Treskow was on the committee and contributed to the catalogue an essay on the ancient art of granulation. Both her restoration work and her scholarly essays and lectures made her an authority in the field of classical jewellery, as well as of engraved gems. This aspect is borne out, for example, by the comprehensive library she owned, among which were books such as Adolf Furtwängler's three-volume edition *Die antiken Gemmen* (Leipzig 1900), J.M.A. Chabouillet's *Catalogue des Camées et Pierres Gravées de la Bibliothèque Impériale* (Paris 1858), or Gisela Richter's

*Engraved Gems of the Greeks and Etruscans* (London 1968), which she used for permanent consultation.

What gives a very particular background to the work of Elisabeth Treskow, is not only her manual dexterity and her technical quality, but her immense erudition and the capacity to reach out beyond the world of jewellery, to set her mind equally upon drawing, painting, sculpture, literature or even archaeological and ecclesiastical matters. During her artistic life Elisabeth Treskow underwent several stages of development and status, from the craft person that she was in the beginning to the discoverer of antique techniques and finally the scholar.

A retrospective exhibition of the oeuvre of Elisabeth Treskow took place last summer in the Museum of Applied Art, Cologne, and in the Deutsches Goldschmiedehaus, Hanau. This contained up to 315 objects, mostly jewels, but also many examples of plate as well as a small selection from her collection of preparatory studies. The latter are split in two groups, one owned by the Cologne Museum, the other by her family. Only a few of the works exhibited came from public collections, such as from Cologne, Karlsruhe, Nürnberg, Pforzheim, Stuttgart, Utrecht and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, while the vast majority of the work was made available through the kindness of private lenders. In several families her jewellery has already reached the second or even third generation and continues to be cherished as a valuable family possession. There is no doubt, that Elisabeth Treskow's work is considered highly in Germany, and it will be many years before it appears on the market in any quantity or is reunited once again in such a comprehensive exhibition.