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Craft Exposition showcases established, emerging artists

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When most people think of craft shows, country-inspired objects -- often conceived in home kitchens and workshops -- come to mind.

At the American Craft Exhibition in Evanston, however, the goods are considerably more elevated.

In fact, the juried exhibition, which is celebrating its 20th year, is hailed as one of the most sophisticated events of its kind and is ranked as the No. 1 indoor craft show in the country by the National Association of Independent Artists.

This year's event begins today and will include everything from metal, glass, furniture, jewelry and ceramics to wearable fiber and leather, wood, paper and baskets.

Adding to the crafty-cool excitement, for the first time ever the show will feature a new category for up-and-coming artists.

"We wanted to establish a way for new artists with arguably fewer resources and more limited inventory to be featured," said 2004 Co-Chair Ann Burnstine. The resulting category, dubbed "emerging artists" will include wares from Evanston resident Jonathan Rutledge.

His jewelry, all of which is done in 22-karat gold, was selected for its intricacy and attention to detail.

"Nurturing the talent of younger craftspeople is an important aspect of the show and a significant ingredient in keeping it fresh each year," added Diane Pekow, co-chair.

Rutledge, who is a Rolling Meadows firefighter by day and has an undergrad degree in political science and a master's degree in fine arts, started creating his dramatic accessories after serving in the military.

"Before college, I spent time in Europe while in the service, and I really developed a love of art," he said. "I became fascinated by Greek Etruscan jewelry in particular. They had the imaginations to create these amazingly intricate pieces but didn't have the tools to accomplish their vision. Yet, somehow they managed."

Rutledge's pieces, which incorporate the technique of granulation, take cues from the Etruscan style and have contemporary flair. Among the pieces at the show will be an oval brooch inlaid with tourmaline and diamonds and detailed with countless floating spheres.

"Creating my work can be a nerve-wracking process," Rutledge said. "During the heating process, it's common for me to have \$500 worth of gold, and there's a millisecond between fusing or melting the metal. If the spheres I intend to fuse were to melt, I couldn't fix it. That would be awful after investing 70 hours -- and a lot of money -- in a piece."

In addition to showcasing fine arts, the craft expo also will host lectures, panel discussions and artist demonstrations.

This year's show will benefit breast and ovarian cancer research at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare. More than half of the artists participating in this year's American Craft Exposition, including Rutledge, will donate a percentage of sales from designated pieces to research.

The exposition opens with a Collectors' Hour from 5:30-6:30 p.m. today (Thursday) followed by a Benefit Preview Party from 6:30-9:30 p.m. Events will take place at the Henry Crown Sports Pavilion, 2311 Campus Drive, Evanston. Tickets are \$150 for the Collectors' Hour and Benefit Preview Party, and \$100 for the Benefit Preview Party only. (Both include a three-day pass to the exposition and admission to all lectures.) The show runs from 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$12 and include re-entry throughout the weekend. Tickets for children 10 and under are \$5, while children under 2 are admitted free. For details, call (847) 570-5096 or visit www.americancraftexpo.org.

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