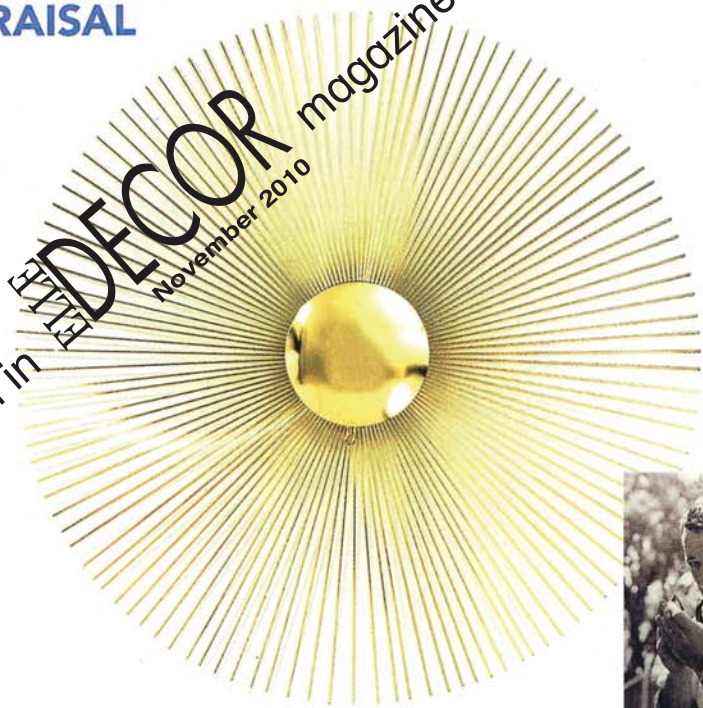


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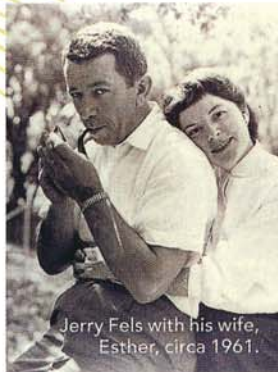


Sunburst, a reproduction by Jonathan Adler of a 1960s wall sculpture.

C. Jeré

In the 1960s, two costume jewelers launched a line of glamorous sculptural ornaments that is still exciting decorators and collectors alike

By Mitchell Owens



Jerry Fels with his wife, Esther, circa 1961.

pieces are attracting the admiration of leading dealers in vintage chic and have become so sought after that Jonathan Adler recently arranged with the firm, which is still in business under different ownership, to reproduce several of its classic designs.

First things, however, first. Shortly after the end of World War II, Fels (1917–2007) and Freiler (born in 1910 and now retired) settled in Los Angeles, where they began producing costume jewelry with hand-wrought appeal. The pair's Renoir and Matisse brands, made of copper and brightly enameled copper, respectively, were popular throughout the 1950s and early '60s (Lana Turner was reportedly a fan) and are hotly collected by jewelry enthusiasts. Unfortunately, around 1964, a cigarette-sparked explosion destroyed the partners' factory and inventory. "They were left with a couple of buildings and their own personal hand tools," recalls Jerry's son, artist Peter Fels. "Father had been wanting to do interior-decorator-oriented metal sculptures, so he and my uncle started again."

Good-bye, Renoir and Matisse; hello, Artisan House. Distributed by Raymor, a cutting-edge showroom in New York City, and retailed at Gump's in San Francisco and other high-quality emporiums, Artisan House's work was as broad as it was, on occasion, bizarre. Fels and Freiler introduced approximately 50 designs each year, most of them made at factories in Glendale, California, and the San Fernando Valley, though some aluminum castings were produced in Tijuana, Mexico.

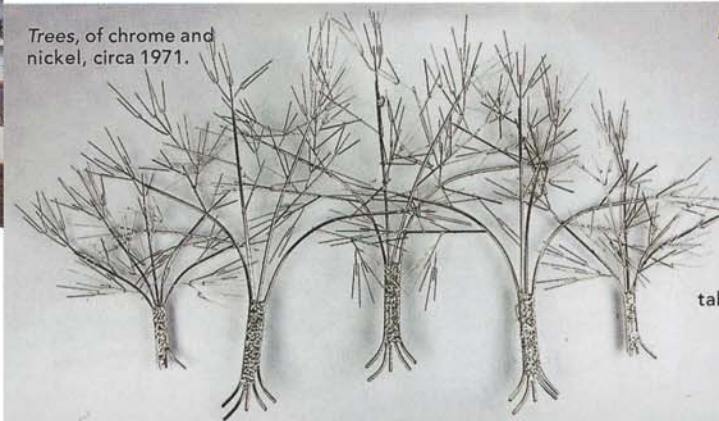
Everything was signed "C. Jeré" (see-zhair-AY), a creative contraction of the partners' names that led some observers to believe a single artist was behind the eye-catching works (fans also have erroneously called the marque "Curtis Jeré," because Freiler sometimes used the first name Curtis to minimize anti-German slurs).

Manhattan dealer Todd Merrill, who >



When Jerry Fels and Kurt Freiler met in the 1940s, it was a match made in design heaven. Not only did the young men become fast friends and eventually marry sisters, they quickly discovered each was the other's creative complement. Fels was a New York-born artist who served in the Army Air Corps in World War II, while Freiler, a German immigrant whose family perished in the concentration camps, was a manufacturing genius who never met a tool he couldn't adapt for ingenious purposes. Together they launched Artisan House in 1964, which soon became known for its highly ornamental and often dizzyingly funky wall sculptures. Today those

Trees, of chrome and nickel, circa 1971.



A 1970s brass table lamp.



The 1970s sculpture *Raindrops* in designer Frank Roop's Boston home.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF JONATHAN ADLER; COURTESY OF THE FELS FAMILY; COURTESY OF TODD MERRILL; ANTIQUES & 20TH CENTURY; PHOTO PROVIDED BY ANTIQUES DU MONDE; ERIC ROTH

APPRAISAL

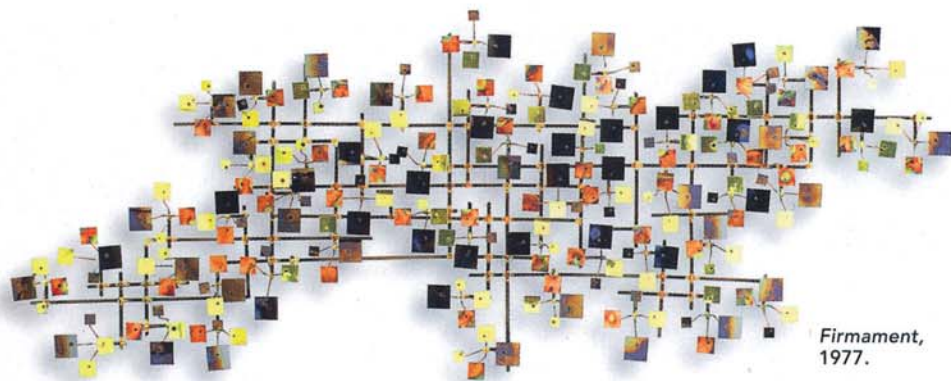


The Tree, 1987.

specializes in 20th-century decorative arts, describes the firm's work as ranging from "sometimes hokey to kind of organic to magical and very pretty." The array of charming tabletop sculptures included a lively enameled flower sprouting from a fist-size chunk of stone and a 17-inch-tall owl covered in curling, torch-cut brass feathers. One mirror was wrapped with a 12-sided frame of flashy faceted brass, while another was designed to mimic a large pair of aviator-style sunglasses. The company's lighting line featured a chrome-plated floor lamp that was nothing more than a miniature construction crane. A set of bookends looks like individual blocks of ice (actually textured greenish glass) gripped by large silvery tongs.

Most emblematic, and in especially high demand today, are the eccentric wall sculptures whose deftly patinated metal components are shaped into abstract and realistic forms: spiky supernovas resembling huge dandelion heads; picturesque streetscapes; the Golden Gate and Brooklyn bridges; a sidewalk-café scene complete with tree-shaded tables; even a hugely magnified replica of a bottle opener, part of a fabulous Pop Art–style gourmet collection that also included a giant whisk. Prices range from the low hundreds to the mid-thousands, depending on rarity and style, and they can be found at a wide variety of sources, from eBay vendors to deluxe dealers such as Manor Art in England, which is devoted solely to vintage Artisan House creations.

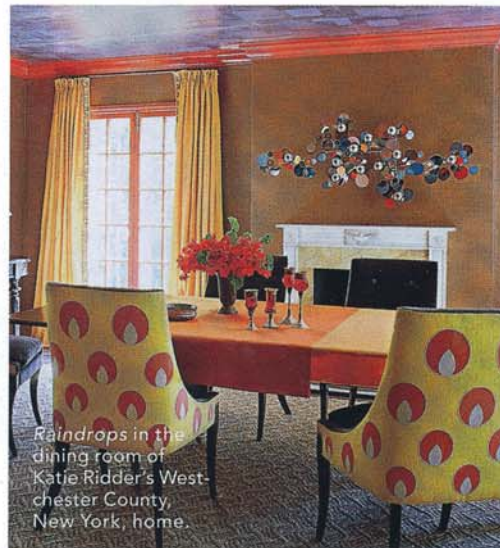
Designed by Fels as well as a group of uncredited freelance talents, including artists John Reistetter, Dorothea Casady, and BJ Keith (who still works for Artisan House), the works went from the drawing board into the hands of Freiler, who developed the intriguing finishes that became a company hallmark. "My uncle is an absolute genius," says Peter Fels. "He created mass-produced pieces that look handmade." Under Freiler's meticulous direction, the workers—a number of whom were minorities or handicapped—sheared, crimped, torched,



Firmament, 1977.

and welded brass, copper, and other metals before coating them with luminous patinas.

Interior designers David Jimenez and Emma Jane Pilkington both own vintage examples of C. Jeré's best-known piece, *Raindrops*, a flamboyant 1970s wall sculpture composed of wafer-thin metal discs arranged in an extravagant constellation that can be as long as six feet. (Jonathan Adler's six-piece collection of reissues includes two versions of *Raindrops*—a wall sculpture and a round mirror.) "I love how you can bend the bits of metal to your liking," Pilkington explains. "If you place it near a window, the discs reflect everything going on outside, whether the flashing red light on an ambulance or the sky filled with dark clouds." ■



Raindrops in the dining room of Katie Ridder's Westchester County, New York, home.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

If a vintage piece doesn't bear a scrawled "C. Jeré" signature and the year of production, pass it by. "Father and my uncle Kurt were very careful to sign their work," says Peter Fels. Quality is also crucial; Artisan House's welding is worthy of fine jewelry.

WHERE TO FIND IT

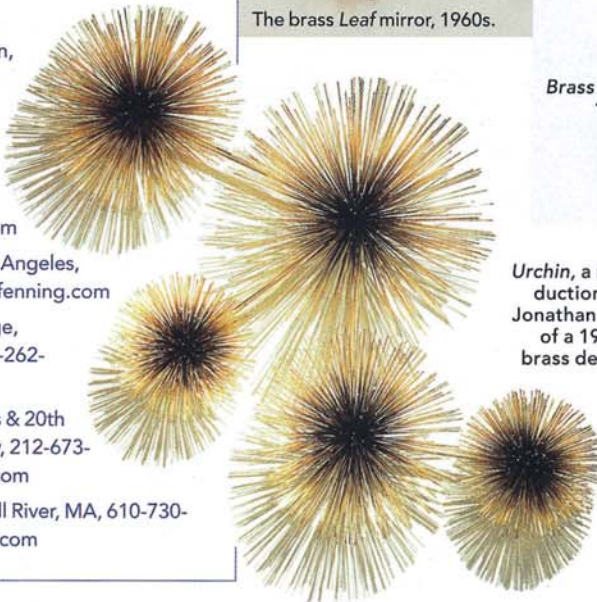
- 1stdibs.com
- Artisan House, Wilton, CT, 203-563-0017; artisanhouse.com
- Gustavo Olivieri Antiques, Wainscott, NY, 631-537-2811; gustavoolivieriantiques.com
- Lawson-Fenning, Los Angeles, 323-934-0048; lawsonfenning.com
- Manor Art, Cambridge, England, 011-44-1223-262-600; curtisjereart.com
- Todd Merrill Antiques & 20th Century, New York City, 212-673-0531; merrillantiques.com
- Tom Gibbs Studio, Fall River, MA, 610-730-8309; tomgibbsstudio.com



The brass Leaf mirror, 1960s.



Brass Tree, 1977.



Urchin, a reproduction by Jonathan Adler of a 1979 brass design.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: © C. JERÉ; COURTESY OF ARTISAN HOUSE INC.; WILLIAM WALDRON; COURTESY OF MONDO CANE; COURTESY OF ARTISAN HOUSE INC.; COURTESY OF JONATHAN ADLER