

Exhibition

Lacquer, Gilding, and Inlay Techniques Come to Life at the Berkshire Botanical Garden

An exhibition of Nancy Lorenz's artistic works displays an inspired series of decorative screens and more

By Madeleine Luckel

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Spring is finally in the air, and in the Berkshires, so are traditional decorative arts techniques. On June 1, Nancy Lorenz is set to unveil an exhibition of her lacquer works, fittingly set in the galleries of the Berkshire Botanical Garden's flower-filled grounds. The show is titled "Shimmering Flowers: Nancy Lorenz's Lacquer and Bronze Landscapes," but the works make excellent use of giltwork, gold leaf, and mother-of-pearl as well. It will be on view through early fall, and is being enthusiastically greeted by the garden's executive director, Michael Beck.

Beck and his team first encountered Lorenz's work in a San Diego exhibition. They were struck by her fine attention to detail, and her clear dedication to craft. Luckily for Lorenz, and for us, their admiration fomented into an offer of its own. "This is the first time I've ever had opportunity to exhibit in a botanical garden," Lorenz tells AD PRO. While many of the works on display are large in scale, others are quite small—bronze trays and tabletop mountains on which flowers can be arranged are two such examples. Regardless, the spirit of design may be best conveyed through Lorenz's emphasis on lacquer techniques, which she first studied in high school, along with other artistic practices in Tokyo and throughout Japan.

"The heart of my work is these really labor-intensive craft traditions," she says, adding with a laugh, "I'm always finding ways to make things take longer. That's where my work is heading. It's a meditative process." Lorenz begins each piece by creating a loose watercolor drawing on a gesso panel, before meticulously cutting each outline and inlaying it with mother of pearl. She then builds up a work with ten layers of gilders clay, which itself is a mix of various materials. The works are then finely sanded and perfectly polished—all before she begins to apply her lacquer colors.

As for the gilding, her process is no less intense. Layers of prep are required, as are gesso, clay, and a great deal of polish.



A close-up look at Nancy Lorenz's meticulously made works, which will be on view at the Berkshire Botanical Garden as part of "Shimmering Flowers: Nancy Lorenz's Lacquer and Bronze Landscapes." Photo: Courtesy of Berkshire Botanical Garden

After the base has been completed, Lorenz applies gossamer sheets of gold "that would blow away if you breathed on them," as she explains it. The gold itself is applied with water, and hours later, the work is hand-burnished with a piece of agate.

In many of her works, elements of nature are the clear focus. However, even when that is not the case, the materials Lorenz uses, such as her distressed cedar bases, harken back to the natural world. Another important facet is that Lorenz spent years running a business that specialized in restoring Asian antiques. And while understanding lacquer was of course instrumental to all this, Lorenz was interested in the scientific aspects of the work as well.

"Ultimately," she says, "it's about when you see something that's so sublime, [that you ask] 'How could that incredibly beautiful thing be made?' That's something I aspire to." Yet perhaps, as this new exhibition illustrates, it's something she has already achieved.