

NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE ARTS

# Showing her mettle

## Process revolutionizes jewelry making

By ELLEN  
PRITSKER

**T**here is a revolution happening, about which you may know little. CNN has not even touched upon it, and News Radio 78 may never even try. The revolutionaries have chosen an unlikely turf: jewelry making, and the rebel band is comprised of artisans using something called precious metal clay, or PMC for short.

Elaine Luther is a member of this merry band of reformers who are setting aside unwieldy, conventional precious metal for this much more malleable product. Certified by the PMC Guild as an instructor, she will present a workshop Nov. 18-19 at River Forest Community Center. Students will learn to use simple tools to complete attractive pieces in just two days. The fee is \$130 and includes one ounce of PMC. Call (708) 488-9577 for more information or to register.

"PMC is worked like Clay, but fires into metal," Luther explained. "It is soft and easy to mold, like potter's clay, but the product consists of microscopic particles of silver or gold, suspended in a binder that burns away at high temperatures. After firing, you



TamaraBell/Pioneer Press

are left with solid metal in the shape you've created. And the surface can be sanded, soldered, enameled, polished, burnished or otherwise embellished. It's wonderful because a student can learn very quickly how to work with it. Using standard hard metals, an aspiring jewelry maker would work really hard for six or eight weeks and possibly not even finish one piece."

According to Diane Mayer, a Lake Villa jewelry maker and certified PMC instructor who will teach PMC techniques at Vernon Hills High

School in March, 2001, the product was developed by Mitsubishi Materials Corp. of Japan in the early 1990s. The silver particles embedded in the clay-like binder are 20 microns in diameter. 25 would fit into a single grain of salt.

Mayer said PMC can be worked with the fingers or with simple tools to form jewelry that is lighter than a similar cast piece; it can also be thrown on a potter's wheel, to create a silver vessel with finger marks and texture

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Some examples of Luther's jewelry.

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characteristic of ceramic wear. Its extreme flexibility means that it can be used to create hollow forms such as beads, cups or pendants.

"The artisan shapes a core out of material such as cellulose or plastics, and the clay is molded around it," Mayer said. "During firing, the core literally 'goes up in smoke,' combusting through pores of the still-forming metal. This permits the formation of a completely-enclosed hollow silver or gold object."

Both Luther and Mayer are certified as instructors by the PMC Guild. The guild was founded just last year to educate the public about this extraordinary product, and a support for artists, instructors, researchers and other users. The Colorado-based guild sponsors the national certification program, publishes a newsletter and operates a Web site at [www.PMCGuild.com](http://www.PMCGuild.com).

Luther, a former Oak Parker now living in Forest Park, graduated from Oak Park-River Forest High School. She did not officially study jewelry design until college, although as a child she enjoyed craft activities and loved to remake her own bracelets by taking them apart and redesigning them. Since 1990, when she first took courses in metalworking and jewelry at the University of Iowa, she has not stopped.

In addition to numerous advanced courses in design and jewelry making, she holds certificates in colored stone grading and gem identification from the Gemological Institute of America, and has completed three core courses offered by the International Society of Appraisers, earning the ISA designation. She has taught jewelry making at the

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University of Illinois at Chicago's Center Studios, and teaches at the Indianapolis Art Center. From her studio, she designs and produces metal sculpture, as well as a line of sterling silver jewelry that is sold at the Illinois Artisans shops in Chicago and central Illinois.

"Actually, it's no accident that I've been attracted to working with metal," Luther noted. "I'm the third generation in my family to work with metals — my grandmother founded a thermocouple factory with my grandfather, and welded for their business. My mother learned to weld, working there during the summer."

"Working with metal was something I knew I could do well," she continued. "There is a belief that this is an arena for men, because it can be dirty and noisy — not usually associated with the feminine. It appealed to me to go against the stereotypes."

"PMC is the biggest new thing in jewelry in over a century. Jewelry making techniques have remained constant, although we did get electrical tools. I haven't really developed a line of pieces for sale in PMC yet, but I will. I'll probably be enameling silver pieces made from the product, or using other design techniques to embellish the surface. So the big change for me will be to produce silver pieces with a much more textured appearance, and lots of visual excitement."