



# Artist, free thinker, innovator, mentor

AND GUELPH SILVERSMITH IS STILL COLLECTING ACCOLADES AT AGE 82

By Barbara Aggerholm

**WHEN SHE WAS A GIRL**, internationally praised silversmith Lois Etherington Betteridge was making stink bombs under the basement stairs with her chemistry set.

She was a tom boy, with a sense of adventure and a spirit that would take her, at age 19, to the University of Kansas to study fine arts, and later to England to create studio after studio whenever her family pulled up stakes.

In the 1950s, a woman was more likely to be a teacher or secretary if she worked outside the home.

But Etherington Betteridge, born in 1928, daughter of “broad-thinking” parents — one a trained singer and the other a businessman and former Hamilton Tiger-Cats football player — always knew she’d be an artist.

And if it meant leaving Toronto where she was studying at the Ontario College of Art and taking a 24-hour train ride to Kansas on her own, so be it. She just did it.

She has always been independent, always her own woman, but she was never a feminist, she says.

“When I decided to do all these things and become a silversmith and the earliest in Canada and all that sort of thing, it wasn’t because I was doing it for women’s rights,” says Etherington Betteridge, who turns 82 this month.

“I was doing it because I was a person. I never was aware of anybody ever treating me like a second-class citizen because I



Photography • Keith J. Betteridge

Works by silversmith Lois Etherington Betteridge, shown in her Guelph studio, have been displayed in at least 26 solo shows and more than 130 invitational group exhibitions around the world. Above is a piece entitled *A Rose Is a Rose, Is a Rose...* Gertrude Stein (2005).

was a woman or an artist.”

Well, there was that one time, when a condescending art director in London, England, made her “a little angry.”

She was living in the Cotswolds with her veterinarian husband and two children, a toddler and a baby, when she decided to visit London to try to find other silversmiths. She presented her folio to an art director who handed it back to her.



Photography • Nick Iwanyshn

He had just two questions: are you married and do you have children? Yes to both, she answered.

“That’s fine; good luck,” the man said, and that was that.

Hardly.

“I walked out and I proceeded to do things,” she says simply.

And boy, is that an understatement.

Etherington Betteridge is a “consummate silversmith,” says the Society of North ▶



These rings are among eight styles Lois Etherington Betteridge created in limited editions of 12 each.



► American Goldsmiths, which awarded Etherington Betteridge the 2010 Lifetime Achievement award.

She’s “perhaps the most important influence in Canadian silversmithing in the 20th century . . .,” the society says.

Etherington Betteridge was the first university-trained silversmith in Canada when she finished her degree at the University of Kansas where both pottery and metal instructors had competed to get her in their classes.

Her work has been displayed in at least 26 solo exhibitions and more than 130 invitational group exhibitions around the world.

Over the years, she has accumulated many, many distinctions, among them the Order of Canada, the Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in Crafts, the Queen’s Golden Jubilee medal and the M. Joan Chalmers 15th Anniversary Award.

She’s known equally well for being an excellent teacher. Students come from all over Canada to study her techniques and she has given workshops across Canada, U.S., Great Britain and in Scandinavia.

For almost two decades, until 2002, she taught summer courses at the Haliburton School of Fine Arts. In 2000, seven former students paid tribute to the silversmith pioneer with an exhibition at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph.

Betteridge “has been recognized both nationally and internationally for the superb innovative quality of her own work in silver and also for her role as a mentor to a whole new generation of artists practising in metal,” says Judith Nasby, curator and director of the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre.

“She’s also extremely generous of her time and regularly brings in the third generation of artists wishing to become experts in the metal fields of working with silver, gold and copper,” Nasby says. “These young people stay with her, work with her daily over a number of weeks” so they can learn the master techniques.

Her work continues to evolve today.



## TWO VIEWS

Totcup for an Insomniac (1983), shown from the side (right) and from the bottom (above).

Photography • Keith J. Betteridge



“At age 82, she is still being as inventive as ever, making new forms often quite whimsical and complex in their technical accomplishment,” Nasby says.

Etherington Betteridge feels as though she is on the cusp of change.

On a recent day when the sun was shining into her studio on the main floor of the 1885 stone house in Guelph that she shares with her husband, veterinary researcher Keith Betteridge, and her dog, Tanner, the silversmith reflects on her next project.

The studio, off the kitchen, is surrounded by windows, a far cry from the basement studio she had in her former house. It’s nice to see outside, but more distracting than the basement walls, she says.

At her work bench, crowded with files, emery papers, hammers and other tools of the craft, she picks up one of the 144 rings she was making for a show of “2010 Rings” by 14 artists co-ordinated by the late Lily

Yung at a Toronto gallery.

Laughing, she describes how she and two artist friends “ranged around town” looking through goth shops and dollar stores for buttons and other small pieces to add whimsy to some of the “fun, conversational” pieces.

She telephoned her brother-in-law in England to ask if he could find some “lucky stones” – stones with holes through them – that she could incorporate in a ring.

“I was casting about for ideas,” she says.

Other rings are more serious, she adds.

“I’ve got 10 different designs I’ve made in wax,” she says. “I carve it in wax and then I have it cast in silver and then I finish it.”

She’s getting ready to do something else, though she isn’t quite sure what it will be yet.

“I’m waiting for an inspiration. When I finished the flamingo teapot, I had a lot of commissions and they were interesting.

“I really think I’m about to do something else. . . . Something is going to happen when I get these darn rings finished.

“I don’t see myself as going off in a wild direction, maybe develop another area.”

Throughout her career, the independent-minded silversmith never went off in wild directions, though it may have seemed so

to others when she started out. It was a time when silversmiths – especially female silversmiths – were few and far between. She didn’t know any other artists.

After graduating in 1952 with a bachelor of fine arts from the University of Kansas where she specialized in goldsmithing and silversmithing, Etherington Betteridge returned to Toronto.

She fixed up a dilapidated store on Yonge Street and opened a studio, complete with a storefront, against the advice of a female jeweller she consulted.

“I said, ‘I’m committed,’ ” says Etherington Betteridge, patting the terrier sleeping on her lap. “Once I start doing it, that’s all I want to do. I didn’t care if I starved.”

With a Hungarian restaurant nearby, she didn’t starve, and she remembers still the filet mignon it served with fried eggs for \$2.25. Once a week, she had her nails and hair done.

“It was important how you looked,” she recalls. “I wore high heels in my studio. . . . I wasn’t the artsy type.”

She got enough commissions to keep busy, and she learned how to enamel for one commission that required her

to make ashtrays.

“I had a homemade kiln that would make your hair stand on end,” she says. “It took a very long time to get it to 1,400 degrees. That said; I almost burnt the store down.”

At the time, Danish silversmiths were coming out with “marvellous new forms,” based on a pure, less-is-more principle.

“They swept over the world with their designs, so different from other things. I was definitely going in that direction,” she says. “My work is less-is-more, too.”

It was about 1978, when she was 50, that she felt the confidence to change her focus.

“I started being self-indulgent,” she says. “I made things that had humour and joy and happiness and sometimes didn’t even function.”

Her imaginative 10-centimetre-high Ice Cream Cone (1983), with its dripping silver ice cream and a cone with four small inlaid photographs of her children eating ice cream cones, is a good example.

But function does not take a back door in whimsical pieces like her Jewish wedding cup, spice shaker, honey pot and coffee server. Look closely and see a bee and section of hive in the top of Honey Pot (1976).

“Although there are times when my ideas are expressed in sculpture, I am primarily concerned with the functional object,” she says in an artist’s statement on her website.

“For me, it is a way to celebrate the many ‘rituals’ of our lives; rituals we may not be aware of but which, when celebrated, become meaningful, beautiful and formal, extending the role of objects far beyond mere function.”

Her silver Flamingo Teapot (2008-09), with its long-necked spout, spindly legs, knobby knees and webbed feet, can’t help but make you smile. ►

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Flamingo Teapot and Family (2008-09).

Photography • Keith J. Betteridge





► “It can function as a teapot, but you just really enjoy it,” she says.

After three years in Toronto, the young silversmith decided she needed to know more about silversmithing. She won a scholarship to study at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, and received a master of fine arts degree in 1956. Once again, she made the trek back to Canada after graduation.

“I felt I should come back to Canada because nothing was happening in Canada, and there was a little bit I could do.

“I guess I was pretty interested in instilling the knowledge in a number of people where there wasn’t anybody else to do it.”

Among her teaching positions, she was hired at the Macdonald Institute in Guelph, where its head, Margaret McCready, had built art classes into the institute’s home economics base.

“She put in a fully equipped silversmith room,” Etherington Betteridge says. There was also equipment for woodworking, ceramics and weaving. “She hired me and we developed the crafts more rigorously.”

In a “marvellous” classroom workshop there, Etherington Betteridge worked away on interesting commissions, including the Stations of the Cross for a Catholic women’s college.

But Etherington Betteridge, then in her 20s, wasn’t finished with her education yet. She decided that England, with its fine silversmiths, was the place to go.

It just so happened that she then met Englishman Keith Betteridge who was studying in Guelph for his master of veterinary science degree. In 1961, they married and went to England together where Betteridge, a pioneer in embryo transfer in farm animals, had a veterinary practice, then did research and worked on his doctorate.

Two young children and frequent moves to new communities didn’t thwart Etherington Betteridge from working on her art. She did private commissions and prepared for an exhibition in an Oxford gallery.

“In six years, we moved four times,” she



## A FEW EXAMPLES ...

Lois Etherington Betteridge was among 14 artists featured in a Toronto show called 2010 Rings this fall. Some of her 144 ring designs feature items from goth shops and dollar stores while others (right) have “lucky” stones her brother sent from England.

says. “I just simply set up and got to work.”

The couple returned to Canada in 1967 when her husband was offered a too-good-to-resist opportunity in Ottawa to continue his embryo transfer research. They stayed 13 years; then moved to Quebec for five.

With each move, Etherington Betteridge collected new commissions, including a gift for the provincial premiers, the prime minister and a board of governors of a silver ink bottle and pen on a soapstone slab.

“I got a young woman who’d assisted me when I was in Guelph to stay with me and we worked like stink,” she says, laughing. “There were 31. I don’t do two-of-a-kind.”

Later, she did many other presentation pieces and trophies for the Canadian government, among them the Peace by Peace Trophy presented to then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau.

The couple returned to Guelph to live in 1986 where Etherington Betteridge, now a

grandmother of four, works as a studio artist and continues to inspire generations of metalsmiths.

As always, she is advancing her art, but she doesn’t work as many hours as she once did.

Not that she wouldn’t like to spend more time at her work bench.

“I used to work all day and three to six hours at night,” she says. “I didn’t need much sleep.

“Now I don’t work at nights. I’m really mad about it,” she says. “I thought you needed less sleep as you get older.”

Now, she rewards herself with a ritual of her own after spending hours alone in her studio.

“My ritual, after a couple of days, is to involve myself with a party,” she says. “I work alone all the time. When I’m not working, I like to be friendly. I love dinner and a movie.”

While technology is changing some of the silversmith techniques, Etherington



Betteridge isn’t interested in pursuing them.

“I’m satisfied with what I have to express what I want to do,” she says.

She continues to be a perfectionist in a demanding craft that thwarts perfection.

Once, she spent four months on a spice shaker for a friend’s father, a man who had everything.

“It took me months to do,” she recalls.

“Chasing is very time-consuming and very rewarding.”

(Chasing is achieving contour in the metal by moving it, not taking it away.)

When she was finished, the ornate piece cost \$5,000. “I said, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll make him something else,’” she says, laughing.

“I always think the next piece is going to be the best piece and yet I know I can’t achieve the perfect piece,” she says.

“Nobody can.

“But I always strive to make it the best I can.”

*Lois Etherington Betteridge is represented by Harbinger Gallery on Dupont Street in Waterloo, and the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre on Gordon Street in Guelph. The artist’s website is: [www.loisbetteridge.com](http://www.loisbetteridge.com).*



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