

BOOK REVIEWS

Photography of Personal Adornment.

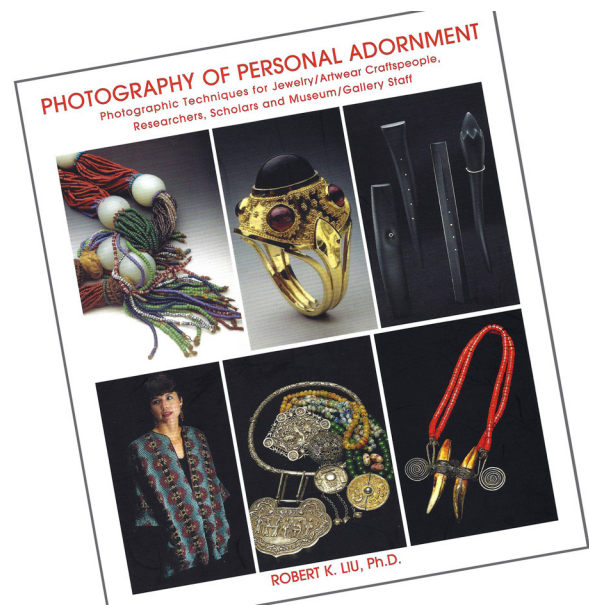
Robert K. Liu. Ornament, P.O. Box 2349, San Marcos, CA 92079. 2014. 160 pp., 520 color and B&W figs., glossary, index. ISBN: 978-0-692-32387-8. \$38.95 (paperback).

Just about everyone in the bead world is familiar with the luscious pages of *Ornament* magazine which are made so by the gorgeous photographs of sumptuous objects of bodily ornamentation. Created in a photographic style both highly recognizable and influential, *Ornament's* pages are very desirable places for artists' work to appear, in large part due to that beautiful photography. Reading *Photography of Personal Adornment* is like spending an afternoon surrounded by a pile of *Ornaments* from the last twenty years, engendering a feeling like visiting with an old and much-loved friend, but also making it harder to see the images anew for their being so familiar.

As the originator of *Ornament's* photographic style, Robert K. Liu, a self-taught photographer, brings to the magazine's pages a discerning and particular eye, one utterly devoted to showcasing beauty. In this book, Liu promises to show the reader how to compose works for photography, how to use particular lighting, backgrounds, and props, how to "see" what works and what doesn't, what to consider when shooting magazine and book covers and advertisements, and things to remember while shooting in non-studio settings.

Liu's Preface and Acknowledgements clarify his background and photographic education and set up the *Ornament* back story. The Introduction covers the general history of the use of first film, then digital cameras to document fine craft work, and discusses some shortcomings of the changes in how photographic images are captured, yet acknowledging the benefit of software to enhance what could only previously be done laboriously in the darkroom. A survey of photographic and studio equipment follows which, while thorough, is not meant to be an exhaustive study of what is needed or how it is used. Following the excellent base he establishes here, further reading into the use of digital cameras and the purchase, production, and use of studio equipment is advised. Liu's suggestions

for narrowing the many choices faced by the novice photographer are especially helpful. He illustrates his many points with good, if small and sometimes cramped, photographs of picture setups and photo studios.



Of especial use are images of the same object(s) shown with different backgrounds or lighting, to illustrate the differences that occur when one varies shooting methods. It encourages the novice photographer to test a number of different backgrounds, systems of lighting, and camera angles to see what best shows off an individual piece. With the immediate feedback of digital photographic systems, this is now easy to do. Sometimes the differences are quite dramatic.

With many of the shots, Liu discusses in great detail how the shot was set up, and describes the use of handmade devices to hold objects at particular angles or "levitate" them in the air so that they float freely. He points out the use of any number of props and systems for grouping objects, and introduced me to the idea of using a bit of beeswax to "stick" an object where it is wanted, without harming either the object or the background.

Ornament's photographs are so dramatic in large part due to two particular elements: simple, clean backgrounds (light-absorbing black Tuf-Flock, soft white backlit translucent Plexiglas, and light-to-dark shaded Varitone sheets) and lighting (softboxes, backlighting, reflected light). Liu provides significant information about both. Moving on in the book, he discusses the process for determining the best layouts of the pieces being photographed, compares ways to vary the layout, discusses imitation materials, describes how to create photographs of craft processes and what it's like in photographic and artists' studios, explains how to work with models, how to shoot beads, beadwork (though far less of the latter), and clothing, and delineates the process of setting up shots for magazine covers and advertisements.

Moving out of the studio, Liu writes about dealing with museums and the special problems of shooting therein. *Photography of Personal Adornment* ends with the photographing of events, including fashion runways and exhibition openings, and a glossary of photographic terms, references/bibliography, and an index.

Liu says "If you are lucky enough to get great material to photograph, it is almost a crime not to be playful." I think this is an important consideration to remember and it is well illustrated throughout his book. He also emphasizes the importance of shooting details as well as full shots for the additional detail provided in a closeup (i.e., the Asyut dress, p. 146; Kathleen Dustin's *Village Women* beads, p. 45). Throughout the book, he discusses the various craft techniques used by the artists, thus giving any reader who loves crafts a greater understanding of just how many of the pieces pictured were made, and emphasizes the need to understand what you're shooting so that you can shoot it properly.

It was sadly sweet to see the photograph of Gabrielle Liese in her younger days, reminding us that *Ornament* has been recording the history of the bead movement as well as the modern art jewelry/clothing movements, showing in the pages of both *Photography of Personal Adornment* and *Ornament* the work of many artists, scholars, and gallerists, recording important museum exhibitions, and noting the existence of the bead museums and bead groups now passed into history. This is an extremely important legacy to leave behind.

There are a few things I find uncomfortable about the book. It is in a smaller format than needed, squeezing much

text and many pictures into a page size that did none of them much good, with the text tightly kerned to maximize the amount of verbiage included. Some pictures were difficult to discern (i.e., some shots of studios) for having too much visual information crammed into them, and there were a surprising number of typos, a bane to someone like me whose eye cannot help but zero in on them. Sometimes the same term was rendered inconsistently (talhakimt vs. talhâkimt, for instance) or was used improperly (pre-columbian vs. pre-Columbian). Because the book draws exclusively from material shot for *Ornament*, the style is so strong and consistent that not only are many people already using it, thanks to the magazine's influence, but with the advent of *Photography of Personal Adornment*, many more will as well, thus potentially watering down the long-term impact of the style. It may have been beneficial to contrast the *Ornament* style with that of other photographers so as to offer further choices of how to approach the photography of such objects.

Overall, however, *Photography of Personal Adornment* succeeds because it takes a popular magazine recognized by most jewelry and clothing artisans, who likely have it on their shelves, and parses the process used in creating the photographs within, instantly giving the reader immediate tools for making their own wonderful photographs. Liu points out what succeeds with juries and customers, and gives people good and bad examples from which to learn. He discusses materials and processes that make good pictures much easier to take and answers the question many undoubtedly have had: "How did Robert take that picture?" He makes strong, beautiful photographs easily doable by anyone with a modicum of camera skills with a teaching skill that conveys important and complex information relatively clearly. I wished I'd had this book when I was shooting images for publications and postcards in the 1990s. Finally, unlike so many people who live "only in the now," Liu recognizes and points out that photographing all this material helps "preserve it for the future," even those photographs not intended for publication. This book is well worth adding to the library of anyone seeking to document their own and others' work.

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