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# *Touch of a Finger, Turn of a Phrase*

RING TOYS BY BARBARA WALTER



A graduate of Northern Illinois University with a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. in Jewelry and Metalwork, Barbara Walter taught at Oklahoma State University for two years before coming to Syracuse University as an associate professor in the School of Art Foundation Program, College of Visual and Performing Arts, in 1979. Her jewelry toys and metalwork have been included in exhibits that have toured the United States and Asia. They are also represented among the permanent collections of the Society for Art in Crafts, Verona, Pennsylvania; the Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and in many private collections.



**Note:** All dimensions are given in order of height x width x depth.

**DON'T RECALL** my first experience with metal, but I can remember spending hours immersed in the joy of discovering how easily materials could be manipulated by my hands. The sensations from feeling the surfaces change and move stimulated my ideas. It was difficult to determine whether the material was responding to me or I to it.

The wood scrap box in the basement was full of secrets that could be investigated with a few tools and glue. There were hand and power tools to do just about anything to a piece of wood. Metal, though, was the biggest mystery. When it came to working with scraps of sheet metal, wire, and rod, my experimentation was limited by a lack of tools and knowledge. Metal was capable of doing so much more than pliers and a pair of tin snips would allow. Even now, though my metalworking tools have become more sophisticated, that fascination with the medium continues to stir my curiosity.

Another fascination has also shaped my work, however: the ways in which human beings communicate. Sometimes what seems to be the most direct method, verbal communication, can become the most confusing and misunderstood. How well do we communicate? Is what we say understood as we intended it to be? The myriad connotations of words allow messages to be misconstrued—often, as in puns, with humorous results.

Many pieces shown in this photo essay are visual translations of puns. Ideas for them are culled from bits of conversations, daydreams, and scenarios. Each piece deals with the misinterpretation of what was intended. To understand the piece as a pun, there must be a change in the comprehension of the communication. A pun involves a much more complex connection of ideas than a straightforward statement. Two or more seemingly unrelated messages must be simultaneously concluded.

### **Two-Finger Carousel Ring Toy**

2½" × 1½" × 1½"

Silver, copper, brass, steel, pearl  
All color from metals

*The horses move up and down as they circle the ring while the benches turn in the opposite direction.*



Other pieces are derived from tongue twisters. The melodic sound and syncopated rhythm become almost hypnotic. The visual images coupled with each word combine into a crazy collage, which, when constructed three-dimensionally, results in an unlikely assemblage illustrating the rhyme. These pieces are similar to the ones generated by puns in that they, too, bring together disparate elements into a unified work based on a simple phrase.

I involve the viewer further by designing the pieces to be not only functional jewelry, but also mechanical toys. This playful involvement makes the relationship between the wearer and the piece more intimate. Rather than responding to the jewelry in traditional terms—as symbols of wealth, social status, or religious belief, for example—the wearer responds in much more personal terms, as one might respond to a nostalgic toy. This is the kind of bond I feel with my work and wish to share.

In artwork the success of the message relies heavily on nonverbal communication. There is a greater chance for artwork to be misread than for a paragraph written or spoken by the artist about the artwork to be misread, because what is expressed in the artwork is visual and more ambiguous than a literal or verbal explanation. Rather than try to clarify a single meaning in my work, I choose deliberately to confuse the issue until what is actually comprehended is the humor that can come from misunderstanding.

### ***Lion A Round Ring Toy***

2" × 1" × ½"

*Silver, brass, nickel silver, plastic  
Yellow and black ring sides and feet*

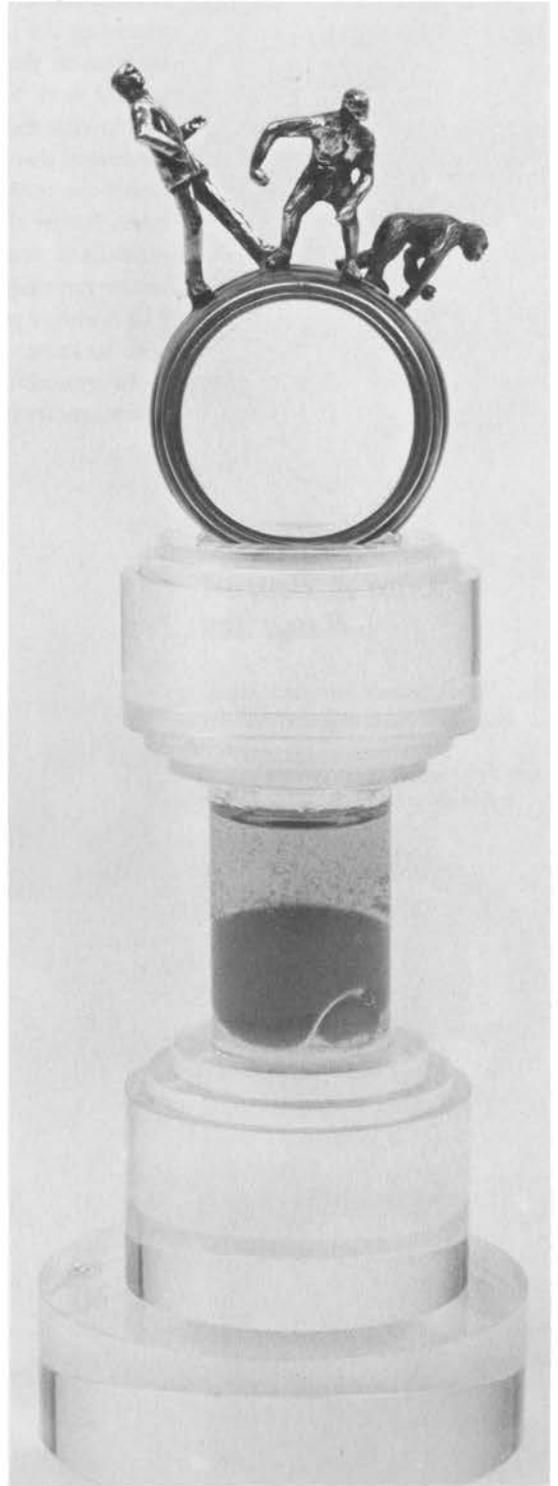
*The lion spins in the circle and hinges  
to fold down between the ring sides.*



***Monkey's Uncle  
Opposing Thumb Ring***

*1 ½" × 1" × ½"  
Silver, plastic*

*The man, Neanderthal, and ape rotate around the blue, green, and brown globe. The man may be positioned to be first, second, or last in line.*





### ***Flamingo Ringo***

*2 3/4" × 1" × 1"*

*Plastic, steel, brass, nylon*

*Blue ring with pink and black pattern, pink flamingos, green and brown palm.*

*When the tabs on the sides of the ring are pressed together the flamingos dance.*





***My, Isn't That A Lure Ring?***

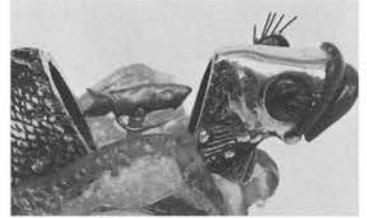
2" × 1½" × ¾"

*Silver, plastic, lure, horsehair*

*Red lips, green and yellow eyes, and blue water*



*When the fish is opened, a lure appears. If the mouth is opened, the eyes roll back batting the eyelashes. The tail is hinged to move from side to side.*



## ***Gopher Broke Wheel of Fortune Ring Toy***

1 ½" × 1 ¼" × ½"

Silver, brass, copper, plastic  
Red and black roulette wheel,  
multicolored slot machine disc

*The gopher splits to reveal a hand of cards in one half and a pair of dice in the other. The slot machine and roulette wheels spin on the sides of the ring.*



*Photography:* Steve Sartori/ SU Photo Center  
*Model:* Jessica Wiesener/ SU Musical Theater Program  
*Retouching:* Hans Otten