

## BABS BANNENBERG

By Ellen Goldman

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It is April. My husband John and I set off to visit Babs and Karel Bannenberg at their lovely home in Uitgeest. I have looked forward to this visit for, though Babs and I are good friends, we have not seen each other for quite a while. When we arrive, we find the coffee ready, and Babs and Karel hospitable as always.

It is not long before our conversation turns to enamelling, and to the [Jubilee Exhibition](#), organized on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Dutch Society of Enamellers VNE. This exhibition is touring our country at the moment. From the municipal Museum Rijswijk near Den Haag (The Hague), the show will travel on to three more museums in various parts of the country. On show are 45 historical pieces, on loan from several museums and private collectors, and about 200 works made by contemporary enamellers, Babs and myself included. Then our conversation turns to Babs' work.

Leaving John and Karel downstairs, Babs and I climb the stairs to her studio which occupies two rooms. One of these looks like a homely small gallery as it houses the works Babs considers to be finished. The other studio houses her kilns and the torch Babs often uses for her work. Small pots of enamelling powders and lumps line one wall, the other wall has shelves which store many things Babs likes to keep, or which are ready for use. Shells, pieces of drift wood, but also small artefacts made in the past. As she shows me the pieces of wood she has picked up on the beach, she says, handling them with loving care: 'Aren't they beautiful?' She adds a remark, typical for her: 'these pieces of driftwood do not really need any work done to them, nothing really needs to be added to their intrinsic beauty!' I can only agree. Babs makes me look at things with different eyes. Her enthusiasm is contagious.

Some time ago, I had sent Babs some small bags with enamelling powders I thought she might like to use, and Babs has taken the trouble to fire samples with these powders. She shows them to me, explaining that - alas- they are not what she has been looking for. It almost sounds as if she apologizes for disappointing me...



We go into the other studio room. Here, two largish statuettes take pride of place. Babs tells me that they are made from large pieces of wood, found in the ashes of a campfire on the beach. When she found the wood, it was totally black so at first she considered that it could not be used and she left it. But the blackened wood remained in her thoughts, so the following day she went back to retrieve it. She then worked on it till most of the black had been removed. What was left, reminded her of human torsos. She found that there was enough wood to make six of these. For the first she made a crown to wear, and gave the statuette a name: **King of my Ancestors**.. The five other works of the series of six are the Black Queen; Protomother; Son of the

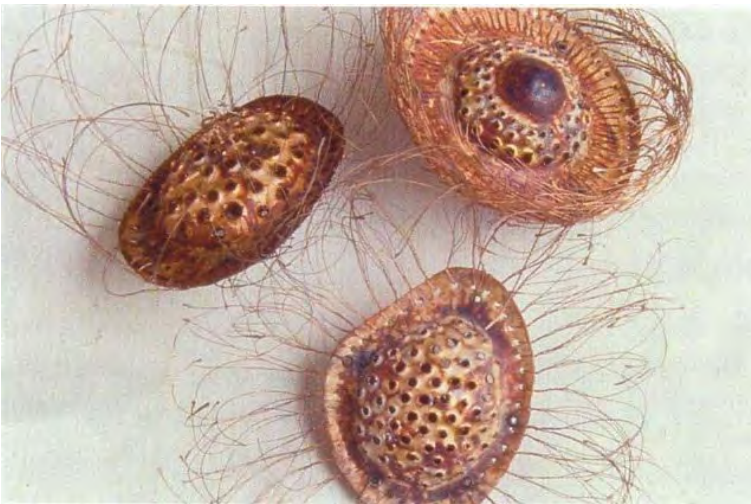
## Sea; Phoenix' Sister and the Goddess of Silence 'Aum'.

The Goddess of Silence Aum, Babs explains, wears a crown, but she has no mouth. She is neither the beginning, nor the end. She is the fundamental tone, the origin of sound; this is the alpha and the omega...

The principle of the returning of beginning and end, Babs says, also applies to thoughts; they form, repeat themselves, come together and link, and repeat again. It is an organic principle which you must see, feel, think about... this idea is given shape in many of her art works which have a certain, almost symbolic, movement. Babs takes flat or curved pieces of copper and links them together to form beings, strange creatures that seem alive because of the movement which is not lost. One experiment is, however, not enough.

Soon, Babs says, she will begin to wonder: what if I link these segments together in some other way? She tries it out, and the answer is soon given: another strangely moving work is born. This process may be repeated almost endlessly. It may result in creatures which are small, getting bigger and bigger, or larger creatures growing smaller and smaller.

In her work, Babs searches for harmony, and she tells me that harmony may, strangely enough, even be found in contrasts. She works in copper and in silver, and she explains to me that, though these two metals are very different to work with as they give rise to very different feelings and thoughts, her way of working does not change. As she works, she returns time and time again, to the original form.



I look up and above my head I see a copper chain made of tiny links. From it dangle a collection of strange copper shapes and forms, quite small. They somehow look strangely alive. 'Are they supposed to be animals?' I ask. But Babs tells me: no, they are not. They are objects, made for an exhibition of fragrant things. She takes one of these objects down to let me smell the faintly lingering

fragrance. These hollow shapes have holes punched in them, the two halves are held together with thin metal threads... they are part from a series **Sound, Scent and Touch**. (The Dutch title is slightly different. This is because Babs has a feeling for sounds and she tries to find titles that sound well together: 'Klank, Kleur en Geur' is, therefore, the Dutch equivalent of the English title. This attention for seemingly small things is typical of Babs.)

It is time to leave, but Babs only lets us go after we have tasted the soup she especially made for us. After lunch, John and I say our goodbyes and go out into the sunshine, on our way back to Den Haag.