

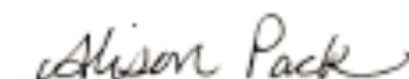
Fenix Fire

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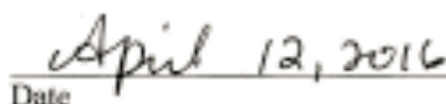
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art


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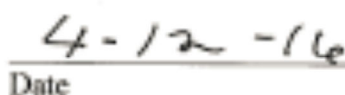
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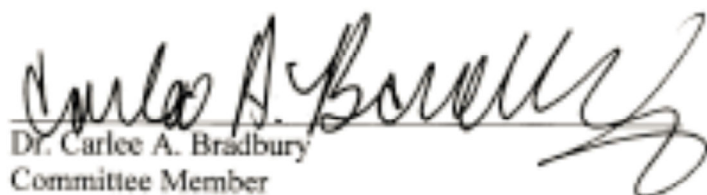
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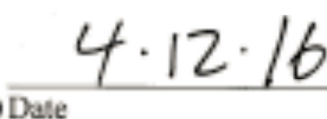
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## **Abstract**

My body of work was inspired by the myth of the phoenix and my desire to personify the classical element of fire. My fascination with phoenix imagery was sparked through my study of medieval Bestiaries. Bestiaries are manuscripts depicting the medieval belief about the natural world of beasts and birds, real and imaginary. The phoenix is described as a bird that when it reaches the end of its long life, builds a funeral pyre for itself and using the rays from the sun to set it ablaze. The flames consume the bird and after a period of time the phoenix is reborn from the ashes. The phoenix is used as symbol of the sun as well as an allegory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through my studies, I have grown a deeply spiritual connection with the phoenix and it began the development of a character that would evolve into the Phoenix Warrior, also referred as the Crimson Lady or Phoenix Child. Through this character study, I created a combination of pedestal pieces and wearable adornment pieces for my Phoenix Warrior in hopes to show the viewer a part of her world.

I choose to work with metals because it is one of the most challenging and rewarding mediums I have used. It involves a great deal of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as a lot of patience and time. When working with metals, I physically develop my pieces with my hands thus giving me a harmonious connection with my work. I used various metalsmithing techniques in the creation of my pieces, from fabricating to lost-wax casting. These casted elements often portray a pair of hands. These hands signify the Phoenix Warrior's relationship with fire and also serve as an example of how I use my hands, with the help of fire, to create my pieces. I wish to continue delving into this world of the phoenix through subsequent work. I plan on doing character studies involving other classical elements of air, water and earth.

Kathryn Mattox, MFA  
Department of Art, 2016  
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## **Dedication**

In memory of my grandfather, love has lifted you as high as you can go.

I miss you, Pawpaw.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor and professor, Alison Pack for cultivating my love of metals through the years as well as introducing me to other artists of the field.

I would also like to thank my other professors and committee members for their support. Professor Drew Dodson for providing an outlet when I needed a break from working long hours in the jewelry lab. Professor Dr. Carlee Bradbury for introducing me to the wonderful world of medieval Bestiaries. Without the Bestiaries the phoenix would never have risen from the ashes.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Eloise Philpot for reading draft after draft of this thesis, and I am gratefully indebted to her for her very valuable comments.

My greatest gratitude goes to my friend and fellow graduate, Kala Marshall for all her love, support and especially companionship during all those long nights working into the wee hours. We did it, girl.

Last, but not least I must thank my family for all their support and encouragement throughout my studies at Radford University. I could not have done it without them and I will be forever grateful to them all.



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## **Phoenix Warrior**

I am exploring the creation of objects that symbolize aspects of the classical four elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Due to the time consuming nature of metals, I chose to focus on the element of fire, through a character study of the Phoenix Warrior. The Phoenix Warrior is an ideal spiritual projection of myself. This identity is based in my own fantasy world where fire is held in great reverence. Fire is more than just a tool of survival in this world, but a mystic source of power and new life. Fire cleanses away imperfections and makes way for new life to bloom, by burning away the old that hinders growth. This idea is embodied in the phoenix, as the firebird is a representation of rebirth. The phoenix when it has grown old will make a pyre where it creates a fire from the rays of the sun. A few days later, it is reborn from the ashes of its former self. Through my studies, I grew a deep connection with the phoenix that inspired me to create the character of the Phoenix Warrior. The viewer gets a glimpse of this world through the depiction of items that would be worn or used by the Phoenix Warrior. These pieces have a ceremonial and ritualistic quality taken from an imaginary world, where the phoenix flies protectively over the land.

## **Tried By Fire**

One of my favorite bible verses is Psalms 66:10, which says “For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us by fire, as silver is tried.”<sup>1</sup> This verse became the inspiration for my sculpture *Purified By Fire* (see Figure 1). This sculpture depicts a silver lady standing on a sun being purified in a ring of fire as it swirls about her. I believe it is in our nature to strive to better ourselves, to become our “good” self. Once we achieve our basic needs of survival, shelter and sustenance, we desire for something more. We all grow, adapt, and experience success and failure. We are tested throughout our lives in order to enhance our existence. Like a piece of coal that endures the heat and pressure from under the earth, so it can become a beautiful diamond. Through the fire we are tested and purified like silver.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. 66:10 Douay-Rheims Bible



Figure 1: Kathryn Mattox, *Purified By Fire*, 2016, Sterling silver, bronze, copper, stains, 3 in X 6 ½ in X 3 in

## **Fantasy and Symbolism**

Making this body of work stems from my desire to express myself through beautiful sculptural pieces. It also allows me to bring my fantasy world to life and share it with others. Just like some of my favorite authors bring worlds alive through their words, I do so through tactile metal objects. The Bestiaries were my key resources for phoenix imagery, from the symbolic use of fire, nests, and ashes to the use of incense in my work. It is my hope to inspire others to reflect the beauty in their own worlds and to strive for their ideal selves.

## Research and Inspirations

As an artist, I am constantly inspired by outside sources, whether it is from books I read or movies and television shows I see or other artists and metalsmiths I study. When it comes to books and movies, I have always been drawn to fantasy worlds of myth and legend, where magic often plays an important role. I would often imagine myself part of these worlds and even created a few of my own. But there is one in particular that I continually find myself going back to, which is the wonderful world that J.R.R. Tolkien created in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series. Seeing his work on the big screen made me want to be part of his epic world where Hobbit, Dwarf, Elf and Man join together to battle against evil to save Middle Earth. This medieval-like fantasy world filled with a rich assortment of creatures would often become a backdrop for my characters. This eventually led to the Phoenix Warrior character whose world is based on a similar universe. The jewelry and armor from the movies also influenced my work as well, such as Galadriel's crown from *The Hobbit*. The crown starts at a downward point on her forehead and sweeps around towards the back of her head. This design is reflected in my *Fenix Fire* headpiece. The flame shapes start at the front, arching around the head and back around the ears towards the front, which also mimics the cheek guards from the many helmets worn throughout the *Lord of the Rings* movies (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Kathryn Mattox, *Fenix Fire: Headpiece and Breastplate*, 2015-2016, Copper, stains, 7 ½ in X 8 ⅞ in x 9 in, 17 ⅞ in X 11 in X 10 in





Figure 3: Kathryn Mattox, *Fenix Fire: Headpiece, Breastplate and Barrette*, 2015-2016, Copper, stains, 7 ½ in X 8 ⅞ in x 9 in, 17 ⅛ in X 11 in X 10 in, 3 ⅜ in X 5 ⅛ in X ½ in

Some of the artists and metalsmiths that currently influence my work include Robert Lee Morris, David Bausman and Ellen Starr. Robert Lee Morris is a jewelry designer known for creating wearable art in distinct, sensual and organic forms. I fell in love with his work, especially his early work which consisted of hammered silver and brass cuffs, breastplates and body armor in sculpted metal. His pieces reflect a post-apocalyptic world with the fusion of tribal and futuristic shapes. He inspired me to create my own body armor, but set in a medieval fantasy world rather than his futuristic world. Throughout his jewelry designs, he often repeats the same shapes over and over again in various sizes to make a new composite, which is reflected in my work through the intertwining of multiple flame shapes, like in my *Fenix Fire* headpiece and breastplate.

David Bausman is a metalsmith known for his functional sterling silver hollowware. He utilizes die-forming techniques to create pillow-like curvilinear organic forms that taper into points, which are similar to my own hydraulic pressed forms. He then combines several of these forms to create his animal-like vessels. This can be seen in his water vessel, *Airavata*, which has been featured on the cover of Lark Books's *500 Metal Vessels*. This particular vessel inspired my own vessel using die-forming techniques (see Figure 4). In his artist statement, Bausman uses his work, especially his vessels, to portray human relationships and sacred love. He wishes to convey the importance of balance, as it will strengthen relationships on a physical, mental, and spiritual level. This will result in the need for modern rituals to create closer connections physical, emotionally and spiritually.<sup>2</sup> I added to my body of work a ritualistic aspect focused on my spiritual connection with the phoenix. This is shown in many of my sculpture pieces, such as *Rebirth Incense Reliquary* (see Figure 5). The reliquary holds an incense cone that can

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<sup>2</sup> David Bausman, *David Bausman: Selected works*, (San Francisco: Blurb, Inc, 2007), 3.

be lit allowing the smoke to swirl up around the stone egg, which represents the phoenix being reborn. For centuries and to this day, incenses are used for religious ceremonies, often as a means of purification, and even the phoenix uses sweet aromatic plants in its pyre. I was drawn to the use of incense in my work for these reasons.



Figure 4: Kathryn Mattox, *Flames Burn Auburn Pouring Vessel*, 2016, Copper, stains, 8 in X 9 in X 8 in



Figure 5: Kathryn Mattox, *Rebirth Incense Reliquary*, 2016, Sterling silver, copper, rhodochrosite, oxides, stains, 2 in X 4 in X 2 in. Photo by: Rachel DeBusk

Ellen Starr is an artist who works in various mediums including woodworking, painting and metalsmithing. Through her work, she strives to reflect beauty, spiritual symbolism, and enlightenment. In 2008, she was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer, which transformed her personally and artistically. Her artwork reflects the wisdom, healing and gratitude that came with the blessing of her awakening due to her diagnosis and her rebirth into a new life view. Her pieces express doorways of discovery and healing through the use of imagery associated with life, transformation and growth as well as the renewal quality of fire and sun imagery. In a couple of her pieces, she even depicts the phoenix as a symbol of rebirth. As in her work, I also strive to express beauty, enlightenment and restorative quality through my own work. I also use sun imagery in several of my jewelry pieces and sculptures. One in particular is *Filled With Fire Vessel*, where the sun holds up a small raised vessel. The vessel has a decorative stopper consisting of silver hands that are holding a flame, which are coming out of a nest that is on fire (see Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6: Kathryn Mattox, *Filled With Fire Vessel*, 2016, Bronze, copper, sterling silver, stains, 5 in X 4 in X 5 ½ in



Figure 7: Kathryn Mattox, *Filled With Fire Vessel*, 2016, Bronze, copper, sterling silver, stains, 5 in X 4 in X 5 ½ in



Furthermore, I must mention medieval Bestiaries as they sparked my fascination with phoenix imagery. Bestiaries are manuscripts describing the medieval belief about the natural world of beasts and birds. They are an expanded form of the Physiologus, a Greek text written most likely in Alexandria around the second century. The Physiologus is a compilation of pseudo-science, evolved from Eastern fables, Eastern and Western folklore, in which the fantastic descriptions of real and imaginary animals, birds and even stones were used to illustrate points of Christian dogma and morals.<sup>3</sup> In the Bestiaries, particularly the Aberdeen Bestiary, the phoenix is described as an Arabian bird that lives up to five hundred years. When it feels that it has grown old, it erects a funeral pyre out of aromatic plants, like frankincense and myrrh. Then using the rays of the sun, it fans the flames, which consume the bird. After the ninth day, the phoenix rises from its ashes. The phoenix is used as an allegory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Through studying the Bestiaries, I grew a deep spiritual connection with the phoenix, instead of just thinking of it as a beautiful imaginary bird, and it began the development of a character that would evolve into the Phoenix Warrior, which I also refer to as the Crimson Lady or Phoenix Child.

I am also influenced by the use of Celtic knots throughout the Bestiaries, as well as other medieval manuscripts. In its purest form, a Celtic knot symbolizes eternal life as it has no beginning and no end, just continuously weaving in and out. The continuous line can also stand for unity and oneness of spirit. I even recreated a Celtic knot out of silver wire for my *Crimson Warmth* necklace (see Figure 8). I also wanted to employ this idea of interconnectedness

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<sup>3</sup> Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 15.

<sup>4</sup> “The Aberdeen Bestiary,” University of Aberdeen. Accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/index.hti>, 34v-34r.

through the interlacing of my flame shapes where they are no longer individual forms, but have become interdependent as they begin to fuse into one (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 8: Kathryn Mattox, *Crimson Warmth*, 2015, Sterling silver, red jasper, fine silver woven chain, 1½ in X 2½ in X ½ in, chain length 22 in

In addition to medieval Bestiaries, medieval reliquaries also influenced my work. Reliquaries are decorative containers that were used to protect and display relics, which were important religious objects. These objects were associated with a particular saint or other religious figure, often a piece of bone, article of clothing or a piece of a cross. These relics were considered precious objects and the containers were crafted to reflect this by using gold, silver, gems and enamel. Reliquaries can vary in size from simple pendants or rings to elaborate chests. I created several reliquary-like containers from a locket to small-scale sculptures. The reliquary that holds the most significance is the *Rising Ashes Reliquary*, where a glass bottle, filled with ashes, is held up by swirling smoke above a burning nest to symbolize the phoenix rising from its ashes (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Kathryn Mattox, *Rising Ashes Reliquary*, 2016, Bronze, sterling silver, glass, ashes, copper, stains, 2 in X 5 in X 2 in

## Fire and Metal

I choose to work with metals because it is one of the most challenging and rewarding mediums I have used. It involves a great deal of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as a lot of patience. It is also very time consuming. When working with metals, I get to satisfy my desire to work with my hands; physically developing my pieces gives me a sense of oneness with my work. The evolution of the piece is as important to me as the finished product. I love watching my pieces evolve, as they seem to take on a life of their own and guide me to a complete ideal state. I worked with a combination of precious and base metals, like silver and copper. The use of silver accents in my pieces, reflect the idea of fire as a purifying element. This idea is brought to life in several of my pieces, but especially in *Purified By Fire*, as the lady is purified by the fire and is now completely silver (see Figure 1).

I used various metalsmithing techniques in the creation of my pieces, such as fabrication, piercing, and soldering sheet metal and wire. I used the hydraulic press, with dies I have made, to puff up annealed sheet metal into assorted shapes that were used in a series of pieces. This helped bring a sense of cohesion throughout my pieces. I used the press in order to mass-produce my fire shapes to use as elements in my compositional pieces, like the Phoenix Warrior's headpiece and breastplate (see Figures 2 and 3).

I also employed the lost-wax casting process to create sculptural elements that are then added to enhance my fabricated works. These casted elements often portray a pair of hands; these hands signify the Phoenix Warrior embracing fire as well as allude to her having the power to manipulate fire itself. They also illustrate my own hands and how as a metalsmith I use my hands, with the help of fire, to create my pieces. This can be seen in *Filled With Fire Vessel* (Figures 6 and 7), *Crimson Warmth* necklace (Figure 8) and *Heaven's Light Locket* (Figure 10);

each depicts a set of hands holding a representation of fire. The hands are always cast in silver to symbolize that the fire has purified them. The various patinas, stains and fire-finishes were used to achieve the desired appearances on my pieces in order to create a smoky fiery look and give the illusion that the work itself is fire.



Figure 10: Kathryn Mattox, *Heaven's Light Locket*, 2015, Copper, sterling silver, oxides, 2 5/8 in X 8 in X 1 in, chain length 24 in

## **Conclusion**

Through this character study, I have created a combination of pedestal pieces and wearable adornment pieces for my Phoenix Warrior, to show the viewer items that she wears and uses in her world. I wish to continue delving into this world of the phoenix through future work. I would also like to personify the rest of the classical four elements, air, water and earth, which was my plan from the beginning, but due to the time consuming nature of metals I had to focus on just one. In my work with the hydraulic press, I was limited as to how big I could construct my dies, thus constricting the size of my shapes. Metal has required a lot of time, problem solving and patience, but it has all been worth it to see my pieces evolve into a completed body of work, despite the many frustrations and heartache, which is why I love working with metal and will continue to do so. I hope in the future to build up my own studio and focus on creating, selling, and showing my work.



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## **Appendix: List of Terms**

**Annealed:** refers to the metal being malleable enough to work with, done by heating up the metal to a specific temperature.

**Die forming:** forming metal by forcing the material over a rigid object known as the die, which has the shape and contour of the desired shape.

**Enamel:** a vitreous, opaque or transparent, protective or decorative coating made from colored glass fused to the surface of metal, glass, or ceramic ware.

**Fabrication:** Building of metal structures out of sheet metal or wire using cutting (sawing/piercing or shearing), bending (hammering) and assembling (soldering, riveting or other cold connections) process.

**Hydraulic Press:** a machine that uses pressure to form, shape, or cut materials, like metal.

**Lost-wax casting:** involves taking a mold of a wax or plastic model, burning out the model and replace it with metal, such as brass or silver.

**Patina:** A colored coating on metal, such as liver of sulfur (which darkens metals).

**Piercing:** Work done with a jeweler's saw, particularly when cutting within a shape.

**Raising:** a metalworking technique whereby sheet metal is formed over a stake or other solid object by repeated 'courses' of hammering and annealing. The sheet metal, held at an angle to the stake, is formed using mechanical advantage by hammering just in front of the contact point.

**Soldering:** the use of alloys with specific melting points and surface tension to join pieces of metal together.