

The Wonders of Wire Embroidery:

# An Interview with Melanie Schow

A wire teacher since 1999, Melanie Schow enjoys introducing students to the world of wire and beads. She understands how even the simplest classes can be life changing. She recalls, "In 1995, I treated a friend to a wire class at the local bead store. She finished the class and went home. I went back for another class and another."



Melanie Schow

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**BEADING DAILY:** I noticed in your bio that you've been teaching wire classes since 1999. What kinds of problems do new students have with wire? Are there any tips or advice that you have for someone who is just beginning wirework?

**Melanie Schow:** I think the most common "problems" I see are more about philosophy than technique. As adults, we are used to being competent and I find it is hard for adults to allow themselves to be beginners. I combat this in class by giving my new students copper wire to practice with and showing them where the one dollar strands of beads are. I

encourage students to keep their early work so they have a reference to see how far they have come.

The other "problem" I see is students who say "I am a perfectionist" and question very minor issues in their work. What I tell those students is, "jewelry is worn at a social distance". When you work on wire you are looking at it very closely; when you wear it, people are looking at the big picture: the design, color, and flow, and not scrutinizing minute details. I encourage students to be patient with themselves and assure them that when they have been practicing the techniques for ten years it will look like mine.

One thing that is common in beginning wire workers is how tightly they hold the tools and the wire. It takes time to develop a feel, but most wirework can be done without using a death grip. I also encourage students to sit up straight, shoulders relaxed, forearms on the table. I also advise them to work sitting in a good chair with good light and to stretch their hands, shoulders, neck and anything else that feels tight about every half hour. If you love wirework, then buy the best tools you can afford. The quality of your tools makes a big difference.

**BD:** The *Coiled in Color* necklace (See picture next page, instructions are on *Beading Daily*) uses colored wire. How long have you been using colored wire in your work?

**MS:** I recently participated in a year long master class with NanC Meinhardt. While she is known for her seed bead work, her master classes are designed to take students who are competent in their medium and develop their perspective and discipline to move to the next level. In the master class, you learn to make art. The biggest requirement is to make a significant piece of work and at the end of the year, the group puts on an art show. This class challenged me in many ways. I found myself envying the students who worked in beads because they had color, so I looked for ways to add color. I started incorporating colored wire as a result of the work I did in the master class.

**BD:** What do you like about working with colored wire?

**MS:** Colored wire adds dimension to my work. It enables me to bring out the colors of the beads I am using or add a surprising visual pop where you might not expect it. There's also a financial benefit to colored wire, as enamel on copper is considerably less expensive than sterling silver. Because the color is baked on and the base wire is copper, the quality is there. Given the size of some of the sculptural work I have been doing, I am grateful.

**BD:** Do you have specific tips for working with colored wire?

**MS:** Colored wire is enamel applied over copper. As a result, if you use the wrong tool, hold on too tightly or your tool slips, you can scratch the enamel and the copper core shows through.

Avoiding this goes back to learning to finesse the wire, rather than holding on tightly. Some of my students use the plastic coating you can dip your pliers in. The students like this solution; I have not tried it myself. I still scratch the colored surface occasionally and for me that means making that piece or section over.

**BD:** Do you usually choose your beads first, or the wire color first?

**MS:** Choosing beads or wire color first is a chicken and egg kind of question. One day it's a particular bead that inspires me and I choose the wire colors that harmonize with the bead. Another day, I am in a pink and green mood and I find the beads to go with those wire colors.


**BD:** The project description for *Coiled in Color* states, "It started with some sculptural pieces, and she liked the result so well it was soon incorporated into her jewelry

*Dragon's Hoard* was done in collaboration with lampwork artist Robin Poff.





**MS:** My creative process is another chicken and egg question. At times, I am buying beads I love and know I will figure out how to use them later. At other times, I have something very specific in mind and I am looking for an artist who is willing to make the exact beads that I need. Some days I sketch, especially when I am not able to start on an idea. Mostly I jump in with the idea in my head and see how it evolves on my bench.

When I collaborate with other artists, I invariably have to sketch to communicate what is in my head. Dragon's Hoard, was done in collaboration with lampwork artist Robin Poff. It started with the dragon bead. I asked her if she was willing to create some additional body parts for me. Her answer was yes, but she wanted a sketch so she would know what to make. You can see segments of the dragon's body and his tail curled around his magnificent collection of "pearls and gem stones". 

To learn more about **MELANIE SCHOW**, visit her website at [www.bendwire.com](http://www.bendwire.com)

designs." Is this typical for you—moving between project types—from sculpture to jewelry? Besides jewelry, what other types of pieces do you create?

**MS:** Moving between projects is very typical for me. I usually have multiple projects in the works with more stacked up in my head or noted in a journal. I tend to dabble in most any creative activity that has lots of color and texture; spinning, knitting, the occasional seed bead project, and even doll making. One artist recently said to me she works hard at not getting distracted so she can continue to grow her primary work. I took that to heart. As she said, it's easier to be distracted than to stay focused on your work.

My primary work is the wire technique I developed in the master class that I call "Wire Embroidery". It is done on a large scale, worked over an armature to make sculptural pieces. The original piece was a human sized head. Lately, I have been working on spheres about 4.5 inches. Elements of wire embroidery are also incorporated into my jewelry designs like Coiled in Color. I am working to down-size the actual wire embroidery technique to something wearable; this has a bigger appeal for students.

**BD:** What is your creative process like? Do you sketch or make notes before starting a new piece, or do most of your designs come together "on the table"?



*Coiled in Color.*  
Full instructions are available on Beading Daily.