

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 19, 2017

## **VMFA exhibition to explore transformative power of jewelry, art objects**

*The Rachel Lambert Mellon Collection of Jean Schlumberger* to open February 10, 2017

Finding inspiration for his work in nature, the French-born designer Jean Schlumberger (1907-1987) created jewelry and accessories that transformed 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion. *The Rachel Lambert Mellon Collection of Jean Schlumberger at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, an exclusive new exhibition on view at VMFA from February 10 to June 18, 2017, will showcase a broad representation of jewelry and decorative objects from this innovative designer. Admission is free.

Artist-jeweler Schlumberger (*zhahn SCHLUM-ber-zhay*) transformed 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion with his creative designs for highly sculptural, vibrant and whimsical jewelry and accessories. He began his career crafting costume jewelry for the French surrealist fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli in 1930s Paris, before heading his own private salon at New York's Tiffany & Co. beginning in the 1950s. Schlumberger was known for his imaginative interpretations of animal and botanical subjects that came to define mid-20<sup>th</sup> century chic. His witty designs for objects ranging from cigarette cases and pill boxes to brooches, necklaces, and bracelets were popular with some of the most celebrated and stylish women of the period.

With 142 pieces, the exhibition celebrates the generosity of Rachel "Bunny" Lambert Mellon (1910-2014), a noted horticulturalist, philanthropist, and longtime VMFA supporter. With husband Paul Mellon, Mrs. Mellon, who was his second wife, also gave an important collection of French art, including important nuclei of works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre Bonnard, among many others. Paul Mellon also donated a large part of his pre-eminent collections of British and American art. These collections – displayed in a wing purposely built to house them in 1985 – are considered among the finest in North America. With Mrs. Mellon's extraordinary gift in 2014, VMFA now preserves the largest and most comprehensive public collection of jewelry and art objects by Schlumberger.

"This unparalleled collection of Jean Schlumberger's iconic jewelry, accessories, and other decorative objects was given to VMFA by Rachel Lambert Mellon, one of the most generous donors in our history," said Alex Nyerges, VMFA Director. "These extraordinary works – with their vibrant colors, exquisite craftsmanship, and natural inspirations – showcase Schlumberger's dazzling imagination and clarity of vision."

Dr. Mitchell Merling, VMFA's Paul Mellon Curator and Head of the Department of European Art, curated the exhibition with Kristie Couser, Curatorial Associate for the Mellon Collections. *The Rachel Lambert Mellon Collection of Jean Schlumberger* is presented exclusively at VMFA and features many works on public display for the first time. "The works of art that debut here collectively reveal the dedication to perfection and beauty that united the artist and his great friend and patron," Merling said.

### **Jean Schlumberger**

Born in Mulhouse, France, in 1907, Schlumberger demonstrated an early talent for drawing, but received no formal training as an artist or jeweler. After stints in banking and art reproduction, he created his first brooches from porcelain flowers found at Paris flea markets, which caught the eye of surrealist fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli. Schlumberger made his way to New York in 1940, briefly opening a small jewelry store there with childhood friend Nicolas Bongard, a trained jeweler. Around 1942, he returned to Europe to help the Allied war effort. Following World War II, he and Bongard opened a shop in a townhouse in New York's Upper East Side, where Schlumberger first met Mrs. Mellon in 1954.

In 1956, Schlumberger joined Tiffany & Co. as a signature designer, and he and Bongard were appointed vice presidents of an independent department within Tiffany's signature Fifth Avenue store. Schlumberger enjoyed total creative control over his designs, with Tiffany & Co. also permitting him to maintain an independent shop in Paris while creating exclusive works for their Manhattan flagship store. His reputation quickly grew among Hollywood stars, fashion experts, and other influential style icons from both sides of the Atlantic—many of whom counted among his closest friends. His clients included Princess Marina of Greece and Denmark (later the Duchess of Kent), Greta Garbo, Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Gloria Vanderbilt, Barbara “Babe” Cushing Mortimer Paley, Gloria Guinness, *Vogue* editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland, and Mrs. Mellon.

In 1958, Schlumberger became the first jewelry designer to receive the prestigious Coty American Fashion Critics' Award, and in 1977, the French government made him a Chevalier of the National Order of Merit. In 1986, one year before his death, Tiffany & Co. mounted a retrospective exhibition to honor his 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the firm.

### **The VMFA exhibition**

Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *The Rachel Lambert Mellon Collection of Jean Schlumberger* was curated by Dr. Mitchell Merling with Kristie Couser. The exhibition is presented in a series of galleries, with each room focusing on a theme among the designer's work. The exhibition also features an interactive gallery evocative of the artist's studio where visitors are encouraged to engage with the design process through a variety of hands-on activities. The accompanying Fact Sheet provides additional details.

### **Sponsorship**

*The Rachel Lambert Mellon Collection of Jean Schlumberger* is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The presenting sponsor of the exhibition is Elizabeth Locke Jewels, with additional support from the Francena T. Harrison Foundation Trust, the Peachtree House Foundation, Mrs. Frances Massey Dulaney, Sotheby's, and Mrs. Patricia R. St. Clair.

### **About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 5,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass more than 35,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is home to important collections of English silver and Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its 80-year history. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For — additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit [www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum).

### **Media contact:**

**Anthony Backherms** | [anthony.backherms@vmfa.museum](mailto:anthony.backherms@vmfa.museum) | 804.204.2705  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 N. Boulevard, Richmond VA 23220-4007