

This "Sky People" ring features platinum, yellow gold, a Ceylon sapphire, and diamonds.

Keith Belles



For many people, there's only one answer to the question of what to give that special someone this gift-giving season—jewelry. Beautifully formed precious metals and stones have been expressions of love and respect for as long as man has had the ability to shape and craft them. On these pages, meet some of talented artists throughout our area who are taking the centuries-old art of jewelry design to sparkling new heights.

BY MARY S. GILBERT

jewelry

by design

Keith Attwood

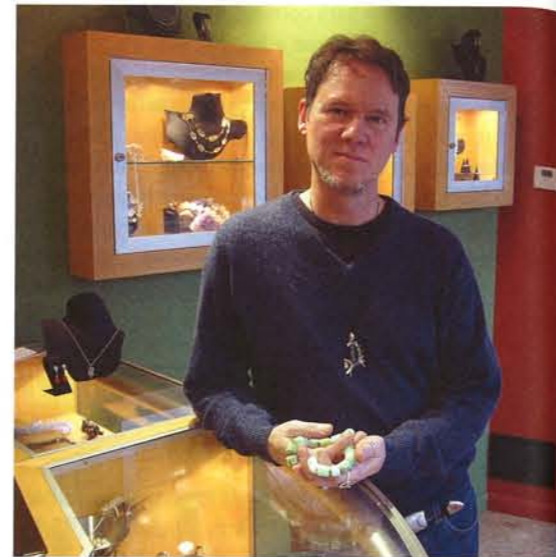
Celtic twist rings combine both white gold and yellow gold.



"Diamonds are a girl's best friend," sang Marilyn Monroe, but then so are other gemstones, precious metals, and natural materials of all kinds when talented designers transform them into wearable art.

But jewelry is more than a requisite fashion accessory and form of artistic expression—it also makes a public statement about the wearer.

Rings, bracelets, pins, and necklaces have the power to communicate stories and symbolize life experiences, according to designer Keith Belles of Wax Jewelry Design Studio in Shadyside.



Keith Belles says that unusual jewelry designs like his "either speak to you or they don't."

"I'm less into bling and more into jewelry that has meaning," Belles explains.

It's a message that his customers have taken to heart.

One patron used to sign love notes to his fiancée with the letter X. Belles was so intrigued with the romantic intent behind that gesture that he placed an X on the palm side of her wedding band. Each time the woman opens her hand she now sees the X and recognizes the ring as a gift from her husband.

A classically trained sculptor, Belles has studied the jewelry and artifacts of ancient civilizations, and he often incorporates meteorite fragments, fossils, and custom-carved gemstones into his works.

He recalls another customer who survived a cathartic event and found solace in the story of Dante's Inferno, albeit reversed as an escape from the darkness of Hell. "We made the flames in petrified dinosaur bone for the look of red," Belles describes. "Dante's face was like the classical Michelangelo-carved face of David. Luckily, my customer was a size 13, so we had room to work. The owner lived that story."

"These examples are what elevate a ring to an heirloom to be passed down for generations and for the story to be retold," he adds.



Keith Attwood spends most of his days at work in the back room of his South Side shop.

Keith Attwood, owner of Attwood Goldsmiths on the South Side, offers a broad range of styles—from arts and crafts to Celtic, art nouveau to simple, crisp architectural modes. More personal than mere jewelry, his creations are tantamount to miniature sculp-



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tures that reflect peoples' feelings for themselves and for each other.

"I design the piece, but I do it to reflect the feelings and tastes of the people I'm working with, and I work from their point of view," says Attwood, a native of the United Kingdom, whose grandfather was an Irish goldsmith. "I do a lot of wedding bands and engagement rings for people looking for something they can't find anywhere else."

His medium of choice? Gold. "Gold is \$1,000 an ounce now, and that reflects its preciousness and scarcity value," Attwood says. "When you have jewelry made by a craftsman, you want materials that last forever, and gold is that material. I also love to work with color. I just love beautiful things."

New to the Attwood workshop is the family's next generation of designers—his daughter, Chelsea. She has a less traditional, more spirited sensibility informing her craft, he says. "I look at Chelsea's work as whimsical and fun, with a certain lightness that I find refreshing," he muses. "She has a line of silver jewelry that is well-designed in the arts and crafts feel."

The process to design and produce jewelry can take several weeks or more from start to finish. The major steps include drawings, wax models, casting, stone setting, and finishing details. Yet listening may be a custom jewelry designer's most critical skill, according to Robert Hallett of Robert Hallett, Goldsmith in Oakmont.

From the outset, success of the piece depends on the initial creative concept, which develops from a give-and-take exchange between the designer and customer. Questions about lifestyle, fashion tastes, intended wear, personality, and budget are fundamental to the discussion. Many customers bring in old jewelry—family heirlooms, items from past relationships, or pieces that no longer look or feel fresh—and ask designers to use them as raw materials to craft new pieces.

"Customers know specifically what they want, or vaguely know, or don't know at all," Hallett says. "I try not to 'sell' anything. If someone asks, 'What should I have?' then I try to turn it around to see what they want. Customers come in happy, and you have to



When creating his designs, Robert Hallett often uses machinery that is nearly a century old.

Robert Hallett



A yellow gold and diamond ring with decorative beading.

keep them that way. I have a reputation for making people happy and for quality. It helps that you start with really beautiful materials."

Hallett draws his inspiration from architecture, tools, old jewelry, the early 1970s, Danish minimalism, and even magazine clippings. The result includes pieces such as a platinum earrings set with natural pyrite crystals and small, emerald-cut rubies that won a prestigious Spectrum Award from the American Gem Trade Association.

"I've done lots of challenging pieces, everything from a juke box pendant to miniature academic chairs, but I'm most proud of the pieces that have won industry awards," he exclaims. "They were made in a short period of time. I threw out practicality and just had fun with the designs."



The sterling silver "butter ring" set with a smoky quartz stone.

Caesar Azzam



Caesar Azzam examines a work-in-progress at his Shadyside studio.

Caesar Azzam is a third-generation jeweler who owns Caesar's Designs Fine Jewelry Creations in Shadyside. He began his career as a banker, but the inherent pull of his DNA won out. He relishes customers' reactions to his designs.

"I like seeing jewelry on people, especially one of my custom pieces," he says. "My litmus test for how happy customers are is when they give me a hug—and I've had a lot of hugs."

Azzam's claim-to-fame is the "butter ring," a rounded triangle with a wide bottom that balances on your finger, which he designed to create a shape with a unique look that would be effortless to wear. "It's so smooth that the name was a joke at first and then took hold," he says. "The inside is rounded so you barely feel it. It's smooth like butter."

"I like wearable pieces that have simple lines," Azzam continues. "But also have some particular features that make them special and that at the same time are comfortable to wear. It's not just the look for the sake of the look."

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JEWELRY BY DESIGN



Nina Pugliese

Blue topaz stones hang from the yellow gold loops of this necklace.

Jon Anderson

A yellow gold necklace with rutilated quartz and diamond pendant.

Nina Pugliese and Jon Anderson are the in-house designers at Henne Jewelers in Shadyside. Her specialty is colored stones, 18K gold, pearls, and sterling silver. Anderson, who also is a goldsmith, focuses on engagement rings, mostly in platinum. While they bring diverse, yet complementary perspectives to their work, both start their pieces with a clear sense of their customers.

Anderson adheres to the "form follows function" tenet of renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright. "Jewelry must be functional, wearable, and durable," he explains. "I work backward. I have the finished piece in mind first. Regardless of what I'm making, if it looks even better than I thought it would, then I'm satisfied that I've done my work and added my own artistic flair."

Pugliese, on the other hand, thinks of jewelry more in a fashion mode.

"I like the way jewelry looks, and I want it to be wearable more on a daily basis versus an occasion," she says. "You wear jewelry to adorn yourself and to look good."



Jon Anderson and Nina Pugliese form the design team at Henne Jewelers.

Current trends are calling for bigger, chunkier looks, and color is holding its own, Pugliese says. Yellow gold is more in style now than it has been for 10 years, she adds, while platinum is still a popular choice in bridal.

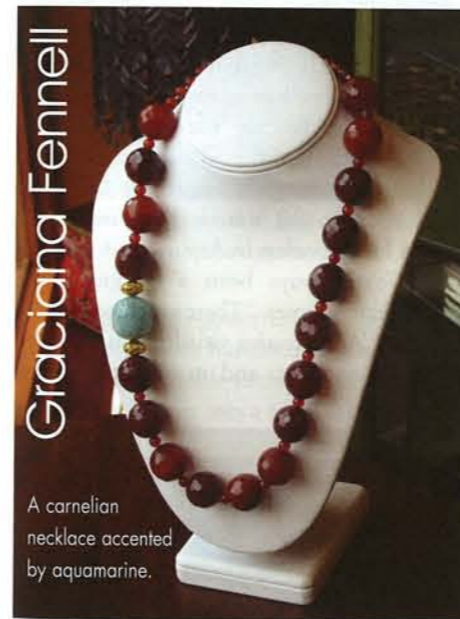
"My goal is that I want to like it when I'm done to the point that I'd like to keep it," Pugliese says. A customer from Italy apparently felt the same when she actually bought the leather and citrine necklace right off the jewelry designer's neck.

That bond between a jewelry designer and her work is almost maternal in nature for Graciana Fennell, owner of Gardell Designs, a custom jewelry design studio in Shadyside. When asked whether she has a favorite piece in her one-of-a-kind collection, she answers freely, "Do you have a favorite child?"

Fennell trained as a pediatrician in Argentina, Italy, and the United States, but throughout her career as a physician, she would always draw and design jewelry as a hobby—and respite from the pressures of medicine.



Graciana Fennell creates her jewelry designs surrounded by the smell of scented candles and the sounds of soothing music.



A carnelian necklace accented by aquamarine.

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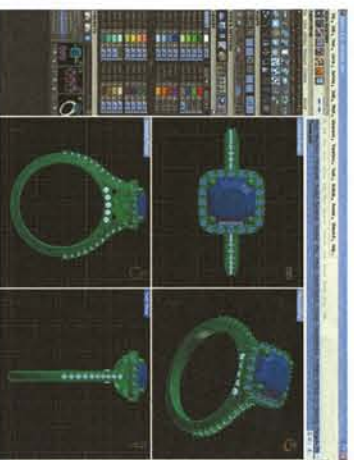
Nine years ago, during a trip to visit her sister in Arizona, Fennell purchased some gems that inspired her to finally begin transforming her designs into reality. "It just kind of escalated to the point where the hobby was completely out of control," she recalls. "One time my husband came down to the basement at 7 a.m., and only then did I realize I had been up all night, completely in another world, making pieces."

Today Fennell does her jewelry-making from the work studio—which she calls her "sanctuary"—adjacent to her showroom. The self-taught designer likes to fuse antique-feeling creations with innovative chains that incorporate semiprecious stones, along with rubies, sapphires, and other gems. Black diamonds are another favorite for their organic allure. "There's a warmth and peace to my work that just comes alive, more than what you might find in a traditional jewelry shop," Fennell says.

But even more conventional shops are changing their ways thanks to a technology called computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing, or CAD/CAM, which is now being applied to jewelry design.

Hallett says he began his career like an old-time jeweler, purchasing tools from the early 1900s and embracing old-fashioned goldsmithing in the tradition of two centuries ago. About five years ago, however, he became a CAD convert. So, too, is Jack Tesouro of Chapel Hills Jewelers in Aspinwall.

"We've always been a designer-based store," Tesouro notes. "There are three components of CAD: creative visualization, a skilled computer operator, and making the design



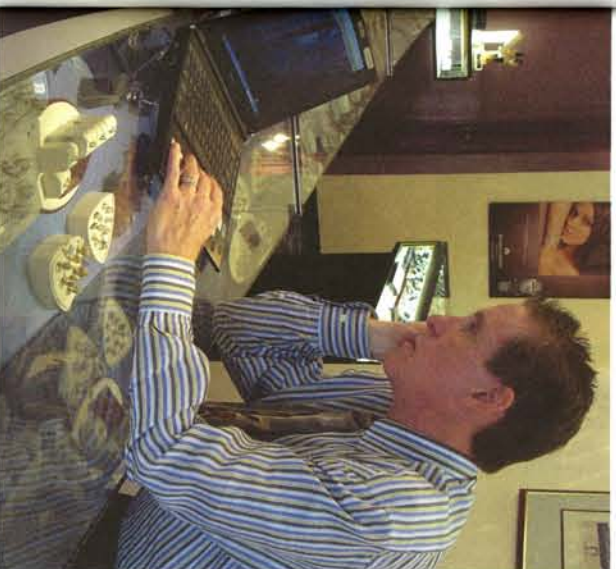
A Tesouro CAD design (above)—and the finished product in white gold and diamonds.



Jack Tesouro

work on the bench. With CAD we can show the piece in various views and create a virtual reality piece so the customer will see what the finished piece will look like."

Tesouro demonstrates how the system enables him to produce a pendant depicting celestial bodies in exacting detail. "For the center of the piece we mapped a photo of the moon on a computer and put it into the CAD system," he points out. "Our moon will have the textures and craters of the real moon."



Jack Tesouro refers to one of his CAD designs while talking on the phone with a customer.

Using a high-power microscope, Tesouro can set a piece with hundreds of stones so small they are barely visible to the naked eye. Where the average jeweler uses a torch for welding, he uses lasers to do incredible detail work.

While CAD/CAM makes possible some design that cannot be done by hand and reduces labor costs, not everyone is a fan.

"My CAD design system is in my head and hands," Artwood asserts. Henne's Anderson also says he does not use a computer, citing his concerns about the mechanics. Ultimately though, the designers all agree, what matters most about custom-designed jewelry is what the piece means to the customer.

Michèle Mackey, a Squirrel Hill resident and Belle's customer at Wax Jewelry Design Studio, can attest to the power of jewelry. "We adopted a young woman whom I used to teach," Mackey says. "We had Keith make her a bangle to commemorate the adoption. He put a verse along the outside of the bangle and inside we wrote a personal message to her."

"It wasn't the most intricate thing he has done for me," she shares. "But it was a very meaningful way to let her know how much we love her and how much she has enriched our lives."