

NEW! Stone Setting Challenge, PAGE 8 **PLUS: Tools You Can Make**

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LAPIDARY JOURNAL

JEWELRY

ARTIST

JUNE 2010

learn how
to etch
copper
and more

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5 Basics

ABOUT ULTRACHIC
AND AFFORDABLE
RAW DIAMONDS

Fuse a Silver Wire Wedding Band

and explore
more bridal
alternatives



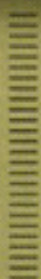
Design with Etching

✦ Set etched copper in a Southwest style pendant

USE ACCENTS

make 2-toned
earrings
of bronze and
steel clays

make a bronze
pendant
with silver and
stone accents

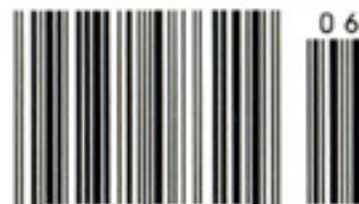


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PAGE 42

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06



REINVENTING THE

Wedding Ring

Wedding rings are finally breaking out of their conventional mold — good news for jewelry artists

BY CATHLEEN McCARTHY

More than 2 million people will marry in the U.S. this year and not all of them will be satisfied with a band from the local mall's big chain jewelry store. Many couples are seeking rings that say something more personal than "Hands off, I'm married" or "Look how wealthy I am" — and not just for brides, but grooms as well.

Custom wedding rings are helping many jewelry artists weather the recession. As Vermont-based jewelry artist Jacob Albee puts it, **"The bottom may be falling out of the economy and the luxury market is taking a major hit, but people are still getting married."**

MARRIED IN METEORITE

Despite the fact that his specialty is meteorite jewelry, Albee has seen a sharp rise in his bridal business — from a dozen rings two years ago to 50 last summer. It helps that his rings incorporate gold and diamonds, and that their sleek design has unisex appeal. It doesn't hurt that Vermont is now the second most popular destination-wedding state after California. "Given that Vermont has a population of about 600,000, compared to California's 4 million, that's a booming wedding business," Albee points out.

Despite the overall caution about spending right now, he finds many people are willing to splurge on their wedding rings. "Young couples getting married without much disposable income are still willing to spend \$2,000, \$3,000 or even \$4,000 on their wedding jewelry, knowing they might not spend that amount on anything else this year," he says. "That's always a fun customer because they see the intrinsic value in it. They figure, 'I'm going to be wearing this for the rest of my life and I want it to be as awesome as it can be.'"

Albee says customers often come into his Vermont studio, look at the rings on display, and ask, "Are these wedding rings?" Albee or his wife Kristin reply, "They're whatever you want them to be."

Usually a couple will request alterations: a more rounded top, rose gold instead of yellow, more stones or fewer, a narrow or wider band. Recently an older couple celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary asked Albee to make them new rings for the occasion. He made the woman a ring with a larger stone, then set the tiny baguette diamond from her original engagement ring in a band for her husband.

"It's a pretty individual thing every time," Albee says, but the final product is always a version of his existing designs. "I don't want to spend my time making something I don't like."



For some of his more unusual wedding rings, Jacob Albee combines meteorite with gold and diamonds.

COLLABORATING WITH COUPLES

For artists like Albee who have a signature look, making wedding rings is a matter of tweaking a prototype. Others, like Jim Dailing, see it as an opportunity to create something from scratch in collaboration with the bride and groom.

Dailing meets with couples a few times in his Portland, Oregon, studio, showing them rings he's made and discussing techniques. His primary goal in initial conversations is to open their minds to the possibilities. He gets them talking about things other than jewelry: what kind of art they like, textures they're drawn to, nature, their favorite places to travel.

These discussions often lead to rings completely different from the couple's original vision. A lesbian couple, for example, brought in photos of Art Nouveau jewelry and rings by Todd Reed "which I adore," Dailing says. "But as we began to talk, one of them showed me her tattoo of an Inuit raven design, a powerful symbol in her life." He ended up carving the symbol into both rings using lost-wax casting, incorporating the textural quality of historic totem poles.

Another couple in their 50s mentioned that they collect Japanese woodblock prints and brought a book of them on their next visit. They ended up choosing a beautiful still life of maple leaves floating on water, and Dailing created a stylized version in 24K gold inlay.

"Typically, my customers are less interested in brand recognition or status symbols than who they are as individuals," he says. Because customers have a hard time visualizing the rings from sketches, Dailing often makes a prototype in sterling so they can see it in three dimensions.

Designing this way can be very gratifying. "One thing I love is that I get a lot of hugs from my clients," Dailing says. "Many times people come to me because they simply can't find what they want anywhere else — because it doesn't exist yet."

CUSTOMIZING RAW DIAMOND RINGS

Todd Reed has made wedding rings for almost two decades. It was a logical progression for a goldsmith who specializes in diamonds, albeit uncut ones. Reed now sells between 10 and 20 wedding rings or sets a month. Reed credits the increase to the booming demand for sustainable jewelry — he uses only traceable rough diamonds and gold — and the trend among young couples to opt for less conventional rings for both bride and groom. Increasingly, that includes couples made of two brides or two grooms.

Reed began promoting his commitment to sustainable materials and social responsibility in the 1990s, which put him in a strong position when the public discovered "blood diamonds" and began questioning the source of jewelry materials. Legalization of gay marriage also expanded his already strong gay market.

"For the last 19 years, my customers have been 55- to 75-year-old women and gay men," Reed says, "but in the last five years, the bridal market really opened up." Lesbian couples have begun buying his bands, as well as "people in their 20s and 30s who are interested in breaking with tradition and getting something unique." That crowd is particularly motivated by sustainability. "It's amazing how many people search for sustainable jewelry now."

Reed enjoys working directly with couples to customize their rings. He now travels the country, doing this at stores that carry his jewelry as well as his own studio in Boulder, Colorado. He puts customers at ease by focusing the discussion on design, not price.

Find them

Jacob Albee, www.jacobalbee.com

Jim Dailing, www.jimdailing.com

Pat Flynn, www.patflynninc.com

Todd Reed, www.toddreed.com

Marne Ryan, www.marneryan.com

Jim Dailing.
POLKA DOT RING
18K palladium
white gold band,
24K dots and
natural colored
diamonds.

ARCHITECT'S RING
18K white gold.





Todd Reed.
ABOVE LEFT
 18K yellow gold, silver and palladium rings with rose cut diamonds, brilliant cut diamonds and raw diamond cubes, hand forged and fabricated.

ABOVE RIGHT
 18K yellow gold rings with princess cut diamonds and raw diamond cubes, hand forged and fabricated.

LEFT
 18K yellow gold rings with rose cut diamonds, brilliant cut diamonds and raw diamond cubes, hand forged and fabricated.

After they've decided on a basic style, he asks how much they can spend and shows them which stones, metals and widths are available in their price range. "That person getting the \$2,000 ring feels just as special as the one getting the \$100,000 ring because the whole process is the same," Reed says.

Typically, Reed will sketch while they talk. "They'll say, 'Oh, I don't like that' or 'I love that.' I'll bang out a shank and put stones on and then it'll be 'Ah, I thought I liked that but I really like that.' Relationship is a process and building this is a privilege. The reason they come to me is to have that experience.

"It's not random," he adds. "I know how to drive them and move things along. If the process starts getting annoying and futile, I'm the first to tell them it's not going to work out. I do have those experiences, too, but most of the time it goes well."

LEAVE IT TO THE GALLERIES

Pat Flynn prefers to let galleries handle his ring orders. Because he designs with diamonds and precious metals set in black, forged iron, his rings appeal to men as well as women, and many buy them as wedding bands.

Occasionally, a fan of Flynn's work will ask him to design a custom ring, but he often regrets taking these commissions. "Guiding clients in the right direction takes a certain skill and a certain confidence, the ability to tell people what you want to make and then convince them that's what they want," he says. "I'm not really good at that so I shy away. I prefer building work for myself, sending it to galleries and letting them put it out in the world."

Flynn still has a ring sitting on his workbench that was rejected by the woman who ordered it, then freaked out because she didn't have a ring for her ceremony.

REINVENTING THE
Wedding Ring

For silver rings, Ryan creates 2"x 3" sheets of texture by fusing small overlapping bits of metal into a pattern. That entire sheet is fused to 22K, and then cut into bands. Additional 24K sheet is fused to the surface. The bands are shaped into rings and then framed in 18K pale yellow gold.



Like Reed, Ryan is finding more customers asking for raw diamonds. "The biggest change in recent years is in social awareness," she says. "People want to know where the material comes from." That means

metal as well as stones. Like most jewelers, Ryan recycles whatever she can, including 95 percent of the metal she uses.

A good portion of that metal comes from the customers themselves. By providing unwanted jewelry for her to melt down, it cuts their costs substantially without costing Ryan much profit. With gold up to \$1,000 an ounce, many couples can no longer afford the rings they want unless they do this.

"We're dealing with a commodity that used to be very stable in value and is not now," Ryan says. "I think all artisans — and jewelry stores as well — face the question: How do I keep it in balance and also have my customer be able afford it? There's always that dance, but especially for wedding rings because they are done on a very personal level.

"A wedding ring is magical to make," she says. "I feel honored that somebody would come to me for that, and I want them to have a really good experience and end up with something they can treasure and that will take whatever comes, like the partnership itself."

Ryan recently set a small opal into a wedding ring for a man from Australia. It was important to him to have that connection to his origins, she said, "but he also loves the fact that it's fragile but set in a way that it's protected, because that's what he feels marriage is."

His fiancée was with him when Ryan presented the finished ring. "It was so sweet to look at their faces," she says. "I can't get over that look on someone's face and that energy exchange when you hand them something so meaningful to them. I may not have a partner in my life, but I get to experience that!"

CATHLEEN MCCARTHY writes about jewelry for *Town & Country*, *AmericanStyle*, *Art & Antiques*, and her own site, *TheJewelryLoupe.com*. She has written for this magazine since 1992.



PHOTOS BY GEORGE POST

Ryan's gold and platinum rings are multi-layered 18K gold in several colors, platinum and 24K gold. The stones are natural zircons, colored sapphires, moonstone, boulder and black opals, Tahitian pearls and gem silica.

Another client commissioned an extremely expensive purple sapphire ring, then took three years to pay him. Both experiences he describes as train wrecks.

"Sometimes I'll start these rings and think, 'What have I gotten myself into now?'" he says. "I start feeling sick. I'm so afraid they're going to hate it or I'm going to hate it. Frequently, the piece ends up being an amazing thing. I'm working with materials I don't normally work with and that can turn into something quite remarkable, with a different scale and presence. It's nice to push yourself sometimes, just give it a go and see what happens."

He recently designed wedding rings for a friend and his wife that turned out beautifully, and everyone was happy. "It was a very pleasant experience," Flynn says. "I have friends and clients who have worn my rings for a really long time and that's a special thing. But I think people get a little too wrapped up with weddings sometimes."

FUSING FOR LIFE

Marne Ryan enjoys working with couples and admits to being a "mushball" where weddings are concerned. Long before she became known for her distinctive fused-metal art jewelry, wedding rings were her bread and butter. Thirty years later, they still make up about 60 percent of her work.



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—Pat Flynn



Pat Flynn.

TOP TO BOTTOM, Yellow and white gold striped ring; band with gold, platinum and diamonds; yellow gold and diamond ring; gold and iron band; Diamond Stripe Ring with iron, gold, platinum, and diamonds; yellow gold band.