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In Jewelry, the Personal Connection

By KATHLEEN BECKETT



Julie Pellerin, wearing cuffs designed by Mia Fonssagrives-Solow.
Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Julie Pellerin lives with her boyfriend at his stud farm in Normandy, has an apartment in Paris and adores New York.

So when a friend of her family gave her a bracelet in the shape of the Manhattan skyline, she was thrilled. “So many people have all the same jewelry,” Ms. Pellerin, 24, said, “but this you don’t see on everybody.”

The friend was the jeweler, sculptor and artist Mia Fonssagrives-Solow, and Ms. Pellerin has turned to her since to create more highly personal, one-of-a-kind pieces, including two wide cuffs. One was in black stingray; the other, silver leather, and both have silhouettes of horses crafted in sterling silver prancing around their circumferences to reflect Ms. Pellerin’s love of horses. (She rides competitively and often travels to watch equestrian events.)

“When I wear them, so many people ask about them,” Ms. Pellerin said, twisting her arms to show off the cuff on each one. “When you have special jewelry, people are attracted to it.”

It’s little wonder bespoke jewelry is becoming more popular. “Custom and customized jewelry is very hot right now,” Karen Giberson, president of the Accessories Council in New York, said, “and we see it continuing. It appeals to the desire for something unique, individualized and thoughtful.” And “there are great options” at a variety of prices, she added, “from mainstream to luxury.”

While the consensus among jewelry makers and retailers is that the sector is growing, there are no estimates of total sales or the proportion of jewelry sales it represents.

Yet custom jewelry is in such demand that Bergdorf Goodman is rolling out a series of trunk shows featuring custom jewelry makers, following on the success of its Custom Jewelry Event, which for two years brought together more than a dozen jewelers who create one-of-a-kind pieces. Increasingly “our clients are looking for something truly unique that expresses their individual style,” Elizabeth von der Goltz, the store’s senior vice president overseeing jewelry, said. “They are looking for something meaningful to them, something they can relate to. They want a personal connection to the jewelry.”



The motif on Ms. Pellerin's cuffs reflect her interest in horses.

Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

The term custom can be confusing. Jewelry that is engraved or has a charm or bead added to it is generally known in the industry and in retail circles as personalized jewelry; such customization is readily available at department and jewelry stores. But jewelry that is made for one person is custom, or bespoke.

Most people are familiar with custom clothing — like a tailored men’s suit or couture dress — and as technology has accelerated fitting and assembly techniques, fashion brands’ “made-to-measure” lines (a kind of demi-couture) has grown. But while jewelry made for individuals has deep roots in the history of people around the world, it is only recently that public taste has gone beyond manufactured pieces to again embrace distinctive designs. “We’ve seen it in fashion, and now it’s nice to see it in jewelry,” Ms. von der Goltz said.

Ms. Fonssagrives-Solow, the New York-based creator of Ms. Pellerin’s horse cuffs, said she has created hundreds of pieces of custom jewelry as a result of word of mouth. “I loved the Booth dogs in ‘The New Yorker’ cartoons and made myself a pin of one,” she said. “People would say, ‘I love your dog, but can you make one of my poodle?’ ”

For one family extremely fond of its Jack Russell terrier, she made cuff links of the pet for the husband, a pin for the wife and earrings for the daughter, all in silver with sapphire eyes. “For private customers, I’ll do anything,” said the jeweler, who can be emailed at mia@miafonssagrivessolow.com. She said she even made a silver meerkat belt buckle for a woman whose son was researching the animals in the Kalahari Desert, adding, “I get wonderful, funny requests.”

Other commissions are sentimental, such as one that the Russian-born jeweler Alex Soldier got from a New Yorker. “It was a husband who wanted something special for his wife for their 10th anniversary,” said the New York-based jeweler, who has done work for the Bolshoi Ballet and the Princess Grace Awards in Monaco. “They had met at the New York Botanical Gardens and he wanted to commemorate that.”



Mr. Soldier created a diamond and ruby anemone — her birthstone was a ruby, for July — that could be worn as a pin, pendant, ring or bracelet.

“With everyone on the computer today, there’s a backlash against mass production,” Mr. Soldier said, whose custom pieces with precious jewels begin at \$10,000. “People want something unique, something special.”

Lily Gabriella Elia, a Brazilian designer working in London, has also received romantic commissions. She made a ring with two grade A natural Tahitian pearls (“It took me four weeks to source them,” she said) that she placed as if they were “kissing” to commemorate the 30th anniversary of a couple who spent their honeymoon sailing the South Seas.

Ms. Elia said that creating such a piece can take weeks, if not months. “I discuss with the client about each of the specific requirements of their bespoke jewelry design, to ensure I create exactly what they have in mind,” she said. “This includes the precious metals and type of stone, whether it is a diamond or a stunning gemstone, I can truly customize every single portion.

“Clients sometimes have an idea of what they want the item to look like,” she continued. “If not, I will provide them with ideas. I create hand-drawn sketches. This is done with the client together, or I scan and email the drawings at a later time. Once the client is 100 percent happy with the design, one of my craftsmen creates a wax or silver model. The client can now see exactly the shape, size and thickness of their piece.”

Once the model has been approved, the metal base is made and sent to the London Assay Office to be stamped with her maker’s mark, the metal quality mark and the leopard’s head that indicates it was examined in London.

“Once returned,” she said, “the stone or stones are set and the finished article is polished and placed in a personalized jewelry box, ready for the client.” Little wonder prices for such efforts start at about 10,000 pounds (\$12,200).
