

# The new masters of the jewelry world

Successors to Fabergé mix unusual materials with unfettered design

BY VICTORIA GOMELSKY

It is taken as gospel that the king of 20th century jewelry makers was Peter Carl Fabergé, the inimitable jeweler to the czars. Question: 100 years from now, who among the makers of today will be in the running to assume a similar title for this century?

"The first name — and I'm bored myself with saying it — is JAR," said François Curiel, Christie's chief jewelry specialist, referring to Joel Arthur Rosenthal, the enigmatic U.S.-born artist whose Parisian atelier turns out pieces that regularly earn two to three times their auction estimates.

"He is a jeweler in constant evolution but whose style is instantly recognizable by the members of his virtual international club."

For most of history, collectibility was beside the point. Jewels doubled as currency because they had an intrinsic value that allowed them to be dismantled and traded.

But in the 33 years since JAR founded his company, a booming estate jewelry market has fueled collector interest in signed works; and especially over the past decade, a renaissance in high jewelry making — among independent designers as well as the traditional French houses — has revived the conversation about the next generation of work that deserves to remain intact.

It may be too soon to bracket the current period within discrete dates and describe its characteristics — as diamonds and clean, geometric lines defined the Art Deco movement of the 1920s and 30s — but most experts agree that a willingness to embrace unconventional, even common, materials is a mark of the 21st century jeweler.

An example is Michele della Valle, a

jeweler based in Rome: "Recently, I used carbon fiber in an unusual way to mimic the feather-like details found around the pistils of anemone flowers," Mr. della Valle said, taking pains to emphasize that he never experimented with materials gratuitously but used them for specific properties. "Those times where I still use titanium or zirconium, I do so strictly when required to give lightness to a piece — and mostly in conjunction with gold," he said.

Mr. della Valle shares his appreciation for light metals with a trio of well-regarded designers in Hong Kong: Michelle Ong of Carnet, known for her fanciful, lace-inspired diamond cuffs and brooches; Edmund Chin of Etcetera, whose expert stone-setting has earned acclaim; and Wallace Chan, a gem carver with an alchemist's knack for manipulating titanium.

At F.D., a jewelry salon opened in early November in Manhattan, Fiona Druckemiller, a formidable collector, showcases, alongside vintage Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels, the work of two 21st-century masters: Viren Bhagat, a Mumbai-born jeweler known for his Mogul-meets-Deco aesthetic, and Hemmerle, a family-owned atelier in Munich famed for its distinctively austere designs.

"Hemmerle is urban, anti-bling — they'll put an emerald in copper," Mrs. Druckemiller said. "But Viren's pieces

I couldn't imagine wearing during the day. They are incredibly sumptuous, romantic, extravagant. Neither one is formulaic."

On a recent morning in New York, James de Givenchy, a nephew of the fashion icon, pointed to the graceful wishbone-shaped shank of a solitaire ring that he had designed. "This is where we try to add the difference," he said: never mind the 7-carat D-Flawless diamond in its vise.

Mr. Givenchy has grappled with the tension between intrinsic and aesthetic value in his four-year-old collaboration with Sotheby's Diamonds, for whom he creates pieces that pair million-dollar stones with steel, rope and ceramic, not to mention gold.

"There's so much value in the diamond and I'm just trying to say, 'This is how I see it,'" he said. "I'm not the

Attention to detail and meticulous choice of materials are characteristic of the top designers. From above, clockwise: Tiger necklace from Cartier, in platinum set with diamonds, onyx and emeralds; Pomegranate brooch by Michelle Ong; Stromboli earrings from the Van Cleef & Arpels collection, "Les Voyages Extraordinaires"; pear diamond and rubber wrap bracelet, from the Taffin collection by James de Givenchy.

painting, I'm the frame."

Not all serious jewelers, however, share Mr. Givenchy's reverent feelings. "I never wanted to know the value of diamonds," said Daniel Brush, an American artist-jeweler, recalling one of his most famous creations: a pink diamond-encrusted "Bunny Bangle" made of Bakelite.

Knowing the value would have scared him off using them: "To me, they were pink and charming," he said of the stones. "It was like a little Cinderella dream."

Unlike most of his peers, who rely on teams of bench jewelers to execute their visions, Mr. Brush creates jewelry by hand from start to finish. He makes wearable pieces, like a series of stainless steel brooches set with diamond micro-pavé, as well as the utterly conceptual: an intricately carved aluminum engagement ring that, at 3.5 inches, or almost 9 centimeters in diameter, is almost as broad as a hand and at 1.5 inches thick, hardly slips on to a finger.

"I love the idea of wedding rings," Mr. Brush said. "But what if you don't wear them, and instead box them up and once a year you hold them together?"

In his philosophical approach to jewelry making, Mr. Brush, a former Geor-

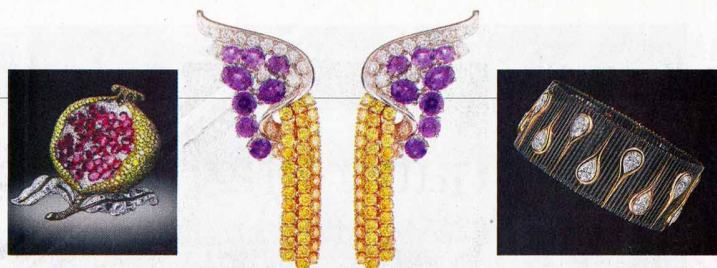
High jewelry's alchemists pursue a timeless quest for a perfect match of matter and form: Rainbow coalitions of philosophers' precious stones.

getown University fine art professor, bridges the gap between jewelry and art, a fertile area for connoisseurs interested in the next wave of collectible work, said Susan Abeles, head of jewelry at Bonhams in New York, citing Art Smith and John Paul Miller as contemporary examples.

"These are jewelers who started in the art world and I'm interested in how that translates into size, proportions and wearability," Ms. Abeles said.

At the other end of the jewelry spectrum lie Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels, whose towering legacies helped shape the last century of jewelry design. Now owned by the luxury industry holding company Financière Richemont, the firms have, over the past decade, used the occasion of the Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris to present formal contemporary collections of unique pieces to suitably discerning buyers.

At the event in September, Van Cleef unveiled Les Voyages Extraordinaires, **MASTERS, PAGE 11**



## A renaissance in jewelry design

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honoring the works of Jules Verne. Past haute joaillerie collections have taken their inspiration from sources as varied as Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the art of gardens, and California in the 1970s.

"It's not really about putting jewels in windows, but about creating a story inspired by fashion and couture," Nicolas Bos, the house's creative director, said.

Cartier, on the other hand, borrows from its own storied past, offering new designs that play on signature motifs and techniques — panthers and jeweled mystery clocks, to name two of the house's iconic specialties.

"We feel we should do something a

certain way, but it's not intellectually calculated," Pierre Rainero, Cartier's director of image, style and heritage, said. "The idea is to create desirable jewelry."

Decades from now, desirability will, of course, be determined by as-yet-unforeseen market forces, though it is safe to say that a rare and beautiful jewel exhibiting a singularity and soulfulness that identifies its maker will stand the test of time — and all the more so when the personality behind the work remains elusive.

Mr. Rosenthal, for example, politely declined via e-mail a request to discuss his jewelry: "Alas, I am not for words about what I do," he said, "believing that an artist should artiste and shut up."



**Lotus earring in copper, white gold and sapphire, by Hemmerle, the Munich jewelry house famed for its purity of design.**