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APRIL 2001

U.S. \$4.99/CAN \$6.99



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Jack and Elizabeth Gaultieri show readers how to make this "Gold Ring with Platinum Granulation" in *Jewelry Journal*, page 48.

To many, working at home and living together might seem like a recipe for disaster at best and insanity at worst. But Jack and Elizabeth Gaultieri, owners of Zaffiro in Portland, Oregon, seem to avoid the worst-case scenarios by a union that at times seems almost telepathic. When the couple talk, they often alternate speaking. Eyes unconsciously locked on each other, they create one whole, cohesive, and coherent sentence. This deep understanding enables them to produce work that is also whole, cohesive, and coherent.

Their specialty is granulation — not only in 22-karat yellow gold, but in different and difficult combinations of metals. Elizabeth became fascinated with granulation while studying metalworking and jewelry at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. One of her professors, who had studied under jeweler and well-known granulator John Paul Miller, showed his class slides of Miller's work. During a study abroad program in Italy in her junior year, Elizabeth encountered Etruscan granulation in a museum in Florence.

Portland artist/jewelers, Jack and Elizabeth Gaultieri, owners of Zaffiro, prove that living and working together can really work.

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON

Although Jack's degree was in industrial design, he had already decided to shift to jewelry manufacturing by his senior year: his thesis project was a full-scale jewelry bench. He had worked for several years as a jeweler at Goldmakers, a jewelry store in Lawrence owned by Pete Zacharias. Elizabeth worked there in sales.

A year after graduation, the Gualtieris were married; soon after, they moved to Santa Fe, where they both found employment in a design studio that specialized in 22-karat granulation. Already intrigued by the process, the two of them learned all they could. A couple years later, they moved to Portland, Oregon, and started Zaffiro.

The couple wanted to choose a name that was consistent with Jack's Italian heritage; they use his family crest as their business logo. "We wanted something pronounceable," says Elizabeth, with amused practicality. "Our name is regularly mangled." (Gwal-tee-air-ee is the correct pronunciation.) They chose *zaffiro*, Italian for sapphire, because, she says, Z "is graphically a very interesting letter. Being an Elizabeth, I've always been drawn to the letter Z."

As with most businesses, Zaffiro started slowly; the Gualtieris' primary source of income was the contract work they did for jewelry stores and galleries. After five years, says Elizabeth, "we're only 10 percent contract."

"We like to do contract work," says Jack. "It's fun to put other people's ideas into solid form." And the demands of customers means that they don't stick to their favorite, tried-and-true methods; contract work pushes them to expand their skills. "It's a chance to use different construction techniques," says Elizabeth. "The more fabrication skills we can get a handle on, the better."

SOMETHING FRESH. Although their work in 22-karat granulation distinguished them from most jewelry artists at first, in recent years more and more artists have introduced this technique into their work. Jack wanted to do something fresh, something new, something that would set Zaffiro even further apart. He began tinkering with platinum granulation on 22-karat yellow gold. "You're fusing two dissimilar metals with two different melting temperatures. It's really hard to do," he says, in a terrific understatement.

Jack first assembles the 22-karat piece of jewelry completely. (In yellow pieces, areas that get more wear and must be more durable are made in 18 karat; white and rose gold pieces are entirely 22 karat.) Then he applies the platinum granules with a vegetable-based enameling glue called Klyr-Fire. To fuse the platinum granules to the surface, the gold



Right: Microcosm pendant and earrings ensemble, with boulder opals and faceted fancy colored sapphire rounds in granulated 22K gold with 18K gold. Below: Oceana pin, set with an American Tennessee River cultured pearl and faceted pink spinel rounds (.55 tww.) in granulated 22K gold with 18K gold.



piece must be brought to the melt point without melting the piece. It requires a deft touch with a torch and close concentration.

During the fusing process, variations in metal thickness can act like very sensitive microclimates, causing one area to melt and fuse while another area doesn't. This is particularly troublesome on raised pieces, explains Elizabeth. To circumvent this problem, she sometimes applies the granules in groups and "tacks" them to the surface. "Gold becomes tacky or sticky before it melts," explains Jack. When granulating a bail, for example, the granules might be applied to the front surface of the bail, and tacked, then applied to the "hump" of the bail and tacked, and so on. Once all the granules are in place and secure, the whole piece is brought up to heat and fused.

"A lot of platinum granulation is feel and intuition," says Elizabeth.

"There is a high failure rate in the beginning," says Jack. "If you're not on the mark, or if you pause . . . you try not to think about anything else, but your mind will wander and all of a sudden, you've melted it."

If the work is all 22 karat, it can still be salvaged, recycled, realloyed, and reused. (The Gualtieris make all their own alloys, wire, and sheet stock as well as their own granules. "It's one of our little sicknesses," says Elizabeth.) But if the melted piece contains platinum with the gold, it has to be scrapped and shipped back to the refiner.

Because of the popularity of platinum, Jack wanted to

achieve platinum granulation on platinum. Until now, the process has not succeeded because platinum is unstable when it nears melting point. "When heating gold, it goes from melt to puddle. Platinum just goes to puddle," he says. But recently he had a breakthrough in the alloying process. He's hopeful of having a finished platinum-on-platinum piece by summer. Best of all, he already has a client for it.

While experimenting with the platinum alloys, Jack developed white and rose gold alloys that would allow him to granulate those metals and fuse them. The first piece of rose gold granulation "was a beautiful pendant design. I shot way outside my skill level because I wanted the first piece to be dynamic."

It didn't work. "I didn't think I had the piece hot enough. If you start doubting yourself at that crucial moment, you need to stop. But you don't because you're not quite sure. You think 'maybe just a little more.' But that little bit more trashed it."

While this kind of creative disaster may seem daunting, the Gualtieris take it in stride. "There is a risk," says Jack. "You have to be willing to take the chance you might lose the piece when you do something different."

Polishing the granulated pieces is also a challenge; it must be done carefully so that the round granules do not flatten out. "We've developed a couple polishing techniques to maintain a high level of clean surface, and keep the granules crisp and well formed," says Elizabeth. "Mostly the polishing depends on using polishing tools properly."

"No average consumer of granulation is going to notice the polish," she continues. "Some details are so small, they're just important to us. When the piece leaves here, we're proud to put our name on it."

OBSESSED WITH QUALITY. The headaches are worth the effort, say the Gualtieris. "Platinum granulation is a really good seller," says Jack. "The platinum enhances the whole look of the piece. It just makes it stand out. But it takes forever and it's really hard to do. That's why we only have six pieces out there right now. But there is a small market for it."

You don't talk to the Gualtieris very long without realizing they are somewhat obsessed with quality. They took three years to strip the exterior of their three-story, early 20th-century home down to the wood before painting. They are pulling out the original wood window casements, stripping those down and refinishing them.

So it's not surprising that, after fabricating an entire piece of jewelry, they may scrap it if it has been slightly overfired or it has not polished up perfectly. "If the process isn't just right," says Elizabeth, "the pieces don't sell. Sometimes you can polish a piece back to life, but not always. Sometimes

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Tuscan Garden earrings, of granulated 22K gold with 18K gold, set with .80 tcw of faceted grape garnet rounds.

polishing does more harm than good." But, she says, a lot of the "failures" walk on the edge; perhaps someone else would let them pass. Not the Gualtieris.

"It comes down to, 'Would you want your name associated with that piece?' The answer usually ends up being no," says Jack. "But it's hard to say that because you have so much invested in the piece." That's where a partner comes in. "You just need the other person to say no," he says.

The Gualtieris learned their commitment to quality from Pete Zacharias at Goldmakers. Zacharias taught them that there is very little difference in the time it takes to do something right and to do it half way.

"There is satisfaction in doing something properly and right," says Elizabeth. "Anybody can do shortcuts. That's the hardest part of doing a technique that is very labor intensive. Within that technique, there are some shortcuts, but you end up with an inferior piece of jewelry. One thing we never sacrifice is quality construction."

"Quality is always a big issue with us," says Jack. "We talk to each other, and show each other our pieces. We're each other's worst critic."

The Gualtieris have complementary strengths that contribute to the creation of high-quality jewelry. Elizabeth's

strength is looking at a design and seeing where it needs to be finished or carried out a bit further. "Lizzie is more visual, more into the aesthetics of a piece," says Jack. "I'm more into how a piece goes together and functions." When the couple first got together, Elizabeth would ask Jack what he was trying to say in a piece. He would be looking at Elizabeth's work and asking how it would work.

"It's always constructive criticism," says Jack. "There is never any competition between us. We help each other make each project the best we can make it."

"We're both perfectionists," adds Elizabeth.

This commitment to quality, says Jack, "makes all our projects ten times more complicated than they should be, but when you see the end result, you're glad you put in the extra time."

MAKING THEIR NAME. Quality itself, however, isn't entirely its own reward. As Elizabeth says, "you can be the best jeweler in the world, but if no one knows about you, it does you no good." So now with a salable and predictable product, representation in several galleries, and dedicated customers, they're concentrating on the business of selling the work. For the last two years they have advertised in *Designer Jewelry Showcase*, a publication that goes only to jewelers and galleries that carry designer work. Their work is represented by several galleries, and they've begun entering more contests: two years ago, Elizabeth won second place in the American Pearl Company's 1999 Vision Award contest.

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"It's been many hours away from the bench," says Jack, but it has been time well spent. "Realizing that that is actually valuable time even though it is not spent making jewelry has been a big lesson," says Elizabeth.

Their efforts have paid off. The business is growing and the 2000 Christmas season was their best so far. They left their first trunk show, at Sofia's, a gallery in Mill Valley, California, exhilarated. They met and sold jewelry to many clients who already owned one of their pieces and who came to meet them and buy more.

"We feel very fortunate to be where we are," says Elizabeth. "We would never take it for granted."

"[Working for yourself] is a risk," says Jack. "But if you spend too much time stressing about it or worrying about it, that's just wasted time." Elizabeth adds, "If you're going to spend a lot of energy on something, spend it on design or the business."

"When we started out, in lean times we'd sit and sketch," says Jack. "It's not always about making something. It's about doing something and not worrying about it."

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Jack and Elizabeth Gualtieri

And it's about doing something beautiful for the client. "There's a lot of jewelry that is disposable," says Elizabeth, "and that's sad. We do something that has a sense of permanence, that will be an heirloom. Something the client will pass down for generations, that they will treasure. We want people who purchase our work to not only have an aesthetic connection with it, but some kind of personal connection with the piece. I would hope that the jewelry would be a manifestation of something beautiful inside the person."

The Gualtieris have been working together for 11 years; for seven of those years, they've been married. Far from driving each other crazy, their partnership seems to have evolved into something separate, yet very much one. It's an unusual union that works. ♦

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