

**Some top jewelry designers
who have a special affection for rings
tell us what makes a ring stand out.**

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Hands are perhaps the most individual part of our bodies, often reflecting the kinds of work we do — or don't do. They can be strong, supple, or knotted with age. They help us express ourselves as we gesticulate. And the rings we choose to adorn our hands may be the first jewelry noticed by others. "Rings are a material extension of a wearer's personality," says Elizabeth Gualtieri of Zaffiro in Portland, Oregon. "Rings tell a lot about a person, whether they're wearing a simple wedding band or they decorate all ten fingers."

Through time, the circle has repre-

L EADERS

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON



Opposite page: Work by three jewelry artists show the range of rings. Randy Fullbright's ring (top) is of sugilite in sterling silver and mokume gane (photo: Azad); Gaia Pelikan's, of iron and 18K gold with an ammonite fossil (photo: Gaia Pelikan); and Joe Apodaca's, of 18K gold with ruby and diamonds (photo: Joe Apodaca).

Left: A Black Tahitian pearl is set in a granulated 22K and 18K gold ring by Elizabeth and Jack Gaultieri. Photo: Van Rossen.

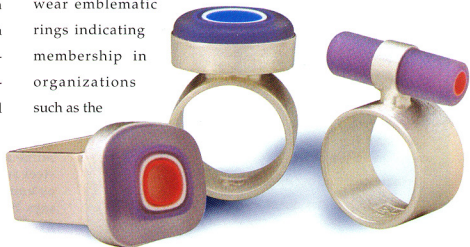
Below: Three glass and sterling silver rings by Laura Preshong, of Umbilical Glass.

*If you make your own rings, see "Meteorite Ring," by Joe Apodaca, in *Jewelry Journal*, page 50.*

sented the spirit, the world, protection, or eternity. Thus it is only natural that circles in the forms of rings should have a rich, talismanic history of mystical power. From that, rings came to represent the power of state, religion, and rank. Such rings have often been so closely associated with the wearer or his position that they were used as personal or political seals; pressed into hot wax, they certified a document as genuine. In times when few people could read, most recognized the symbols in the seals and respected the power that that seal represented.

As wealth often comes with power, rings also came to be a sign of wealth, as witnessed by the multiple rings worn by the wealthy merchants and nobles who sat for portraits in the Renaissance. They were also the ones to put rings to sinister uses, too, secreting poisons or drugs in hollow rings.

Rings still signal status or membership in an exclusive group. Men still wear emblematic rings indicating membership in organizations such as the



Masons. And then there are class rings, Air Force rings, and Super Bowl rings, symbols of belonging to successful and specific groups.

PERSONAL POWER. While emblematic rings shout their messages of success, many rings, seemingly worn for ornament, represent more personal achievements and successes to the wearer. My friend Devon Monk writes short science fiction. It's a tough market to sell to, but she's successful at it. Every time she sells a story, she buys a small silver ring. The rings decorating the joints of her fingers remind her of her successes. When the inexpensive rings break, they are a humbling reminder that she cannot sit on her laurels but must continue to write — and earn her rings.

Devon is not alone in marking her successes with rings, says artist/jeweler Sasha Samuels of Portland, Oregon. About 50 percent of the jewelry Samuels sells are rings; about 90 percent of those rings are sold to women who have achieved some landmark in their lives. "It's particularly younger women who are coming into their own — not so much financial power as personal power. They're growing into their adulthood. Very often, there's been a transition. It



could be a marriage. It could be a woman has hit forty. It might be a graduation gift or job promotion gift that they buy not because of the extra money, but because they have arrived, or reached a personal goal or a place of personal power in their lives."

Why rings? Why not a diamond pendant or an elegant brooch?

Simply because rings are the only pieces of jewelry, besides bracelets and cufflinks (which come without the ring's weight of history and tradition), that the wearer can see while wearing them. Neckpieces, brooches, and earrings are worn for ornament, for others to see, and to complement one's clothes. With pendants and earrings, you have

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The Right Ring

Rings are as idiosyncratic as the people who wear them. If you are designing rings for yourself or for a customer, ask the following questions:

- How will the ring be worn — occasionally all the time?
- If you'll wear it all the time, what kind of work do your hands do?
- What kinds of stones should you choose to suit the way the ring will be worn? Should the stones be set in prongs or bezels?
- What surface texture should you use? High polish that shows scratches and wears quickly or a rough or matte surface that hides wear?
- What metal will you choose? Do you have metal allergies? Do you want the color of the metal to complement the stones? Your skin color?
- What does the ring mean to you?
- What do you like about your favorite rings? What do you dislike about rings you never wear? — SET

to consider the neckline of an outfit or what colors you're wearing. "A ring is something you can live in," says Samuels. "It's not something that has to match what you're wearing." As such it is a constant reminder to the wearer of the landmark event that prompted the ring purchase.

Although they may buy rings for themselves, not all ring wearers wear rings for themselves. Portland, Oregon, artist/jeweler Deborah Spencer usually makes rings that fit the hand in such a way that the "right" way faces the wearer. But she discovered that her mother and her best friend persisted in wearing her designs the "wrong" way. She finally asked them why. Both her friend and her parent turn the rings around so others can enjoy them right-side up. As a result, Spencer now asks clients which way they would like to wear their rings.

While most artist/jewelers sell most of their rings to women, Gaia Pelikan, in Sedona, Arizona, says that about 70 percent of his rings are sold to men. That may be because Pelikan specializes in combining rough and refined looks — in his work, textured, forged stainless steel and 18-karat gold are set with gem materials such as ammonite, trilobites, and Egyptian scarabs. Rings, says Pelikan, "are for the individual. Rings have energy. They are a gift of love."

DESIGN DIFFICULTIES. Rings may be popular with buyers, but they present a list of problems for designers.

First there are the design considerations. Although ring wearers may want to be reminded of the landmark events in their lives, for the most part they want to forget they have the ring on. "Rings are functional art and the form has to follow the function," says Samuels. "The structure has to work. The balance has to work. The scale has to be right."

Because rings are three-dimensional, they are more like sculpture than flatter pieces of jewelry, such as earrings, pendants, or brooches. "You're trying to take two-dimensional materials, such as sheet and wire, and combine them with different techniques into a three-dimensional entity with textures and planes," says Gualtieri. She and her husband and partner, Jack, fabricate all their pieces of gold or platinum and embellish them with granulation.

If you think of a ring as a four-sided flat form, you may run into trouble integrating the shank and the top. "I'll design a ring from the side view and it can get very sculptural," says Samuels, "but it's sometimes difficult to bring that onto the top of the ring and make it work together."

Then there are the practical considerations. Rings worn on gesticulating hands, working hands, homemaking hands are subject to abuse. Run-ins with countertops, gardening tools, car doors, or file cabinets can wreak havoc on rings that are not thoughtfully designed. "Rings are going to get the most abuse, so durability, well integrated into the design, is always a challenge," says Gualtieri.

Similarly, poorly designed rings can snag or tear clothing and furniture, and scratch the wearer or others. Top-heavy rings roll on the finger, making them an annoyance to the wearer. Poorly refined rings are thick between the fingers or just plain heavy, making them a burden rather than a joy to wear. "You want to make sure the ring's comfortable and safe," says Pelikan.

One obvious problem with rings is sizing. A brooch or pendant can fit anyone, but a ring has to fit a finger. All ring designers have to deal with this. Some remake the ring if it doesn't fit the customer who wants to buy it; others simply size the ring. But sizing can be tricky. If the ring has to be sized up too far, it can break a stone; if it has to come down too far, the stone can be loosened. If too much metal is added to a textured shank, the metal will have to be re-textured. For the square-shaped rings of Boston glassmaker and jeweler Laura Preshong, of Umbilical Glass, sizing down involves cutting the square shank at opposing corners and resoldering; sizing up involves rebuilding the ring.

And customers *always* want changes, says Gualtieri. "Beginners don't often take into consideration that they may have to disassemble or alter a ring. You always have the person who says 'I really love this but want this stone in it.'" She and Jack started out doing jewelry repairs. "That's a good basis for finding out how things are made and understanding others' mistakes," she says.

Opposite page: Sasha Samuels created this "scribble ring," a variation on an Elizabethan style in platinum and gold with fancy cognac and champagne diamonds. Photo © S. Samuels 2000.

Two rings by Eve Alfilié. Right: lolite, blue topaz, and 18K gold from the Medieval series. Photo: Bower Corwin. **Below:** Eight Cardinal Directions, of 18K yellow and green gold, padparadscha and pink sapphires, diamonds, and purple/red tourmaline. Photo: Matthew Arden.



Then there are the idiosyncrasies of the hand. For example, the webbing between the fingers can cause a ring designed to look square on the hand to sit crookedly, and give less pleasure than it might. New York artist/jeweler Joan Smolinsky takes this into account when designing for a client. If a client can't meet with her personally, she requests they send a photocopy of their hand to her.

RING APPEAL. If rings are difficult to design correctly, why do artist/jewelers continue to make them?

"I like the sculptural quality — how rings interact with the body. I like that a ring is a centerpiece in a way," says Samuels. Preshong, whose background is in sculpture, also likes the sculptural possibilities of rings. "Personally, I like to

Getting Started

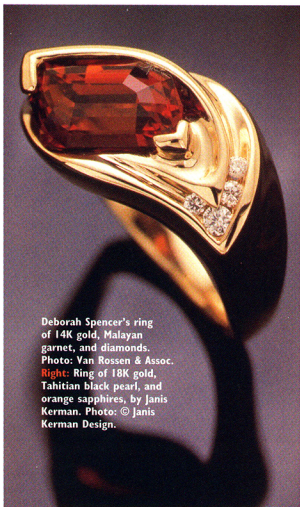
The uniqueness of rings can create some problems for beginners. Here are some common mistakes to avoid:

- Making the shank too thick and uncomfortable
- Making the ring top too high or heavy so that the ring rolls on the hand
- Making part of the wax too thin or spruing incorrectly
- Making the ring too heavy overall
- Setting stones without adequate protection
- Making what you like rather than what the customer requests
- Copying other designs rather than using your own design sense— SET

wear rings," she says. "They're the only type of jewelry I wear."

Although ring design "is a bit more limiting in terms of scale" than other types of jewelry design, says Gualtieri, rings "have their own appeal. There is more visual interaction with rings. We design them so they are visually interesting from all angles."

Working within the ring's limitations may challenge beginning ring makers. It sometimes seems as if everything has been done. "It takes a while to develop your own design sensibility," says Samuels. But to avoid copying others' jewelry, she recommends looking at other forms of art. "The best way is to look at almost anything but jewelry — nature, architecture, and industrial design. Two people could be inspired by a seashell and the jewelry they create might be very different. Developing your own design sense gives you a feeling of who you are and it



Deborah Spencer's ring of 14K gold, Malayan garnet, and diamonds. Photo: Van Rossen & Assoc. Right: Ring of 18K gold, Tahitian black pearl, and orange sapphires, by Janis Kerman. Photo: © Janis Kerman Design.

helps you find your own voice."

Sometimes, though, the weight of ring history is almost too compelling. Samuels, seeming to contradict her own recommendation, is reintroducing a ring that was popular during the time of Queen Elizabeth. Diamonds then were a novelty and were worn uncut, as cutting technology had not yet been developed. The stones were set in rings so that the wearers, like wealthy vandals or romantics, could use the point of the crystal to leave graffiti or love notes on another novelty of the rich — window glass. Samuels is setting her modern, white and rose gold "scribble rings" with champagne diamond crystals. They're proving to be a popular wedding ring selection among her clients. (You'll know who they are by the condition of their windows.)



As the circle endures as a symbol of strength and eternity, so does the popularity of rings. These tokens of love, success, power, and freedom serve the same talismanic roles they have always served. As long as humans endure, it seems, so will the human desire for rings. ♦

Ring Terminology

Bezel — A very thin, narrow strip of metal enclosing a stone to hold it in a mounting.

Casting — The process of creating a ring in wax, encasing it in a high-temperature plaster, heating to melt the wax and form a hollow mold, and pouring molten metal into the hollow. This is the process most often used in jewelry today.

Fabrication — The process of creating a ring directly from metal wire and sheet, which involves cutting the metal with saws, soldering it together with high heat, and finishing it with files, sandpaper, and buffing compounds.

Gallery — The intricate piercing or wire work on the side of a ring.

Granulation — The intricate, time-consuming process of embellishing a ring by adding tinyspheres of gold to the surface in a centuries-old technique.

Patina (also called oxidation or anti-tiquing) — The color given to a metal by treating it with some kind of chemical; occasionally a paint is used.

Prongs — Tiny metal wires used to hold a stone in place.

Shank — The bottom of a ring, the part closest to the palm of the hand.

Texture — The finished surface of the metal which can be rough, smooth, bark-like, nugget-like, engraved, or matte, among any number of other finishes. — SET

Many thanks to everyone I interviewed, especially to Deborah Spencer, Joan Smolinsky, Joe Apodaca, and Eve J. Alfille (whose interview disappeared into cyberspace when my computer was assaulted by a virus).

The jewelers who participated in this article are: Eve Alfille, (847) 869-7920; Joe Apodaca, joerapodaca@msn.com; Randy Fullbright, (435) 789-2451; Elizabeth and Jack Gualtieri, Zaffiro, (503) 236-6735; Janis Kerman, (514) 931-3852; Gaia Pelikan; Laura Preshong, Umbilical Glass and Metal, (617) 268-8327; Sasha Samuels, P.O. Box 42153, Portland, Oregon 97242; and Deborah Spencer, (503) 248-9393. Sharon Elaine Thompson has studied gemology, earning both a GG and an FGA. She has written extensively for Lapidary Journal for the past 12 years.