

KU alumni make name in metalsmithing

By Mindie Paget

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Experimentation is always risky.

But stakes multiply when the test materials are minuscule spheres of 22-karat gold and platinum and the catalyst is a torch.

One wrong move — one second of overheating — and hours, even days, of work on an exquisitely detailed piece of jewelry liquefy.

"You stop working for the rest of the day. But you get up the next day and start over again," said Jack Gualtieri, one half of a husband-wife metalsmithing duo that's revolutionizing an ancient jewelry technique called granulation. "With every process, as far as experimentation goes, you learn something, so it's not a complete loss. All the metals we send to the refiner and get back."

Jack and Elizabeth Gualtieri graduated from Kansas University and got their start in the jewelry business at Goldmakers, 723 Mass. Elizabeth Gualtieri graduated from Lawrence High School in 1988. But since moving to Portland, Ore., and opening their own business, Zaffiro, the couple have broached new territory, surging beyond traditional yellow gold-on-gold granulation to tinker with platinum, white gold and even rose gold granulation.

"These are colors of granulation that have never been done before," Jack Gualtieri said.

"We've taken the foundation of what is known about granulation and have added to it with our own experiments," Elizabeth Gualtieri added.

The Gualtieris have built a reputation for quality that hasn't gone unnoticed. They won second place in the American Pearl Co.'s 1999 Vision Award contest. And they recently received news that a piece they designed and fabricated in collaboration with another artist has been accepted by the Smithsonian Institution for addition to its permanent collection.

It's all about detail

Granulation is a method of



ELIZABETH AND JACK GUALTIERI HAVE FOUND SUCCESS in the jewelry world using an ancient technique called granulation. The couple's business, Zaffiro, is based in their Portland, Ore., home.

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— Elizabeth Gualtieri

goldworking that dates back to the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., when Etruscans used the technique to create jewelry. It's a time-consuming process in which minute spheres of gold — the ones the Gualtieris use range from a quarter of a millimeter down to a 10th of a millimeter — are applied to a surface in decorative patterns.

"It's all about detail," Elizabeth Gualtieri said. "Very few people actually work in this technique because it's very labor-intensive and time-consuming. But it's so beautiful. It's wonderful, and it's intricate and allows for such design variation that Jack and I both fell in love with it."

That love affair led the

Gualtieris in 1997 to open Zaffiro, their home-based metalsmithing business whose name stems from a few of the couple's personal characteristics. Italian for "sapphire," the word Zaffiro honors Jack's Italian heritage and the couple's passion for gemstones.

The Gualtieris moved five years ago to Portland from Santa Fe, N.M. Before that, their training ground was Lawrence. They both graduated from KU in 1992 — Jack with a degree in industrial design, Elizabeth in metalsmithing and jewelry.

The couple met at Goldmakers, where they worked together when they were students. Not only did store owner Peter Zacharias teach the couple sound business practices, but his demand for well-finished, sturdy jewelry helped set the high standard of quality they now demand in their own work.

Lois Greene, KU professor of design and department chairwoman, had Jack Gualtieri in class and has remained friends with the couple.

"They work very hard," she said. "They've done other kinds of jobs in order to support their own work, but now they're doing well enough that they're both on their own. Truly, these people work seven days a week. 'Their lives are kind of



THIS RING IS MADE FROM 22-karat white gold with a 1.36-karat tourmaline stone. It was made in the year 2000 and is available for \$2,300.

revolved around making something beautiful."

A rare art

Christmas is a busy time of year for Zaffiro. The Gualtieris must have the six galleries they work with in California, New Mexico, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands and Portland stocked by November, when people begin their holiday shopping.

Although their jewelry bears a high price tag, as with most other works of art, the customer gets a unique item.

"Everything is one-of-a-kind," Elizabeth Gualtieri said. "I couldn't imagine making 10 of the same ring. Once we've made one piece, it's fun to go on to something new."

The artists spend anywhere from eight hours to three or four days handcrafting a single piece with meticulous detail. Each tiny granule is first adhered to the surface with plant-based glue, then heated just to the metal's melting point — where a stem forms between the granule and the application surface but the piece doesn't melt into a puddle.

In addition to the rare metalworking technique that sets them apart, the Gualtieris use an eclectic selection of gemstones.

"We're champions of the obscure," Elizabeth Gualtieri



Photos special to the Journal-World

THE CROSS PENDANT IS MADE from 18- and 22-karat gold and includes a total of 4 karats of moonstone. It was made in 2001 and is currently in a gallery in the Virgin Islands. It's priced at \$3,250.

said. "We use a lot of pearl and opal, but the pearls and opals we use aren't what people traditionally think of as pearls and opals."

Instead of perfectly rounded white spheres, the couple choose oddly shaped, organic-looking pearls of various shades and colors. The opals they select are bold, often in deep purple or blue hues.

Greene said the couple's finished pieces seamlessly meld metalwork and gemstones.

"It's the craft. It's so beautifully done," she said. "They're known for their granulation. ... But it's also their concept — the way they think about form and all the different parts that make up a piece of jewelry."

Business partners

Although Jack and Elizabeth Gualtieri each design and create their own pieces in their basement studio, they play off each other throughout the process.

"It really helps contribute to our individual projects that we're working on having the

other person there to consult with and remind the other to do certain things," Elizabeth Gualtieri said.

Only one of their friends can tell the difference between Jack and Elizabeth Gualtieri's work. "We both have different kinds of design focuses," Elizabeth Gualtieri said. "Jack also does more of experimental colors in gold. I tend to stick to yellow gold and experiment with my forms."

"We complement each other," Jack Gualtieri added. "There is never any competition between us."

The pairing seems to work. Zaffiro is doing better every year, and the Gualtieris share an ultimate goal:

"Being self-supporting artists," Elizabeth Gualtieri said. "To be able to have the time and the funds to create those outrageous designs that might never get made if every decision was based on salability."

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