

# Sharon Elaine Thompson

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## ARE YOU CUT OUT FOR CUSTOM?

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Custom work can lead to satisfaction, challenge, growth, learning, the establishment of a reputation, and a steady income--all good reasons to take those commissions.

by

Sharon Elaine Thompson

It's almost inevitable. Once you start making jewelry, someone will want to commission you to make something for them. If you're hungry to make a living doing what you love, custom work may seem like manna from heaven. And for most of the artists we talked to, it is. "Custom work made it possible for me to stay in business," says Eve Alfillé, of Evanston, Illinois. But while there are many reasons to court custom work, there are some considerations to make before you decide to embrace it.

### Becoming an Artistic Mercenary

For the artists we spoke to, commissioned work provides between 25 and 70 percent of their income. Custom work is "where I realize the most money for my time," says John Thompson, an artist/jeweler in Laguna Beach, California. "People who come to me are usually willing to pay for the time to design and build the piece." In the respect that customers place an order, you make it, and get paid immediately for it, custom work can provide a more reliable income than spec work. It can generate more profit because you're not out the money spent on stones and materials that sit in a case until the piece sells.

Most artist/jewelers charge more for custom work, too, because of the time and risks involved. "I feel more justified in billing more for custom work because it is intense. It takes a lot more out of you," says Thompson. "Stock work is quicker. You know the steps.

You go from A to B and you're done. Custom work can come to a point where you're sitting staring and wondering what you're going to do next." However, charging a higher rate for custom may not always be possible. Although Alfillé knows she should charge more, she says, "in my area, I find that the market doesn't support it."

#### Artistic Vision vs. Customer Vision

The money in commissions can be good, but working on commission essentially means putting someone else in the driver's seat. So if you see yourself primarily as an artist, and your work as an expression of your own ideas, you may not be comfortable doing commissions. "The one-of-a-kind pieces are about your career, the custom work is about commerce," says Seattle artist/jewelry Andy Cooperman.

"At times I thought custom work would drive me crazy," says Astoria, Oregon, artist/jeweler Holly McHone. "You're always doing what someone else wants rather than what you want." In fact, the clash between personal vision and customer vision contributed to Seattle artist/jeweler Micki Lippe giving up custom work altogether. "I just didn't want what I did to be dictated by the customer," she says. "I wanted to do what I wanted to do."

If you want to take on commissions, sometimes striking a balance between commerce and personal vision can be difficult. Alfillé says custom work "has shaped my career in a way. Originally, it was just me in my basement." Now Alfillé has a gallery that employs 20 to 25 people. The demands of running that business mean that "if you still want to express yourself as a designer, you have to find the time. Fortunately I'm a night person and a lot of my own work is done through the night."

It's important to make sure you understand what custom work will demand from you, says Thompson, because the day will come when a customer wants you to put a truly forgettable stone "into a piece of jewelry that you're going to put hours into. It's your

job to make that piece-of-junk stone look special. And that's a trick. A lot of the time you'll do it by using a combination of weird materials that you don't normally use. In the end, I'll make a nice piece. I won't like it because the stone isn't good, but the customer will be happy." And in the process, you pay the rent for the month.

Sometimes even good money and a happy customer will not be enough. Jennifer Howard-Kicinski, of Seattle, recently took on a large sculptural commission that generated "the most money I've earned for a piece." The client, she says, "had a specific project that he wanted completed. He wasn't interested in my aesthetic." Although she was capable of doing the work, "from an artistic standpoint, it wasn't altogether a pleasant thing to do. He was paying me essentially as a laborer, although I designed a piece specifically around what he wanted. I didn't have any autonomy in terms of design. For me, I felt it was not successful, although he was happy with it and he paid me for it. But I wouldn't put it into my portfolio."

### Skill Building

If you are just starting your career in jewelry, there may be a reason to pause before you become attached to your artistic vision as a holy grail. That reason is education. "I've learned more than if I didn't do custom," says McHone. "I've had custom pieces teach me how to make mechanisms and hinges and stone setting. I'd say, 'Okay I can do it,' then get on the phone and call people to tell me how to do it."

This doesn't mean giving the customer mediocre work. You have to be sure you can learn the skills and provide them in a professional manner. But as those new skills help you expand and improve your spec work, your reputation will grow. There will be greater demand for custom work that more closely approximates the work your heart wants to do. This decreases the conflict between the artist and customer visions, although that conflict will probably never completely disappear.

## Let Go of the Judge

When you first start doing custom work, you may be dismayed at what might seem like the limiting parameters established by the client. This calls for an attitude adjustment. You'll have to see that client-set parameters, "far from limiting the artist, can be challenging and freeing," says Cooperman. Custom work calls for putting yourself in a non-judgmental frame of mind, says Thompson. "The trick is looking at everyone's treasure as a treasure."

Meeting the challenges set by the customer eventually strengthens your skills as a designer. The opportunity to work with "the unusual and the interesting," says Alfillé, "makes me grow." Custom work, says McHone, forces her to "do something I don't normally do. Ultimately, the customer challenges me more than I would challenge myself."

Your challenge may begin when someone asks you, often ingenuously, to copy a photo from a magazine because you'll do it more cheaply than the original recognized artist. No one we talked to will take those kinds of commissions. Besides being insulting to you to be treated as the "bargain basement," says Alfillé, copying jewelry designs is a violation of copyright and, as such, can be expensively illegal.

However, the photos, "drawings on cocktail napkins," and anything else the client brings you can be a jumping off point, says Cooperman. "I'm looking for their response to something they've chosen: a squiggle or curve or the way a stone is set." Thompson looks the same thing. "I'll take a feeling from a piece they've seen and design in that style-- whether it's contemporary, Art Nouveau, Art Deco or whatever."

Alfillé takes these customers through her stock, having them try on pieces with elements similar to the photo they've brought in. "Eventually I have a design direction that

suits them, from what I have already made. And they have forgotten about the design they came in with," she says.

### Designing Artists

Much of the intensity of custom work comes from trying to produce the vision in your customer's head. You may be working with large valuable stones or materials that are family heirlooms. How do you pull the design out? How do you deal with the risks?

Listen, is the word mentioned by everyone. "I listen to what customers say about how they wear jewelry," says Thompson, "how they want it to function in their life--as an everyday piece or as special wear piece." As Alfillé takes customers "through the possibilities," she says, "I listen to what they want. I ask who they are. What do you do? How do you use your hands? I want to know if they're hard on things. But I also want to know about them. How do you spend your time? How did you meet?"

This talking phase is often followed by--or accompanied by--a drawing of some kind. Thompson uses four to five renderings to determine what the customer wants; these may be refined by several more. "Then I build it."

Alfillé has recently begun using a CAD-CAM program. She says that her customers "adore" the beautiful color renderings produced by the program. "They are asking for renderings. As a tool, it's wonderful," she says.

Thompson fabricates all his work directly from the metal. He doesn't do wax work. His clients must make the visual leap from two-dimensional drawing to three-dimensional jewelry. However, artists who manufacture jewelry with the lost-wax process, have a middle stage available to them: the wax. This gives the customer another chance to see the piece before completion, this time in three dimensions. If McHone has a piece that is particularly difficult to visualize or render in two dimensions, she'll make what she calls a "wax sketch." "It's like a sculptor doing a small model of the final piece," she explains.

With customer approval in hand, the artists move on, and cast. They may or may not meet with the client for a further fitting before the piece is complete.

However, no matter how well you listen, how well you suit the design to the customer's needs, you'll eventually run into the reality that not everyone visualizes things easily. When you show a client a hand-carved wax, she may say, "But I don't want it to be blue (or green or purple)." Show it to her in silver, she'll say she can't visualize what it will look like in gold. Hand her a brooch that is identical to the drawing you made, and she'll say, "I didn't think it would look like this." This can work to your advantage: The customer may be happy with anything you do, because she'll think it's better than the wax or drawing. It can create a problem if, when the final piece is delivered, you discover her imagination has been in a different time zone from yours.

Every artist deals with this differently. Alfillé tries to determine exactly what makes the customer unhappy with the piece. "It may be a correctable problem. Sometimes it's just a very small difference. Is it matte instead of polished? I try very hard to see what about it, specifically, they don't like. What is the minimum change I have to make to make it acceptable. If they still don't take it, I charge a restocking fee of 20 percent."

"I'm big on personal responsibility," says Cooperman. "When [customers] have to sign off on a piece, either by verbally agreeing to it or signing a contract, they have to take the responsibility for making the decision. I realize [the customer is] making a leap of faith. They may be looking at a wax that is opaque and blue. And that can be tough. I let them know I can make certain adjustments in the wax. But if they choose to scrap the whole thing once it is cast, that is their responsibility."

Thompson says "I work with a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee. If they don't like the piece, I'll do something else. I don't want people to go away from my work not satisfied. I depend on referrals in my work." He does not carry this to extremes, however.

A second piece is all he'll make. If the customer is still not satisfied, "I'll give them the stones back. Then they don't have a bad taste in their mouth. The worst they can say is that I couldn't give them what they wanted, but I didn't charge them for my time. They don't feel wronged. I'll take the loss rather than have an unhappy customer. And I'll sell the piece with other stones in it."

### Taking a Risk

In addition to listening to the customer, you must be able to communicate the realities of what you do. Especially, you have to be sure the customer understands the risk to the stones involved: Everyone mentioned the infamous fragility of emeralds. "Emeralds are one stone you can never guarantee," says McHone. "Make sure that the customer understands that and signs off on it."

"If you take in a customer's stone that is sensitive in nature and high in value--like an emerald or opal," says Thompson, "make sure they know the stone is fragile and unstable and that you're not going to take the responsibility of not breaking it. Not only can the stone be expensive but, if it's been in the family a long time, [customers] have to understand that there is an element of risk. You'll do what you can to minimize the risk, but there is a potential for disaster."

Then, adds Thompson, you'll want to be "freaking careful with the customer's stones." If minor damage does occur, he suggests you have it repaired at your expense, after telling the customer about it. "I do it for customer relations."

However, your careful explanation and the customer's understanding may not always be the same. "Beware that people say they hear you but they really don't," says Lippe. If you have any doubts that customers understand the risks, either stay away from the job or have them sign a statement on the job envelope that they accept the responsibility for the stone.

## Show Me the Money

There has to be an atmosphere of trust on both sides when you do custom work. The customer trusts you to deliver a piece of jewelry that meets their specifications and expectations. You trust you'll be paid.

Establishing a fee can be difficult when you first start doing custom work. Most of the artists we talked to have been doing it for so long, they can--usually--accurately estimate the time a piece will take, so they know how much to charge. However, to come to this knowledge, McHone says that when she started, she kept track of everything. "I would keep notes on the time. So much for the drawings, so much for the wax, an hour to polish and four to set the stones." Then she'd add it all up.

Some artists ask for a deposit when the order is placed. "You should make it clear to the client that if they want to be taken seriously, they have to pay you to do what you're good at," says Howard-Kicinski. While you don't need to ask for full payment in front, she says, you should require "some earnest money to show they are serious. If the customer places an order without a payment and you put in design or even manufacturing time and they don't like it or change their mind, you are out time and possibly materials." Howard-Kicinski asks for a 50 percent, non-refundable deposit. "If the relationship goes sour, you've been paid for the work you've already done. Most people understand that they're hiring you not only to have a finished project, they're paying you for your time. If they choose to break the contract, they still have to pay for the work even if they don't get the product."

But not all artists require a deposit. "I work with a gentleman's agreement," says Thompson. "If I'm having to supply an enormous amount of side goods, or large important stones, I require payment for the stones. I'm not paid on the piece until the piece is



delivered. If the customer supplies the stone, I know they'll come back so I don't require a deposit."

Cooperman doesn't require a deposit, either. "If they're giving me a large stone, that's a deposit," he says. Alfillé, however, disagrees. "People will say, 'You have my stones.' I usually say politely 'I can't pay the rent with your stones.'"

In addition to partial payment when the order is placed, Howard-Kicinski uses a contract based on the one used by her husband, an architect. In it, she says, "I try to describe the scope and scale of what the piece will be," will it include enamel or stones, be made of silver or gold. "I keep a record of the images I send [the customer.] If I correspond by e-mail, I keep copies of the e-mails. I like to work via the computer. I can scan a drawing out of my sketchbook and keep a copy of the e-mail with the jpeg attached giving you an automatic record of what the customer wants."

Howard-Kicinski also recommends being aware of jewelry designs as your own intellectual property. She signs and dates her preliminary sketches, even when scanned and e-mailed. "You don't want someone to take them somewhere else to be produced. You have to protect your intellectual property."

### Reaping Rewards

Despite the extra work, most artists say that custom work is worth it. It gives you the opportunity to work with a customer in an intimate, personal and fulfilling way. For one woman, who had recently graduated with her degree in horticulture, Cooperman took twigs she had collected, burned them out, then made the cast twigs into a ring. For another customer, he made a memorial piece with the ashes and lock of hair of the client's father. "I had this guy's ashes on my anvil to break them down. I was interacting with the person in the most intimate way I can imagine. It was very sweet. I felt privileged to do it."

Custom work demands you have the manual skills of a Houdini, the mind-reading ability of a psychic, the interpersonal skills of a diplomat, and the combined bedside manner of a priest, psychiatrist and bartender. But if you're up to it, taking commissioned work can teach you new skills, challenge you, give you a dependable source of income, build your reputation and give you plenty of personal satisfaction. Custom work, says Thompson, speaking for many artist/jewelers, "is the most rewarding work I do, financially and emotionally."

To see more of the work of some of the artists mentioned here, see their websites. Eve Afillé, at [www.evejewelry.com](http://www.evejewelry.com); Andy Cooperman at [www.coopermanjewelry.com](http://www.coopermanjewelry.com) or [www.andycooperman.com](http://www.andycooperman.com); Holly McHone at [www.hollymchone.com](http://www.hollymchone.com).

### Some Caveats about Custom Work

\* Listen. This is a custom piece--custom as in customer. This piece will be designed around their dreams and visions. Listen to what the customer wants. If she wants that ugly stone in the ring because they found it on the beach the night he proposed, it's not your job to talk them into a diamond. No one will be happy. If you can't do the job or don't want the job, don't take it.

\* Communicate. Be very sure the customer understands what they are going to get, what the risks are, what responsibilities you take, which are theirs, what will happen if they don't like the piece.

\* Enjoy dealing with people. If you are the kind of jeweler who likes to work in isolation in his or her studio and have a gallery deal with the public, custom work is probably not for you.

\* Be non-judgmental. Remember, that ugly stone may be your customer's pride and joy for reasons that go far beyond its intrinsic value. It's your job to do justice to that feeling.

\* Be sure you're capable of taking the job on. If you don't have the skills, at least be able to recognize what skills are needed. Know whether you can learn those skills in the time necessary, and where you can learn them, or know who has the skills and can subcontract the work. Remember that substandard work can not enhance your reputation.

\* Be honest. Know what your skills really are. Be honest about the quality and sensitivity of the stones, about the time the job will take you. Be honest with yourself about whether this is a customer or a job you want to take on. Don't be afraid to walk away.