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A FINE LINE: SKETCHING FOR JEWELRY ARTISTS

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While computers give designers a new tool, there are still plenty of good reasons to keep your pencil skills flexible.

by

Sharon Elaine Thompson

In an age when computers do so much for us, the idea of old-fashioned sketching—you know, that thing with pencil or pen and paper—may seem quaint. But sketching in jewelry design is still alive and well. And there are several reasons to develop and hone your freehand drawing/sketching skills.

First a definition. “Sketch” can refer to a range of deftness and completeness in a drawing. A sketch can be the haziest draft of an equally hazy idea, little more than a scribble meant as a memory jog for yourself. But other “sketches” may be almost suitable for framing. The purpose of the sketch dictates appearance and detail. An idea record needs only the bare minimum to make it clear for yourself. For a craftsman, you may want to show only how a tricky mechanism should work. A customer wants something as realistic as possible, nicely drawn with color and shading. When entering a competition, you’ll want to produce a beautiful rendition with watercolor, gouache (opaque watercolor), or colored pencil, and perhaps even mat it.

Alan Revere, of the Revere Academy in San Francisco, California; Helen Driggs, Managing Editor of *Jewelry Artist* magazine; and Serina Omori, Rendering and Sketching instructor at the Texas Institute of Jewelry Technology (TIJT), at Paris Junior College in Paris, Texas, gave us three very good reasons to use old-fashioned paper and pencil/pen sketching techniques: idea generation, problem solving, and communication.

IDEA CAPTURE AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Ideas come from everywhere and they escape easily. A quick sketch can pin them down.

“I like to look at a lot of different styles through art history: different motifs and patterns,” says Serina Omori, who recommends having a library of reference books for inspiration. When she finds something that snags her imagination, she jots it down. “It’s good to carry a sketchbook with you so that whenever you see something, and have an idea, you can record it.”

Helen Driggs uses sketching to get her jewelry design ideas, “from my brain to my hand,” a process she refers to as “capturing” an idea, a process akin to gesture drawing. A gesture drawing captures only the essence of a body or an object with a quick line. It takes less than a minute and can even look like a scribble.

If her mind won’t let go of the idea, Driggs begins to develop a more detailed drawing to “focus” her idea. At the same time, Driggs uses the drawing to “discover what problems might lie in the fabrication. I’m examining the design without committing to the metal.” There is much that can be done to “finesse” miscalculations in metal, she says, but

there is only so much you can do for a design that is wildly out of whack. Paper is cheap. Metal is expensive.

TIJT's student's sketches help them determine the manufacturing process they'll need to use, says Omori. "We can figure out the best way to make that part. The student might think they can cast the whole thing but when they draw it out, they realize the details are very fine and lend themselves to fabrication rather than casting."

Driggs even makes three-dimensional "sketches"—paper models—when necessary. "Metal sketches" help her work out techniques like forging, forming, and wire bending. "I test drive the design with a piece of copper to see if the metal behaves the same way as the pencil on the paper."

Using exploded views and diagram-like drawings, Driggs figures out complex constructions—how she'll set stones, assemble multiple layers, and make connections. "I make notes about sizes, connections, textures, and how I want to fit the stone in," she says. "The more you think out a piece from beginning to end, over and over again, the better time you'll have making it."

IDEA GENERATION

One of the most important reasons to cultivate an ability to sketch, says Alan Revere, is "not to sell something but to develop an idea. If you have something in your mind, and you don't capture it, it never really existed. Drawing captures your ideas. It makes them real."

Revere turns on the faucet of creativity by first setting up the right environment, something that will be different for everyone. He usually doesn't start with a specific idea but with a general idea. "Playing with tools, or with materials, rearranging things, looking at a process and technique, any of those can be the seed of a design. You see how the elements interact and how that interface might be interesting for a design."

Then, says Revere, "with the creativity faucet open, I start to move my body and my hand. If I don't get body and hand moving, I'm wasting my time. You can think about a thing forever." But without sketching it out, it doesn't become real.

Essentially, he is doing "directed doodling." Although he doesn't think specifically about what he's doing, he's aware of and watching his hand. He can choose, emphasize or change a direction if he likes what his hand is doing. But at the same time, he leaves himself open to going off in another direction if his hand/eye finds something else intriguing. "The process is intuitive and instinctive. It's directed, not totally random. You're looking and selecting, trying to have a positive and inclusive attitude. You're engaged in the process but observing it at the same time, making choices and decisions without making them." It's very important, he says, to go along with the process without judging it or changing it, or hardening the design too fast.

"It's play. It's freedom. Nothing counts, nothing matters. It's just a bunch of stuff. Don't take it seriously. At least 90 percent of what you do will lead nowhere. You need to get that 90 percent down to get it out of the way," he says. "Once you do, and the faucet is open, you just stand under it."

Later he begins to look for ideas—which may or may not be evident—by laying a piece of translucent paper over this raw sketch and selecting areas that seem suitable for development. He sometimes uses "filters"—looking at the sketches with the idea of triangles or S curves—to see what that brings out.

Although the initial "faucet open" process is unrestricted and un-judged, as he works to develop a design, he has a few rules: "Be clear. If the shape is going to be a circle, make it one, don't nearly make it one. Make the shape standard if it needs to be.

Make curves smooth. Make the thing easy to read and understand. Ease your way into the jewelry shapes.”

Don't confine yourself to one possibility too early. Keep at least three open and working so you can go back and forth between them. “Design,” says Revere, “is not a linear process that has a starting and a finishing point and as straight a line as you can make between the two. In this process [design] you're going in many directions at once.” Often the more possibilities you have open, the better the result.

In fact, if you get a good drawing, says Revere you may not need to make the piece (unless, of course, you have a client who is expecting a finished piece). The drawing alone may allow you to work out a particular problem to your satisfaction so that you don't need to invest time in making it. Making drawings can be like writing letters that you don't send, says Revere: done simply to work something out of your soul.

COMMUNICATION

It is almost impossible to describe a jewelry design idea in words, and even more impossible for a customer to visualize it. So most designers use a quick sketch to communicate their ideas. “A lot of times the customers don't have the vocabulary we use as jewelers,” says Omori. “They don't know what a prong or a bezel is. Without doing a full drawing, a quick sketch can explain things. A sketch helps bridge a gap in vocabulary.”

Many jewelry students do not come from an art background but from a technical one. That is why many jewelry trade schools, such as TIJT, GIA and the Revere Academy, teach a basic rendering process. Students learn how to draw basic jewelry components so they can confidently sketch them—often in front of a customer—in proportion, shaded to show three dimensionality. They learn how to draw gemstones to indicate translucency, brilliance and luster. Being able to draw these elements realistically, and put them in combination, enables the designer to communicate quickly and easily to a customer.

Sketching well at the counter not only increases the student/designer's confidence, it boosts the customer's confidence in the designer. Many people have a poor visual imagination, and are more likely to trust a designer who can present his or her ideas in a clear, visual way they can easily grasp. “Customers have confidence that if you draw so well, you can make the piece,” says Omori.

An added bonus, says Omori, is that sketching ability is highly portable. You can draw your designs not only at the counter, but anywhere. Talking to strangers in an airport can even lead to a commission if you can sketch well, she says.

TOOLS

You can draw with anything—pencil, chalk, ink, charcoal, paint, or a stick in the dirt (although the last probably won't impress a potential client). Both Driggs and Revere recommend using ink (felt pen) and a translucent paper.

“You use ink so that you cannot erase,” says Revere. “When you erase, you erase your memory. I want to accumulate images, I don't want to change them. I want to be able to come back to them later. With a pencil, I add, and change and erase and I get frustrated because the initial image is gone. That path is gone and I can't go down it because I can't remember it.” To refine drawings, lay another, translucent sheet of paper (Revere uses regular copy paper; Driggs uses 100 percent rag layout paper) over the initial drawing, and refine on that. Keep layering as you develop your drawing. You'll never lose any ideas.

“Drawing is learning to see, not just looking, but seeing,” says Driggs. Sketching teaches us to see the world around us, says Revere. Drawing keeps us rooted in reality,

because when you draw something, you're really paying attention to it. "It's very important that we have a good hold on reality to survive." And to design jewelry

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Learning to sketch is like learning any other jewelry technique: it takes practice. But it can be done without any expensive equipment. Try the following four exercises to develop your sketching and seeing skills.

- Make one-minute gesture drawings of familiar objects or jewelry, or head to a local coffee shop to sketch the passing scene. Use only simple lines or scribbles to capture the essence of shapes.
- Draw something you know well without looking at it (a self-portrait, your car, your favorite chair).
- Take something simple apart (not the lawn mower or food processor) drawing as you go. Put it back together, drawing the connections. Draw the parts from different angles to practice rotating an object in your mind.
- Doodle. Set up or seek out a conducive environment. Set your mind free and see what happens.
- Set an object in front of you. Put a pencil on paper off to the side and draw the object without looking at it. Called blind contour drawing, the result will look weird—Picasso on a bad day. But the more you do it, the more your hand and eye will learn to work together as a team.

There are many books and other resources that can help you learn to see and to draw. Two well-known drawing books are *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, by Betty Edwards, and *The Natural Way to Draw* by Kimon Nicolaides. Don't overlook drawing classes at your local community college or art center.