THE MORE THINGS CHANGE…

First published in *Lapidary Journal Jewelry Artist*, February 2008, as "Tomorrow's Artisan Market"

Studio jewelry has been breaking ground for more than 20 years, yet gallery owners see only small changes in the market. Those changes may be significant for those who work with alternative materials and methods, however.

by

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My first exposure to studio jewelry was in 1984, when I, quite accidentally, saw an exhibit entitled "Jewelry USA" sponsored by the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG) and the American Craft Museum. I had seen nothing like the work I saw that day, jewelry made from steel, niobium, plastics, beach pebbles, boar bristles and found objects as well as gold, silver and gemstones. Some of the work I thought very peculiar—rings set with colorful erasers and bits of crayon and colored pencil? Many pieces fascinated me with their color, unusual shapes and materials. Even those pieces made from "conventional" materials were anything but conventional. One piece, a necklace by Abrasha, made of basalt pebbles, 18k gold wire and a single diamond, absolutely entranced me. I left the show a bit confused, but I found, afterward, that "conventional" jewelry seemed a bit drab and unimaginative.

Today, many of the names in that show are familiar to readers of *Lapidary Journal*: Joe Apodaca, Alan Revere, Mary Lee Hu, John Paul Miller, Bruce Metcalf, Bob Ebendorf among many others. Many have become teachers, inspiring, collectively thousands of young craftspersons. Images of their work in magazines and books have captured the imaginations of countless thousands of others.

This has changed the way the general public sees studio jewelry. “Overall, the general public is much more aware of contemporary jewelry and studio jewelry, much more receptive to it than they were 15 years ago when I first opened,” says Cherry LeBrun, owner of De Novo in Palo Alto, California. “A lot of people then were puzzled or surprised or put off by what they saw. That so rarely happens any more. There’s much more exposure and much more education and openness to studio jewelry.” If you work with alternative metals and materials, or with non-traditional methods, this can mean you have less of a hurdle to climb.

Despite this, however, studio jewelry has not gone mainstream. It’s still not for everyone. The woman who buys jewelry to display her wealth will prefer diamonds, gold and platinum, not mokume gane and shell or glass. The woman who wears jewelry strictly as decoration to finish off her “look” for the day--pearls with this outfit, amber with that—may not be drawn to studio jewelry.

Women (and men) who wear studio jewelry are more interested in personal style than in fashion. They have to be outgoing even if not outrageous. They are “people who enjoy being asked about their jewelry and love that interchange that comes from turning heads,” says Karen Lorene, owner of Facèré Jewelry Art in downtown Seattle.

At one time, these buyers were often older, established, self-confident women, between 40 and 50 years old, says Geraldine Alexander at cultureclash gallery in Salida Colorado. “They knew what they wanted. Their home was pretty much in order. Their life was in order. They were looking at putting together a collection of strong pieces of jewelry. They were collecting the work of known artists with recognized names, and quality of workmanship. “

For Alexander, that audience is shifting a bit. Today she finds herself nurturing the younger people in her community. These buyers are not necessarily looking for a “name”

artist. They are looking for something, “not quite so expensive, something eclectic, unique, that makes them stand out in the crowd,” says Alexander. “They’re looking for materials with more funk to them….[something] that has some color, that has some unique materials, like some of the recycled materials, that has interesting images, or some bohemian sparkle without the more expensive stones. They might look at hand blown glass bead jewelry, for instance.”

These new buyers “are not children,” says Alexander. They’re people in their late 20s to mid-30s who are raising families. “They’re looking for signature pieces that they can wear when they get a chance to go out for an evening.”

Lorene says that Facèré is “attracting more women with discretionary income,” especially women in their 30s and 40s. When men come in to buy gifts for these women, they have often been sent to Facèré specifically “because [the women] desire something that doesn’t look like [something] someone else [is wearing].” Younger couples in their 20s, shopping for wedding bands, come to her gallery because they want something “very edgey.” “We’re getting young couples who are choosing materials such as titanium, stainless steel and iron because it has a wonderful edge to it,” she says.

While these are trends noticed at these specific galleries, LeBrun cautions that “the demands for studio jewelry and the type that is selling depends on the part of the country in which the gallery is located. Each gallery carries a different group of artists and so their experience with the market might be different. There is not a generic “studio art” genre.” This should be good news for artists who wonder if there’s a place for their work. If it’s not selling your area, it may sell well somewhere else.

There is a broad price range for the work as well. LeBrun says her price range remains what it has always been, from $100 to $25,000. However, she adds “We sell more of the expensive pieces than we used to, usually to established clients.”

At Facèré, where the average sale is between $300 and $800, “The price point is going up. No question,” says Lorene. “People spend $100 on a blouse. For a lot of people that’s normal.” So she finds customers have little objection to spending $100 on “a pair of earrings that will last a lifetime.” In fact, she says, “there is less price resistance than ever up to about $2000 to $3000.” For anything other than a wedding ring, however, jewelry over that limit “becomes a considered purchase,” she says.

Alexander has noticed a shift in the other direction. “There is still a very strong elite collector who, no matter what the piece costs, will have the money for it. But a lot of people are having second thoughts. People who might at one time have spent $1000 for jewelry are now thinking, Do I need it? Or they’re thinking of planning for retirement or paying gas and heating or tax bills.” Her younger clients who are raising families and perhaps earning entry-level incomes commonly look for work under $200.

She sees the trend to lower price points reflected in the work the artists are producing as well. “More and more artists, who used to spend more time creating complex one-of-a-kind pieces are trying to find work that is less expensive.” Although they still make one-of-a-kind pieces, she says, “Most artists are also trying to find that one production piece they can make a lot of, or trying to find a material they can use in a 100 different ways, something that gives them the $50 or $100 dollar piece of jewelry.”

While collectors have played a part in the studio jewelry market, their role has not been as significant as one might think. It is the people who buy the jewelry to wear who have made the market. “It’s more acceptable for people to wear a unique piece of jewelry so it’s not so totally dependent on the collectors,” says Lorene. LeBrun agrees, saying, “We have some collectors, but the vast majority [of our] customers want to [buy jewelry to wear].”

One thing gallery owners and studio jewelers alike have noticed is that some older collectors, heading for retirement, are no longer collecting. “Collecting drops off with women in their 60s,” says Lorene. Some are even divesting themselves of their collections. While some collections are donated to museums, and in fact may have been collected for that purpose, says Lorene, pieces are also coming into the secondary market.

While many older collectors have stopped buying, there is no fear that, as collectors retire, the desire for studio jewelry will fall off, says Lorene. “For as long as I’ve been in business, there is a small percentage of society that puts original art in their homes. But painters don’t worry that there aren’t any collectors.” In fact, she notes that, as general interest in studio jewelry grows, Facèré is doing better each year, selling jewelry in all price ranges.

The materials that studio jewelers have introduced into jewelry—plastics, glass, stone, bone, found objects—have become more acceptable to buyers. There’s little that gallery owners see that can be considered new. However, polymer clay was mentioned by both Lorene and Alexander as an up and coming material. For example, Lorene represents one artist who combines photo transfer with polymer clay.

“Artists have done astonishing things with [polymer clay] and it’s being accepted,” says Alexander. “It used to be [a material for] the homemaker making little beads.” She mentions seeing a $3000 polymer clay bracelet at a gallery in Santa Fe.

Alexander thinks Precious Metal Clay is another material that has potential for studio jewelers. “I think as artists become more skilled with Precious Metal Clay, that will provide interesting, unique and affordable jewelry,” she says.

Alexnder is cautious, however, about the predominant use of alternative materials in higher end jewelry. She believes that for most buyers once jewelry hits a certain price

point, they want the piece to have a certain intrinsic value, as there is in 18k gold for example. “It’s the rare collector who understands that paper or fiber beads by the right artist can be a wonderful piece worth a significant amount of money.” Although buyers still want to know a piece is done by someone with a recognized name, “if they’re spending enough money, they want to know [the jewelry is] silver or gold,” she says.

However, sometimes the artist’s name and the work can count as strongly as the intrinsic value of the materials. Lorene notes that the work of the late, well-known Washington artist/jeweler Ramona Solberg is beginning to come back into the secondary market, and the demand for the pieces, says Lorene, “is huge.” Yet Solberg is noted for her use of unusual found objects, such as caribou buttons, mother-of-pearl gambling counters, porcelain game pieces from Thailand, mah jongg pieces, dominoes, pot shards, and even labrets, the lip plugs used in some cultures. None of these materials has intrinsic value. It is the quality of the work and the quirkiness of Solberg’s designs that carry the value.

This is the position of studio jewelry today. What do gallery owners see for the future of studio jewelry?

First, even though more people will wear studio jewelry, Lorene thinks it will also be treated more like art. “Because many studio jewelers consider themselves to be sculptors, they are more conscious of how they can get people to put the jewelry on their walls to be viewed like a painting or sculpture. You’re going to see more jewelry art in an environment so it can be displayed as sculpture.“ She says that a number of jewelers create or commission special cabinets or display stands that allow the owners to exhibit their jewelry at home when they’re not wearing it.

“The other thing smart jewelers are doing is making their jewelry convertible, in the tradition of Victorian jewelry,” says Lorene. “You can get two bracelets that become a

necklace, or wear a brooch on a wire, or join three pins that hook together to become a necklace."

There is also a "huge shift toward mixing metals," says Lorene. The artists take advantage of the contrast of white and gold. They darken the silver with a patina and leave the gold bright.

But there is another advantage to using combined metals, says Alexander. It reduces the cost of the piece, not only for the buyer, but for the maker. With prices of precious metals going up, she says, beginning artists might not be able to invest the money necessary to make jewelry out of gold. They might, however, be able to make silver jewelry with just a touch of gold.

This concern about rising prices affects what studio jewelers make, she thinks. "If they're looking at designing art that is for art's sake, they might become conservative rather than put time and money into a piece of jewelry that might sit around for a long time, or may never find a collector because it was never designed for a collector. It was designed for the love of the piece. We used to see more of that [artists designing for the love of the piece]. But now we're seeing less. They're creating for the market rather than creating for the love of creating. And that's sad. That may be the biggest thing we're seeing."

Le Brun, who has worked with many of the same artists for many years, sees less change in the future. "We do add new artists and some leave but there is a core that work with the gallery." That doesn't mean the work is static. "The artists themselves are growing," she says. "If they didn't, everyone would lose interest. They'd lose interest in making it, we'd lose interest in showing it, and people would lose interest in buying it. That's one of the things that's very important: that the artists evolve and change their work."

Although there is a growing acceptance of studio jewelry, new artists cannot rest on the work done by others. They need to continue to educate their customers and their galleries.

"If could say one thing to studio jewelers," says Alexander, "it's that they're going to need more spend energy on educating their audience, including gallery owners who are selling the product. It's up to the artist to inform the gallery owner, and the owner to inform the staff, and the staff to inform the customer. When the customer comes through the store, they may be drawn to a piece of jewelry. But it's the information you can give them about the artist, or the information about how you, as a gallery owner feel about the piece and how it works and fits and the materials it's made from, or an interesting story you may have about the piece, that sells it."

Twenty-two years later, as I look at the catalog from "Jewelry USA," I no longer know which pieces I thought strange. And yet there is not a piece in the catalog that looks dated. Nor do any of them produce a yawn of boredom. They remain as fresh and innovative as when they puzzled me that first day. That says a lot about the design, the craft and the future of studio jewelry.