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Out of the Ordinary

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Hankering to try something different with your jewelry making skills? Gemstone carvings and other specialty cuts may be just what you're looking for. But be forewarned: They'll accept only your best.

Take a trip through any gem show and you'll see booth after booth filled with gemstones cut into nice, standard shapes and sizes. They're beautiful and they're easy to set. But for the adventure seeker in many jewelry makers, they can eventually become just a teensy bit...predictable. Might we even say, boring?

If your setting skills are as strong as your imagination, you may be ready to tackle a gemstone carving or other specialty cut. If so, be prepared to be challenged, says veteran New Mexico jewelry designer Paula Crevoshay, who is known for using unusual cuts. "Sometimes I get very nonplussed by them," she says, as the stones push her out of her comfort zone; something that is especially true of the works of Lawrence Stoller and Glenn Lehrer, she adds.

The variety of carved and specialty cut gemstones is almost without end. No two gem carvers or cutters work the same way. Carvers Thomas McPhee and Elizabeth Beunaiche, for example, tend to specialize in realism and reverse intaglios. The works of Steve Walters, Sherris Cottier Shank, Sean Davis, and Deborah Wilson tend to softer more organic curves. Stoller is known for large, bold, off-the-grid sculptural pieces, Lehrer for his trademarked Torus cut stones. Michael Dyber's and Bernd, Tom and Jutta Musteiner's works seem to come from a strong faceting tradition. But these are only the roughest of generalizations. All of these well-known cutters use a variety of techniques and approaches, and no two of their stones are alike.

This magical variety makes gem carvings easy to fall in love with. But they can have a dark side: setting. "When buying carvings, I have to be careful not to be drawn into the shape but to look at the quality of the material and the cutting, to see if it is adaptable to setting," says Carlsbad, California jeweler Corrine Perez Garcia.

"You may have to jump through hoops to set them," says David Lee, a jeweler in Mason City, Iowa. "You may have to devise a new, completely untested setting technique to hold the stone securely. That often it isn't very practical from business standpoint, since you're engineering the solution to a problem that you can't use multiple times. You have to do it for each individual piece."

In fact, "engineering" is the word all these designers used when they talked about setting gem carvings. It's not a simple matter of deciding prong or bezel, channel or tube. It's a matter of planning the entire piece around holding and showing off the stone to best advantage. "From an actual construction standpoint, carvings are more challenging," says Lee. "You certainly can't pick a mounting from a catalog and integrate [the stone into it]. Most of the time, the mounting has to be formed around the stone."

"The most challenging part of working with these stones is figuring out the engineering," says Crevoshay. "How to make it wearable; how to fit it on the human body; how to house the stone so that the finished piece is not only beautiful and graceful but a good solution." Many larger stones require building a strong armature to support the stone, she says, yet the structure must be light and beautiful as well. "As for the front [of

the stone], I try to make it as free from metal as it can be to show every undulation in the carving.”

“I don’t work with prongs,” says Perez Garcia. “I use a setting style I call integral setting. It’s like semi-bezels where the bold areas of the carving are.” She tries to place lines of the stone between the bezels so that the stone seems to flow naturally into the mounting. “The goal is to create a harmony between the gold and the gemstones, so that it looks like the stone is an inherent element of the design, not just add on or stuck on. It looks like it’s meant to be one piece.”

Unlike the engineering process, getting the design concept may be easy. “Often a design will suggest itself, many times immediately. I can see the design right from the start,” says Lee.

“My main inspiration tends to be the natural landscape,” says Perez Garcia, “so my work has crisp lines, graceful curves, and bold shapes. I work with a lot of compound shapes where concave areas are next to convex. That creates tension that is interesting and artistically stimulating.” She finds many of those same values in Sherris Cottier Shank’s work. “Sometimes it’s like her carvings are made to go into my pieces,” adds Perez Garcia.

Different styles of cutting may demand different jewelry making techniques and a different design esthetic, says Lee. He works often with Shank’s carvings, the flowing lines of which are usually best suited by the softness possible with wax work. “That is in direct opposition to the German fantasy cuts of the 19890s and ‘90s,” he says. “They are so crisp that the mounting is always fabricated.”

Naturally any piece you design with a carved gemstone is going to sell for more than any piece set with a stone of similar size, quality and weight that is cut in a standard facet shape or cabochon. “The stone is more per carat and it’s one of a kind. Then there is the extra work necessary to figure out how to hold something that is not box standard,” says Lee. “That all adds to the end price. If something costs more money, it becomes more than impulse buying. The customer has to really love it, and think they’ll love it for a long time.”

However, customers may be drawn to pieces set with carvings and specialty stones like proverbial moths to flames. “My clientele come to me searching for something unusual to begin with,” says Perez Garcia. “They walk out with a hand-carved stone, usually by an award-winning artist, and a one-of-a-kind piece. So generally, for me, it is not more difficult to sell the stones.”

But even when a piece has “grabbed” a customer, a little education about the work involved and the artistry is still a good idea, says Crevoshay, who works with gemstones carved by a variety of cutters. “I try to educate my clients on the sensibility of the artist, and explain how the artists are different from each other.”

While gemstone carvings and specialty cuts are challenging to mount, cost more, and may take more consumer education to sell, there are still very good reasons to work with them. “If I have the right carving, there is a powerful interplay between the stone and the setting. The gem seems to melt into the setting and vice-versa,” says Perez Garcia.

Crevoshay feels strongly motivated to use these special stones because she is excited by what she’s seen happening in the lapidary world in the last 30 years. “I love to support the lapidary arts. I believe we’ve broken so much new ground on the international scene through our lapidary artists that we’re making an impact on the art history of jewelry.” In addition, she says, “These are highly significant pieces that will hold their value because of the sheer reason that there are only so many pieces that will be made.”

If you have had enough successful experience setting stones with a variety of methods, you should not be intimidated by carved stones “It’s not harder to work with

carved gemstones,” says Perez Garcia. “You just have to look at them a little differently. You just have to open your mind up and be a little more patient with carving a wax or fabricating. It just takes a little more patience and time,” she says. “It’s not more difficult.”