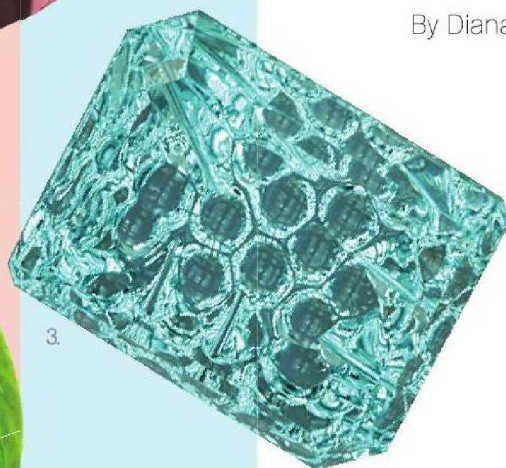


Clever cuts

Popular stones kick it up a notch with creative shapes

By Diana Jarrett

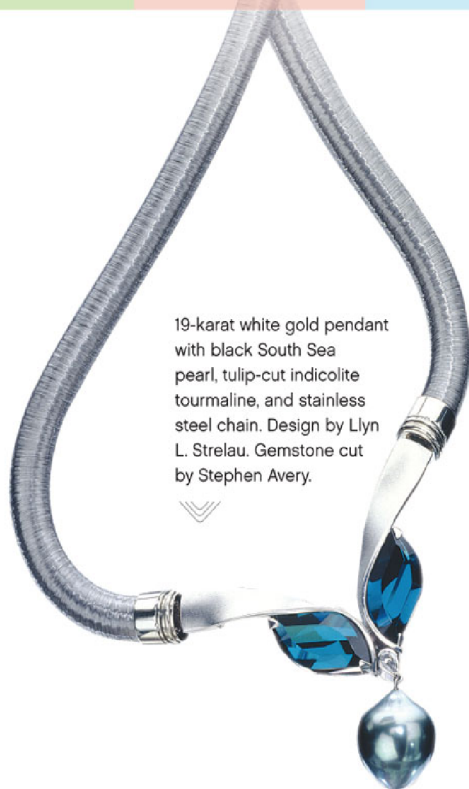


1. 6.75-carat tourmaline cut by Lisa Elser.

2. 19.13-carat peridot cut by Sherris Shank of Gemscapes.

3. 9.23-carat blue beryl cut by John Dyer.
Photo by Lydia Dyer

Necessity is the mother of invention, jewellers know. Adjusting to the new norm of a cautious global economy has spurred coloured stone purveyors to be more inventive than ever. Granted, top tier gemstones are still finding their way to big spenders for whom price was never a concern, and volume manufacturers mostly producing in Asia have plenty of customers for inexpensive mass-produced jewellery. But consumers who crave affordable yet distinctive jewellery that creates an emotional response have been left with few options.



19-karat white gold pendant with black South Sea pearl, tulip-cut indicolite tourmaline, and stainless steel chain. Design by Llyn L. Strelau. Gemstone cut by Stephen Avery.

Photo courtesy AGTA. Photo by John Parrish.

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So how do retailers entice budget-minded consumers who want value, beauty, and individuality in their jewellery purchases? The answer lies in neither upper tier gems that come with hefty price tags nor quirky stones whose value they question.

Forward-thinking merchants recognize opportunities exist for this underserved sector, and they are responding with creatively cut, albeit well-known gemstones. In turn, ingenious cutters and designers are heading down this exact road, offering imaginatively cut gems such as garnet or topaz, along with less common, inexpensive stones.

Shapes and styles are as varied as gemstones themselves. Square cuts are transformed into scintillating blinders with more facets placed on different parts of the stone than their traditional counterparts. Circular pavilion facets surprise when spied through the top of a cabochon. And free-form designs beckon with their polished curvaceous shapes that often look to be miniature sculptures.

These original cutting styles are often so unusual that cutters apply for patents or trademarks. The result is a win-win for merchants and shoppers alike; retailers provide innovative jewellery items that sell and consumers get one-of-a-kind pieces, minus the jarring price tag that comes with designer goods.

Telltale signs of artistry

Award-winning North American gem artist John Dyer serves the Canadian market with his expressive gem cuts. Is it always possible for these dynamic cuts to be patented? “Flat facet patterns are exceedingly hard to patent,” claims Dyer. However, he notes popular creative cuts are often trademarked. Dyer himself holds patents on several of his cuts. Still, cutters often use techniques or styles similar to that of their peers, tweaking those designs somewhat and turning one good idea into yet another, he points out.

Anyone with equipment can cut unique gemstone shapes, but can elite gemstone artists actually recognize each other’s work? Dyer thinks so. He says cutters can often determine who cut creatively shaped stones from subtle, yet telltale signals. “You look for little faceting patterns on the crown, and faceted or smooth girdles,” Dyer explains. “Details like that may reveal who cut a stone. Also, expert touches like ‘V’ groove internal facets that provide extra brilliance, and simultaneously make the material lighter can sometimes suggest an artist who likes to use that technique. But each artist usually uses these details in a distinctive way.”

Creating one-offs requires gem cutters to be adept at cutting a wide variety of stones into difficult faceting patterns. The challenge here lies with understanding how each material responds to the polishing wheel and lapidary tools. Each gem has its own fracture habit. Knowing the different ways in which a stone ruptures determines how a savvy cutter handles that gem.



« Gold rings with diamonds and diamond slices by Anne Sportun/Experimetal Jewellery.

Inclusions compound the cutting process

Toronto native and gemstone cutter Sherris Shank always considers a stone's fracture habits. "As a general rule I do not work with gems softer than a '5' on the Mohs scale or ones that fracture so easily they will come apart if they take a hard knock," explains Shank, owner of Gemscapes. "Some gem materials are so beautiful and unusual—like rhodocrosite—that I still want to cut them, so I consider them for sculpture." Other gems, such as rubellite tourmaline, have so many inclusions they cannot be completely polished out without destroying the gem, she confides. "In their case, if all the inclusions were to be cut away, there would be no gem left." Shank still works with these vibrantly hued stones because, "rubellite's colour is exceptionally lush and the gem takes a magnificent polish."

Still, some stones remain taboo for Shank. "I tend to avoid all gems that have included needles or crystals like rutiled quartz because the needles usually break the surface at some point, leaving pinholes that collect dirt," she notes. "Those needles and fractures also fight the carving patterns I work with." Shank believes these materials are best suited for cabochons with a smooth surface and no pattern.

Port Moody, B.C.-based gem cutter Lisa Elser sheds light on her *modus operandi*. "A great artist is part creative force and part mathematician," she explains. "I like to play with shapes, and draw on my research background to create high-performance stones." She also relies on collaboration. "My husband is a mathematician, and we'll work together to create optimum cuts for particular pieces of rough or unique cuts for clients. I'm not interested in cutting the same design repeatedly, so my inventory is more varied than many other faceters," Elser reveals.

Sometimes it's the client who jumpstarts the creative

process, acknowledges Elser, with flexibility on the cutter's end contributing to the success of clever cuts. The artist develops the design, but inspiration may have originated with the client. "I live for collaborative work like this," reflects Elser. "It's an opportunity to join forces and create something together."

Vancouver's Joan Scarabelli, owner of Scarabelli Jewellery Design, is naturally drawn to artistically cut gemstones like her clients, many of which are in the arts or design field and enjoy wearing miniature sculptural objects. A graduate of Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr College), she majored in painting and sculpture. "The use of original cut stones satisfies my love of both colour and form. I also love the one-of-a-kind aspect of designing with [them]," she says. But after studying gemmology and learning about each stone's complex makeup, including how they handle light, Scarabelli's appreciation for natural gems soared. She foresees the best is yet to come for creative designers. "As technology advances, many new possibilities in the design of gems become available. I look forward to exploring those options and creating new designs to showcase the unusual."

Everything old is new again

Toronto couture jeweller Anne Sportun of Anne Sportun/Experimetal Jewellery offers unique gemstones and diamonds to her clientele. Sportun was an early adapter to this highly individualized jewellery form. As rose-cut diamonds became more available around four years ago, Sportun says she began integrating them into her line. "I especially liked this cut as it seemed reminiscent of the past—something I think helps give a bloodline to a good piece of contemporary jewellery. Prior to this, I bought unusually cut Brazilian tourmaline cut in Germany."



2767-carat
aquamarine cut
by Sherris Shank
of Gemscapes.

Sportun is always on the lookout for the latest evolution in unusual gemstone forms. One sensational silhouette that resonates with her right now is found in diamond slices. "Absolutely love the latest diamond 'slice' stones," she says. "They show off the refraction and dispersion that only a diamond can have, while presenting something unusual, larger scale, and affordable."

Pricing these icon-breaking jewellery items can be tricky for a neophyte, Sportun cautions. Without a culet, they usually weigh less than traditional cuts, which means clients can buy bigger stones at lower prices.

"With diamond slices in brown and grey colours, as well as opaque whites, the price is lower, but not the sparkle or the coveted uniqueness of individual stones," she adds. "Each is so spectacular when set in designer jewellery, the perceived value by the customer is high."

Dyer understands the nuances of pricing signature goods. "Consumers expect to pay a premium for signature cuts and even more for the wilder designs," he notes. This provides the shopper with a couture experience, Dyer says, and the satisfaction of transcending into the rarified world of collector, rather than being merely a 'consumer.' "At the retail level, the merchant can share what went into the cutting process and the difficulty in execution," he explains. "That adds real value to the goods." Dyer points out the profit margin is bigger on less costly gemstones that undergo exciting cuts.

Calgary designer Llyn L. Strelau of Jewels by Design finds patented or trademarked stones practically sell themselves. "I point out the advantages of these gems," he says. "Not only are they interesting, but they are typically more brilliant and simply cut better than the average gemstone, since the cutter has put more time and energy into their signature cuts. In this age of e-commerce, a designer must have something different to offer that distinguishes him or her from the crowd. Margins are generally better as well, since it is more difficult to comparison-shop. A patented cut is usually a more controlled supply, including who the authorized sellers are."

Strelau is no rookie to the winner's circle, having picked up numerous design accolades over the years, including Best Use of Pearls at the 2011 AGTA Spectrum

Awards. Strelau notes that with the exception of ruby, emerald, sapphire, and perhaps diamond, nearly 75 per cent of the stones in his coloured gemstone designs are custom-cut, one-off gems. But he says he may be in the minority. Since diamond and emerald per-carat-prices may be worlds apart from garnet and such, suppliers can be reticent about offering diamonds cut into maverick shapes. And cutters tend to be wary of cutting super pricey gems into unusual shapes, he believes. "But tourmaline, aquamarine, garnet, and spinel are quite easy to acquire in fancy cuts."

Oddly enough, Strelau says cuts aren't always up to par, even on top tier gemstones. "I find a lot more substandard cuts like proportions, windowing, crooked pavilions, shallow crowns, and deep pavilions in higher-priced material than one finds in the less expensive stones. I drive my suppliers crazy by rejecting most of their offerings, usually due to the quality of the cutting."

Cut it for jewellery, please

No matter how fantastic a specialty stone is, at the end of the day, it has to have utility or it will never segue from gem to jewellery. In particular, the artist must consider setting limitations when designing the stone, says Strelau, recalling a special gem he fell in love with years ago. "I still have the first carved stone I ever purchased from Steve Walters of Utah, who was just starting out when I discovered him. He cut really cool shapes, but he hadn't yet considered that a jeweller had to set his creations. He didn't really allow for any 'attractive' place to add a claw or bezel or otherwise set the stone." Strelau speculates this design aspect might have revealed itself when Walters began setting jewellery, too. Even though that stone has never found a setting, it holds a special place in Strelau's heart. "Someday I might set it, but in the meantime, it sits in my safe." ♦

Diana Jarrett is an award-winning trade journalist and graduate gemologist (GG). In addition to being a member of the National Association of Jewelry Appraisers (NAJA) and a registered master valuer, Jarrett is a popular conference and trade show lecturer. She writes a syndicated column called "The Story Behind the Stone" for the Southern Jewellery News and Mid-American Jewellery News and is also a writer for magazines such as Texas Jewelers, New York Mineralogical Club Bulletin, and Rapaport Diamond Report.