

Modern Jewelry Making

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The room is amply provided with large windows. Seated at desks are overalled members of the staff, whose job it is to grade with great care all the gem stones sent to the firm, which will be set in jewelry in the production department. Some of the larger, more valuable stones are meticulously catalogued in a file.

There are many cabinets containing shallow drawers, each subdivided into a number of smaller compartments. These are filled with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and many other gems. They are skillfully sorted according to size, shape, and quality, so that when a gem of a certain shape or size is required for a piece of jewelry, such a stone can quickly be found. Diamonds are graded for quality, shape, and size and mounted on rectangular pieces of white cardboard over which have been stretched pieces of transparent cellophane to hold them in place.

The design department makes exact drawings and designs of each piece of jewelry before it is assembled. In a brightly lit room, the craftsmen work separately at drawing boards. One artist may be engaged in creating a pair of diamond-and-sapphire earrings, while another may be drawing the design of a fox head, which will later become a brooch, with two red eyes made from rubies. Yet a third works on a model for a diamond necklace that has to be copied from an old photograph taken in the early part of the century. A portion of the picture has been much enlarged, but, even so, it is extremely difficult to recognize details.

Other craftsmen are busy molding designs and drawings into life-size wax and plaster-of-Paris models. These are subsequently painted with the appropriate colors of the gems to be used in their making, so that the designer can see a true replica of the piece before actual work in metal and gems is commenced.

Once drawings and models have been completed, they are sent to the workshops. Here, the real task of shaping and assembling the jewelry begins. Each worker is surrounded by a multitude of specialized files, punches, hammers, and pliers. Numerous electric hand drills hang from the ceiling, each placed in a convenient position so as to be readily available for use. The work benches are also fitted with oxyacetylene burners to enable the craftsmen to soften the precious metals.

Most fine jewelry is handmade, and there are no standard sets of tools available for the work. The craftsmen prefer using their own specialized instruments, most of which they have made themselves. Sometimes a worn file that has been shaped and turned correctly may become the craftsman's most treasured device. With infinite care, a man will hammer into shape tiny gold leaves that are to form part of a brooch. Another shapes the setting out of a piece of platinum for a large diamond. Yet another carefully measures the size of an emerald that is to form the centerpiece of a ring.

Although the jewelry is designed on paper and a wax model of it is made for the guidance of the craftsman concerned, much of the beauty of the final product will depend upon his own originality and skill. Broadly speaking, the methods used to fashion the best of modern jewelry have changed little over the centuries, and when one watches these men at work, one leaves behind the hustle and bustle of the twentieth century and enters a world where speed means little, but pride in workmanship is in full accord with ancient tradition.

This is the way the best jewelry, much of which is still specially commissioned, is produced. It must not be overlooked, however, that the industrialization of the twentieth century has also had its impact on the craft of jewelry making. Much of the work on precious metals, hitherto the sole prerogative of the goldsmith, is today carried out by modern machinery. The melting of gold bars and the drawing of wire is no longer carried out by the craftsmen themselves. Large refining firms undertake this project, and ready-made gold sheets and wire made from the precious metals can now be purchased in required shapes and sizes. The making of bracelets, too, has been partially mechanized, and machines can now produce long lengths of different chain designs quickly and relatively cheaply.

A mechanized method of engraving metals, known as engine turning, and the technique of centrifugal casting, have all helped to make jewelry more readily available at prices within the means of most people today.

Although fashion in jewelry changes like fashion in all other forms of art, it can, in some ways, be likened to the changing tastes in music. For instance, a Beethoven symphony composed in the nineteenth century has lost nothing in dignity and beauty during the course of time, though music has changed considerably over the years. In the same way, jewelry created in the sixteenth century by Cellini is as precious and beautiful today as it was then.

Today, modern artists and sculptors are making valuable contributions that often closely follow the lines of their work with the paint brush and the chisel. The beauty of uncut gem crystals has been rediscovered, and stones carefully selected for their shape and natural impurities are increasingly incorporated in designs of contemporary artist-craftsmen. Often, quite common and inexpensive minerals—such as rock crystal, rose quartz, or iron pyrites—when set in

their natural forms in artistically designed gold mounts make exceedingly attractive brooches and rings.

Creations by the well-known Spanish surrealist painter, Salvador Dali, a master of modern jewelry creation, are splendid examples of how the designs of his art can be realized in precious metal and gems. One of his pieces is a golden heart with a jeweled crown, within which there is an animated, pulsating heart. The jewel, Dali says, signifies the ruler whose heart beats for her people. While this may not be everyone's idea of a pleasant piece of jewelry, it is certainly startling. All departures from the conventional meet with criticism, yet, as the years pass, they become commonplace. Dali's creations include a pair of telephone ear clips, made of precious stones, a pair of ruby lips, the rubies being set individually in gold with pearls, and a watch, called "The Eye of Time." The watch, in three shades of blue enamel, is set in a diamond clip shaped like the human eye. Some of his designs are not meant to be worn because of their enormous size; the largest measures about 10 by 30 inches. All of them, however, show a burst of great creative genius that, together with the very nature of the fine material he uses, insure that they become splendid objects of decorative beauty.