

SILVER CHIC



Galactica Moth brooch in oxidized sterling silver and 18k pink and 18k white gold with 8.60 ct. t.w. peach tourmaline, 1.68 cts. t.w. blue sapphires, 0.78 ct. t.w. rubies, and 0.38 ct. t.w. amethysts; **\$11,800**; Boregaard Jeweler, Narrowsburg, N.Y.; 845-252-3827; boregaard.com

Why jewelers searching for craft, creativity, variety, and vision are eschewing gold in favor of silver

When she joined the faculty at San Francisco's Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in 2001, Christine Dhein taught all metalsmith techniques using silver. Back then, it was principally a practice metal. Today, however, silver is as much an end as a means in learning how to make custom jewelry. "Most of our students leave planning to be designers, but primarily in silver, not gold," she says. "If they use gold, it's more as an accent and not the main ingredient."

BY DAVID FEDERMAN

Personalized Family Circle bracelet in sterling silver, leather, and birthstones; \$420 (excluding stones); Krikawa Jewelry Designs, Tucson, Ariz.; 520-322-6090; krikawa.com



The reasons for selecting silver are many—some obvious, some not. The most obvious is, of course, economics. With gold seemingly stuck above the \$1,600-per-ounce mark, silver, at about \$35 per ounce, is the only practical precious metal option for new craftspeople.

But the influence of economics doesn't stop at commodity prices. As Pedro Boregaard, a designer from Narrowsburg, N.Y., puts it, "We are witnessing the disappearance of the middle class. For all those workers and professionals displaced by the recession, silver gives them affordable access to custom precious metal jewelry." The same is true for a new generation of designers and craftspeople. Silver allows them to find careers they may not find in a gold-based marketplace. "In [our] economy," says Boregaard, "silver is an ideal job creator."

What's more, these aren't menial jobs. These are positions that demand creative and technical skill. That's because silver, says Tucson, Ariz., jeweler Lisa Krikawa, is "an art metal first and foremost."

The emerging reality of the silver market—with which gold- and diamond-dependent retail jewelers admittedly struggle—is that, until recently, there has been "no tradition or demand for silver as a marriage or special-occasions metal," says Durango, Colo., designer/silversmith/lapidary Michael Boyd. "Silver is all about fashion." Boyd adds another factor to its popularity with craftspeople: experimentation. "Thanks to silver's low price, it's not the end of the world if you screw up a piece. 'Try, try again' is an affordable credo."

Krikawa agrees: "As a designer, I am not constrained by cost, I do

In 1997, the Air Force held a silver anniversary gala to mark 25 years of F-15 fighter jet production. You get the idea: Silver is the official metal of the quarter-century mark.

Now the Silver Promotion Service wants sterling to become the official gift idea of the 25th anniversary. Last September, the group announced a campaign to make silver jewelry the remembrance of choice for any relationship or venture that has reached its silver anniversary. And the group wants gifts given to be substantial, not just symbolic. As SPS director Michael Barlerin says, "With its many artisanal qualities, silver enables designers to create unique jewelry and ideal products." That's certainly true in a country whose most famous sentinel, Paul Revere, was a silversmith. What's more, with silver around \$32 per ounce, as opposed to \$1,600 per ounce for gold, silver keeps the prospect of great yet affordable design a distinct possibility. —DF

SILVER MEDAL: ISTOCKPHOTO



SILVER'S GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

When it comes to anniversaries, silver has long been synonymous with celebrating 25 of them—at first, of marriage. Legend has it that German couples of means started giving each other silver wreaths for their 25th wedding anniversaries around 600 years ago. Gradually, the exchange of custom-crafted silver became so common, the 25th anniversary became known as the silver anniversary. These days any venture lasting 25 years uses this occasion as a publicity-worthy special event. In 1978, for instance, ABC TV ran a hugely popular silver anniversary special on its 25 years of football coverage.

Boregaard Jeweler's wide and slim Alligator cuffs in oxidized sterling silver with 4.25 cts. t.w. and 3.05 cts. t.w. natural fancy cognac colored diamonds; \$11,650 and \$9,000



not have to worry about weight, and I am not concerned about cracking." But will retailers adopt the same rhapsodic enthusiasm for silver jewelry? "It means repositioning one's store, in whole or part, as a design center and even an art gallery," says Boregaard.

The last time silver was a high-traffic item in jewelry stores during the 1970s, it was mostly in the context of Native American pieces. Now sterling has become a portal into a wide diversity of techniques and finishes—wider than that associated with gold. More and more artists are becoming oxidation enthusiasts, producing pieces that capitalize on silver's tendency to tarnish. "Instead of fighting blackening, designers use controlled oxidation to produce intriguing tarnish tones," says Boregaard, who's considered a master of fine-silver blackening.

Meanwhile, anti-oxidation partisans are enjoying the availability of extremely effective anti-tarnish alloys such as Argentium (its high germanium content retards tarnish). The British import and its many American offspring allow manufacturers to give pieces the longest-lasting shine in silver's 3,000-year history as a jewelry metal—a boon to retailers and consumers alike, thanks to lower maintenance costs.

"Jewelry is all about keeping up appearances," says Don Raymondi, a silver coin and accessories collector in Reading, Pa. "Argentium keeps silver looking fine for months and months. Even when signs of tarnish appear, they are easily removed with soap and water." No wonder Jeffrey Herman, founder and executive director of the Society of American Silversmiths, hopes "Argentium will end the pernicious practice of rhodium plating. What kind of message does plating send? That silver can't hold its own with gold or platinum. That's nonsense."

Of course, some metalsmiths, like Andy Cooperman of Seattle, feel no need to take sides in the oxidation debate. Their pieces blend techniques in such a way that they have distinctive multi-toned and textured surfaces where small and large areas of rapid-acceleration oxidation intermingle with medium- and high-shine areas. "If oxidation is the fate of silver," Cooperman says, "celebrate that fact and let your pieces show their destiny the first day they are worn."

Ironically, even blackening does not last forever. Tarnish wears off—leaving, says Boregaard, a beauty no artist can imitate and few consumers would alter: "In 30 years of owning my own studio, hardly anybody has asked me to re-oxidize a piece. I tell clients the more they wear a piece, the lovelier it will become. Silver needs to be worn to look its best. And that best has a drama only usage can give." ■

COOPERMAN RING: DOUG YAPLE

THE FINISHING TOUCH

Silver's many aesthetic charms help explain why consumers have a greater chance of encountering the metal in contexts of art and experimentation than gold. Indeed, silver predominates in the use of every metals-blend technique now becoming mainstream—from mokume-gane to cold-joining to controlled oxidation. If these terms sound unfamiliar, fret not: They will soon be a part of every silver seller's jewelry vocabulary. Here are today's most popular trends in silver artistry:

BLACKENED SILVER: When silver is immersed in a heated liver-of-sulfur solution, accelerated oxidation gives degrees and tones of tarnish that would otherwise take years to achieve. After one or even several chemical baths of usually no more than 10 seconds each, a final application of Tripoli (a common polishing compound) with the thumb results in an infinite variety of hand-rubbed textures. Leaders in this technique include Zaffiro Jewelry in Portland, Ore., and Pedro Boregaard.

MOKUME-GANE: Originally a Japanese form of sword decoration, mokume-gane almost disappeared in the 18th century when the samurai who were the sole customers for weapons with such ornamentation found their services no longer needed. By transferring the technique to jewelry, artisans saved it. Mokume-gane (which means "burl, or wood-grained, metal") creates distinctive swirl-patterned laminates by forging different metals together. Usually, one sees yellow gold streams on a background of silver. But various colored gold alloys can be used to give multi-hued effects. Among the best-known mokume-gane specialists in America are George Sawyer in Minneapolis and Lisa Krikawa.

KEUM-BOO: This ancient Korean gilding technique for gold-leaf overlay allows craftsmen to fuse 24k gold foil pieces and strips onto silver objects. This is done in two steps: First, the surface of the silver article is repeatedly heated, quenched, and pickled until all traces of copper are depleted; next, gold foil is pressed onto the silver surface, which is then heated to station it permanently in place. Do not think of this gold foil covering as

plating or leaf. Because both the silver and the gold are 100 percent pure, there is an exchange of atoms that fuses the two layers. Christine Dhein says this is her favorite course to teach at the Revere Academy because it can be practiced, if not quite mastered, in a day, making it one of the most quickly satisfying experiences for her students.

COLD-JOINING: Many silver pieces or their component parts have intricate patterns and textures that heat can endanger. So when it comes time to assemble these parts into a whole, craftsmen use connectors such as nails, prongs, tabs, wire—even glue. Seattle-based Andy Cooperman goes one step further and work-hardens his silver to a point where it can hold objects like metal balls or gems through sheer force and tension. Use of such heat-free connectors and confinements is called cold-joining. His pieces treat such fastening devices as structural elements in themselves that add to the sculptural dimension of his pieces. —DF

Orbit ring in sterling silver with 18k gold, stainless steel, and 0.03 ct. yellow diamond; \$750; Andy Cooperman, Seattle; 206-781-0648; andycooperman.com

