

FUNCTIONAL *Flair*

LAPIDARY JOURNAL

Whether designing for clients or competitions, Llyn Strelau fashions jewelry with people in mind.
by Mark Lurie



Caelum et Terra (Heaven and Earth), a hinged bracelet with a core of the Gibeon meteorite, named for where it was found in Namibia, acid-etched to highlight the Widmannstätten pattern; 18K yellow gold liner and rims, diamond-set rivets and 18K white gold orbits set with 18 white and champagne diamond "planets"; 2.97 tcw. Photo courtesy Jewels By Design.

As a jeweler, Llyn Strelau is a creature of Calgary a city that blends cosmopolitan tastes and down-to-earth practicality. For Strelau, who markets his custom creations locally from his retail shop, Jewels By Design, jewelry may be many things, but above all, it must be wearable. "If somebody can't wear it comfortably, then there's something wrong," he says. "It doesn't matter if it's a \$200,000 ring or a \$20 piece of semi-costume jewelry: if it's not functional, for me, it doesn't work."

Scanning his showroom, one takes in a stunning array of pieces that are meant to look as good on a human body as they do in their glass showcases. Strelau, 42, says he's almost "schizophrenic" in his designs, and doesn't really have a signature style yet recurring motifs are discernable. Several pieces reflect his mechanical sensibilities, such as *Opening Night*, a circular brooch with platinum wires swooping down from the tips of

three faceted gems onto a drusy black onyx, like floodlights over a stage at a Hollywood premiere. Other pieces reveal his penchant for using meteorite and fossil materials, as with *Time Spiral*, a 118-million-year-old ammonite ensconced snail-like in a shell of green and white gold.

Both of these award-winning designs, like many in the showroom, were created specifically for competitions something for which Strelau says he has no "formula." Eventually, the right customer will walk into the store and purchase one of these pieces. Most of the time, though, Strelau designs with his clients in mind, finding inspiration in the discussions that take place across his plate glass and granite desk at the back of the shop.

On the day I meet up with him, Strelau is sporting a black-and-white checkered tweed blazer, olive slacks, and flashy green tie patterned with roaming tigers, looking far more the gallery owner than designer. There's a reason for this polished image: though he conceptualizes most designs, develops prototypes, and troubleshoots during construction, for the last five years he has delegated much of the hands-on work to his assistants, at present two goldsmiths, Jim Turner and Bayot Heer, who work in the studio upstairs. "I'm much better dealing with clients than I am sitting at the bench," he says.

It's not hard to see why he is ideally suited to custom design. Far from being a gruff, take-it-or-leave-it artiste, he comes across as an easy person to work with, devoted to his customers and willing to do whatever it takes to help them visualize the works they commission. His patient demeanor bespeaks his prairie upbringing: the firm handshake; the low, quiet voice which, though expressive, never rises dramatically; the modest, self-effacing jibes, and the frank-yet-understated sense of humor.

FINDING HIMSELF. Growing up as one of six siblings in a remote farming community in northern Saskatchewan, Strelau allows that he was "a bit of an oddity," in his words. "Unfortunately for my father, I wasn't cut out to be a farmer," he says. Through exposure in school art classes to Native Indian beadwork, he gained an interest in stones, which he began to collect. "Somebody'd lose an earring, so I'd take the stones out," he recalls. Soon, he began making rings and pendants out of antique iron horseshoe nails he'd acquired from his uncle.

"I started making jewelry because I could never find any jewelry that I liked," he recalls. After high school, he spent a year traveling around Europe, where a Pakistani friend showed him how to make the sort of silver pieces he was selling to subsidize his travels. On his return to Canada, Strelau moved to Calgary to study electronics at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. While on duty at the school's library, which it then shared with the Alberta College of Art, he began thumbing through books on jewelry design, employing new techniques with materials he purchased from a local supplier.



Opening Night, a platinum brooch with wires fanning out from indicolite tourmaline, tanzanite, and rhodolite garnet onto a carved drusy black onyx cut by Steve Walters. Photo John Parrish, courtesy AGTA, 1996.

Ironflame, an 18K gold neckpiece with ammolite and hematite beads. Photo courtesy Korite Minerals Ltd.



"Mostly, I made pieces for myself," he says.

Strelau eventually lost interest in electronics and dropped out, moving into the basement of a house belonging to a woman who allowed him to use his skills to pay for room and board. "I just made a piece of jewelry every month for her. It was a pretty loose arrangement. Sometimes she even bought the stones, and then I'd just set them. The settings were mostly silver. It was a pretty good deal for me," he says, adding, "It was more out of the goodness of her heart than that she was getting a great financial deal out of it." Through this patron, he began to meet people who would become clients, many of whom have remained so ever since.



Soon, he took out a mortgage on a house with money inherited from his father, renting out the top floor while he lived and worked downstairs. To supplement his fledgling design career, he earned money cooking and catering gourmet meals another skill he picked up by reading. "I've never used any of the stuff I've learned in school," he chuckles. "Most of what I've learned is from experience or books or other people."

He did repairs for a local jeweler, eventually joining his staff and manufacturing commercial lines. In the back of Strelau's mind percolated the idea of running a "one-of" operation, though, and when he bought the business five years later, he set up a showroom and began integrating custom designs into the mix. He gradually phased out the production work, and in 1987 he moved the business from Calgary's industrial Southeast quarter to 17th Avenue Southwest, a residential-cum-commercial district that is home to many of the city's galleries and fine shops. A few years later, he moved a few blocks down the street to his current location, in a turn-

of-the-century white wooden house that had been an antiques store.

LLYN STONES. Today, Strelau's designs couldn't be further from the production jewelry he was manufacturing when he purchased the company. The metalwork, for one thing, tends to incorporate a variety of textures. He likes the durability of platinum, especially for thin or wiry components, and frequently combines it with 18-karat gold that has been reduction gilded a technique that intensifies the yellow and gives it a deep, velvety luster, which plays off the metallic surface of polished gold.

Also, in creating one-of-a-kind pieces, he has taken to designing around free-form stones for which production techniques are simply not an option. Among his favorite stones is ammolite gemmified fossil ammonite shell with an iridescent play of color that is mined mainly in and around Lethbridge, Alberta. Through a special relationship with the stone's Calgary-based producers, Korite Minerals Ltd., Strelau has created hundreds of ammolite designs in 18-karat gold or platinum with accent gemstones. Most of these designs wind up in tourist markets, such as nearby Banff and

When choosing ammolite for his designs, Strelau's rule is the more colors, the better; he can then accentuate the centerpiece with combinations of gemstones. In **Under the Rainbow**, he set a 1785-ct free-form ammolite in 18K yellow and white gold and used ruby, fire opal, yellow sapphire, chrome tourmaline, blue sapphire, amethyst and diamond as accent stones. Photo @ John Parrish, courtesy AGTA,



Time Spiral, an 18K green and white gold brooch encasing a 118-million-year-old Russian ammonite, with drusy pyrite replacement, black and white South Sea pearls, akoya pearl, and diamonds. Photo Todd Patterson.

Lake Louise, or as far away as Niagara Falls, though several have won prestigious design awards.

"It's the best of all possible worlds for me, because I have basically carte blanche to do the design, and I get to work with the best quality of stone," says Strelau, who is so reliable a customer for Korite that people at the company refer to ammolite as "Llyn stones." Generally, he works around stones already cut by Korite, though he has sent pieces back to be recut. Occasionally, he sketches designs with a particular cut of ammolite in mind, and asks the company to find a match.

Because ammolite's appeal is its diverse, fiery play of color, Strelau prefers to use large stones, weighing anywhere 10 to 50 carats, which makes them ideal for brooch-pendants. He favors ammolites possessing the full spectrum of colors, including the rare blue and violet along with the more common green, yellow, and red. The more colors, the better, as he can then accentuate these with any number of gemstone combinations.

Still, he notes, the stone is not for everyone. Because he uses top-quality, all-natural ammolite with no spinel or quartz caps for protection, the material is particularly vulnerable to attack from skin acid and other elements, and thus requires the same sort of care one would accord mother-of-pearl. Then there is the intensity of its color. Even in cases where the colors meld gradually into one another,

ammolite defies subtlety because of its strong surface reflection. "With ammolite, people either love it or hate it; there's no middle ground," he says.

Well, there may be some middle ground, consisting of people who don't appreciate what a rare, world-class gem it is. Most Calgarians, for instance. "I sell maybe three or four [ammolite] pieces a year to people in Calgary, if that," Strelau says. The fact that ammolite is unique to Alberta ought to be a major selling point, but it doesn't always work that way. As he explains, people tend to assume (falsely) that "if it's local, it can't be that great."

THE LOCAL MARKET. While Strelau does have a small international clientele, his custom-design work is marketed primarily to local customers. Every once in a while, he'll get tourists stopping in and making a custom order, but this will probably remain the exception to the rule. "I like the process of design to take a little bit longer than most tourists would have," he says. Besides, he's got his plate full in Calgary, a rapidly growing city of 820,000 people which recently has been experiencing a prolonged stretch of prosperity. "Calgary is a particularly buoyant economy right now," acknowledges Strelau, who posted his best-ever sales last year. "We're still an oil-based town, so if the oil companies are doing well, that filters down to the rest of us eventually." Of course, there's a flip side to that equation. "We're kind of at the whim of what's happening in Iraq and Saudi Arabia as much as we are with what's happening locally," he says. To weather the peaks and valleys, a jeweler has to ensure that he or she is the one people go to either when money's tight or when times are good.

Strelau estimates that there are five shops in the city which can service clients looking for high-quality one-of-a-kind jewelry, and that some of these operations could buy his entire inventory on the strength of a single sale. How does one compete? For Strelau, it comes down to establishing relationships with clients who feel comfortable that they're being

understood and listened to regardless of whether they are millionaires or people for whom \$500 wedding bands are a major purchase. "I like my customers to feel that they're getting what they wanted. That it's their brooch, not Jewels By Design's brooch," he says, putting himself in the customer's shoes. "Jewelry for me is a very personal thing for the wearer. I'm always surprised when somebody buys a major piece or any kind of piece, really off the shelf."

After 12 years in business, his design talents and willingness to go the extra mile have combined to earn him a loyal following, mainly through word-of-mouth. He publishes a "strictly informational" quarterly newsletter which he mails to his customers and displays in the shop for browsers to pick up. But he no longer advertises heavily to the general public, operating instead on the principle that if he keeps his existing clients happy, all else will fall into place.

"Calgary is very much a city of small social circles of people," he explains. When these circles intersect at parties or other events, Strelau's jewelry might form the basis for a conversation that will eventually net him customers from a second circle. The process can multiply to the point where "there can be five or six circles that I'm working on at any given time," he says. "That's my theory of how the world works."



Llyn Strelau in his gallery, Jewels By Design. Photo Todd Patterson.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF DESIGN

"I'd say my best pieces are those that tell stories," says Llyn Strelau. Such is the case with *Pause at the Threshold*, an intricate though highly wearable brooch-pendant which illustrates Strelau's collaborative approach to design.

Pause was commissioned by a married couple who had stopped into Strelau's shop months earlier and seen a 10.45-carat trapezoidal boulder opal. Captivated by the opaque yet fiery colors within the stone, they would return periodically to sit down with Strelau and discuss design possibilities.

What was it about the opal that drew them in? As Strelau explains, opal has a three-dimensional depth of color that is more haunting than bold. They immediately thought of the stone as a doorway to another universe or dimension, eventually deciding to have stairs leading up to a pair of doors that would open to reveal a cat looking out onto the other-worldly stone.

After trimming the opal, Strelau did a preliminary sketch on paper, which he then refined using a computer graphics program. Together with his clients, he scanned an architecture book for doors, eventually coming up with a composite based on a Victorian design with columns and Corinthian capitals, which he designed on computer, occasionally allowing the clients to watch and make suggestions.

From a computer printout, Strelau showed them how the opal would appear through the gothic-style windows when the doors were shut. This approved, he presented them with a model of the design in copper and brass. Then came the actual construction.

The frame and mounting for the opal, as well as the stairs and the lintel above the door, were fabricated from 18-karat gold sheet. The architectural moldings and leafy panel, as well as the keystone in the arch linking the two columns,

were carved in wax and then set in gold. Wax carving also accounted for the Corinthian capitals atop the two columns, which were made from prefabricated white gold tubing cut vertically in half and set on cast bases. Above the door, a platinum "fanlight" was held in place from the inside by tiny pins.



Pause at the Threshold, a platinum and 18K yellow and white gold brooch housing a 10.45-ct. boulder opal, and set with ruby, boulder opal, and set with ruby, fire opal, yellow sapphire, emerald, blue sapphire, amethyst, and diamond.

The doors were fabricated from platinum sheet and laminated (on the outside) with 18-karat gold. Once the windows were pierced out, the doors were hung onto the three-millimeter hinges that had been soldered to the frame. "It didn't really slot together, but it all kind of fit very neatly rather like a 3D jigsaw puzzle," Strelau recalls.

Once the components were soldered into place, a series of round colored stones were bead-set into the fanlight, and a diamond set in the doorknob. Finally, having soldered the platinum cat to the top step, just touching part of the opal, Strelau had the name of the piece professionally engraved into the depth of the goldwork, the words running along the arch from base to base.

Most of the actual construction was delegated to Strelau's assistants at the time. Chris Beck set the gemstones, while Jim Turner fabricated most of the metalwork a remarkable feat given Turner's bulky build and large hands. "He's got these immense fingers that can do delicate things," says Strelau, who portrays himself as an amiable taskmaster during the design process. "I stood over [Jim's] shoulder a lot," he recalls. "I tend to drive the guys crazy a bit, because I'll hover, [and say] 'Well, now, what if we did this instead?' or 'How about this way?'"

An enlarged photograph of the brooch now hangs framed in Strelau's showroom, on a black silk background, overlooked by a pair of rainbow hematite earrings with emerald, sapphire, and amethyst cabochons that highlight the colors in the opal. ML