



# Cut Together



An artful trio designs gem sets  
and jewelry set with them

BY ANNIE OSBURN

**IT HAPPENED BY CHANCE.** Somewhere between forming a friendship, deciding to share a booth at the Tucson gem shows, and selling a collaboratively cut suite of stones to a jewelry designer and his client, award-winning lapidary Stephen Avery, gem carver Jason Penn, and custom jewelry designer Llyn Strelau closed their own time-space continuum to create a very special commission. At its center rests a 25+ carat aquamarine and a set of shield-shaped black jade gems. The jewelry, a pendant, is as multifaceted as its trio of creators, and can be worn in at least six distinct ways.



A common time zone is perhaps the only logistical aspect this triad of designers share. With some 1,500 miles between the three, Avery, based in Colorado, and Penn, based in New Mexico, often sent stones back and forth for laborious tweaks. Strelau's studio in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, was the last outpost for the pendant's design (and yet-to-be fabricated matching set of earrings).

## GEM SETS

Just two years in the making, Avery and Penn's collaboratively cut combinations of faceted gems and drusy and other natural-surface

cabochons include suites of peridot, kammererite, rubellite tourmaline, spessartine garnet, black jade, uvarovite garnet, pink spinel, scapolite, and pink calcite. Avery and Penn plan to feature about two dozen collaboratively cut gem sets or suites at this year's American Gem Trade Association (AGTA) GemFair in Tucson.

"Stephen and I have known each other for several years and have become good friends. In the process of moving our booths at the show, we tried to get one next to each other so we could open them up for more space. Stephen was doing his color combinations of

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Two shield-shaped, rough-surfaced black jade stones cut by Jason Penn surround a 25+ ct. aquamarine faceted by Stephen Avery. Photo: Robert Weldon

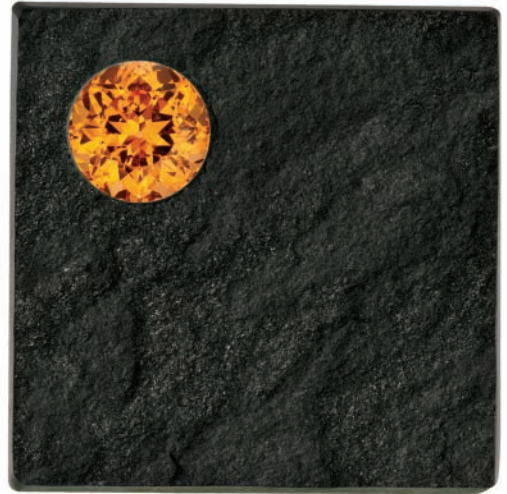
Jeweler Llyn Strelau liked the arrangement but also several others, and designed a necklace that uses the gem set many ways, several of which are shown. Photos: Llyn Strelau

“Most important is our focus on the perfect facet alignment and optics to showcase the best possible color, shape, and brilliance.”



**TOP LEFT**  
Matched rubellite tourmaline (Avery) and black jade (Penn) gem sets. Photo: Robert Weldon

**TOP RIGHT**  
A round faceted spessartine garnet (Avery) rests inside a square black jade (Penn). Photo: Robert Weldon



two faceted stones cut in similar shapes, and I was doing similar work with my cabochons of natural surface materials,” recalls Penn, known for cutting unusually colored cabochons, some with drusy surfaces, in agate, jasper, and other chalcedonies. “We wondered what would happen if we did it together?”

Joining booth spaces soon led to joining creative forces. “We found a tie-in with more than just the physical space we shared,” adds Avery. “I sent Jason an aquamarine and he built the wings around it from black jade. It was the very first piece we did together and the one that Llyn [Strelau] used for his pendant.”

For Avery, a master lapidary who specializes in faceting, a keen eye for color and precision underlies every effort. “Most important is our focus on the perfect facet alignment and optics to showcase the best possible color, shape, and brilliance,” notes Avery, whose repertoire often focuses on

emerald cuts, cushion cuts, and trillions, as well as innovative cuts such as his diamondback and Ovob, or oval opposed bar cuts.

“Trillions were very popular in jewelry design in the ‘80s. I created a trillion pattern and shape that was spectacularly successful and almost glows like a laser beam. I won my first AGTA Cutting Edge Award with a trillion. From there, I expanded to Tri-oppes [triangular opposed-bar cuts] and experimented with the concept of curvilinear girdles, and whether they needed to be straight or not. I started doing the slash cut, a variation of the checkerboard, and evolved that into my diamondback cut, which has been very popular using the curvilinear girdle.”

Favorite material for Avery includes rubellite tourmaline, Nigerian spessartine garnet, aquamarine from Mozambique, tourmaline and pink spinel from Afghanistan, and tsavorite



from Kenya. “Tanzanite is another favorite of mine. You could say that we grew up in the industry together. We were discovered at the same time,” jokes Avery. “When Tanzania opened up its gem business, I was over there quite a bit, sometimes twice a year.”

### JEWELRY PERSPECTIVE

From a jewelry design perspective, Avery’s faceted gems and Penn’s naturally textured cabochons are perfect complements. Says Penn, “My material is flat on the back with different depths and heights, and can present a challenge for a jewelry designer.

“That’s one of the reasons why I like working with a designer like Llyn,” adds Penn. “He looks at a stone and says, ‘How would I do that?’ He has a flexible design perspective. Stephen and I have both come to enjoy the

dichotomy and contrast between a well-faceted stone next to a textured surface material. We see each other a couple of times a year, ship things back and forth and have developed a pretty good feel for what needs to be cut.”

Although Avery and Penn are adept at creating unusual color combinations, the two were surprised to learn that creating winning color collaborations required a lot of trial and error. “We met up in Denver more than a year ago and thought that some of the textures would really pop, in terms of color, with simple faceted stones,” notes Penn. “We started talking about our color combinations and Stephen sent some pieces he had preformed. That’s when we realized this venture was going to be far more technically difficult than we originally thought. There was a big learning curve to knowing what would happen depend-



**ABOVE**  
Faceted spessartine garnet (Avery) and black drusy jade (Penn).  
Photo: Robert Weldon.

“Stephen was doing his color combinations of two faceted stones cut in similar shapes, and I was doing similar work with my cabochons of natural surface materials. We wondered what would happen if we did it together?”

**BELOW LEFT**  
Faceted pink spinel (Avery) and drusy uvarovite garnet (Penn). Photo: Robert Weldon

**BELOW RIGHT**  
Faceted blue-green tourmaline (Avery) and drusy pink calcite (Penn).  
Photo: Robert Weldon



**TOP LEFT**

Faceted purple scapolite (Avery) and drusy uvarovite garnet (Penn).  
Photo: Robert Weldon

**TOP RIGHT**

Faceted spessartine garnet (Avery) and drusy uvarovite garnet (Penn).  
Photo: Robert Weldon

**BOTTOM**

Faceted peridot (Avery) and drusy kammererite (Penn).  
Photo: Robert Weldon



ing on how we cut the stones.”

Avery agrees. “There was a lot more back and forth than we expected. We’re learning the process as we go. Everything I do involves a process and a production. I have to do things in a professional manner to make a living. It’s no less different for Jason. We’re still learning that order for working together. I suppose you’re not much of a cutter if you’re not anal retentive! Sometimes it’s come down to the last tenths of a millimeter and it hasn’t been good enough. We’re still working on perfecting the finishing work and controlling the final product.”

Enter Strelau, a meticulous jewelry designer known for precision and his many award-winning designs, including 10 AGTA Spectrum Awards. A passion for mechanics deftly underscores Strelau’s design concepts. Growing up on a farm on the prairies of Saskatchewan, Strelau jokes that jewelry was not part of the lexicon. “I liked sparkly stuff, collected gems and went to Europe after high school,” says Strelau, who was inspired by a bracelet made by a wandering goldsmith he met in Greece. “I found copper wire and wire cutters and got started. I was a tinker.”

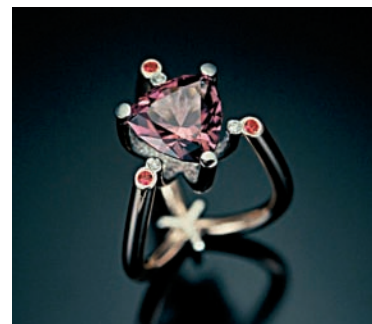
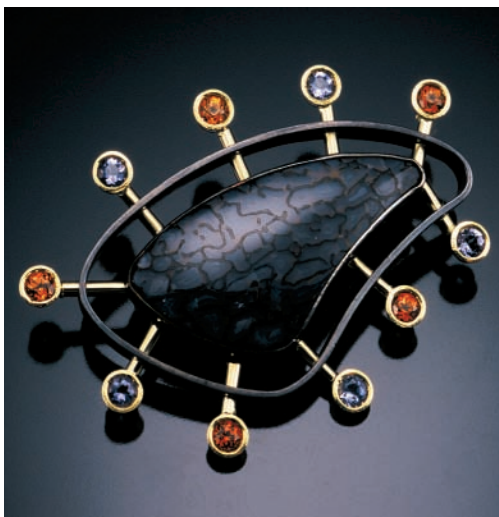
Key to Strelau’s pendant featuring Avery’s aquamarine and Penn’s black jade is his incor-

learn more



about gem cutting  
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“One of my clients calls it my evil clasp system, because she wants to keep adding on. That’s one of the great things about custom jewelry design: once you get somebody hooked, they need to keep coming back.”



**FAR LEFT**  
Blue dinosaur bone gem cut by Jason Penn in pin by Matthew Crawford  
Photo: Matthew Crawford

**LEFT**  
Poppy jasper cut by Jason Penn in pin by Matthew Crawford  
Photo: Matthew Crawford

**ABOVE**  
Tourmaline cut by Jason Penn in ring by Matthew Crawford  
Photo: Matthew Crawford

poration of the interchangeable clasp design invented by Jörg Heinz. Through Strelau’s ingenuity, the clasp allows the pendant to be worn in at least six different styles, with each of the stones by themselves or together, hung from a variety of neckpieces or incorporating additional centerpiece counterpoints.

“I’ve been using the bayonet hardware system designed by Jörg Heinz for the past 15 years. It’s routinely used for beads and pearls and has an invisible clasp like you’d find on pop beads. But for this application, it’s quite sophisticated and made from 18K gold,” says Strelau. “While this type of clasp was first used for beads, it’s been put into anything where you want to wear an ornament at the front of a necklace. You can literally plug the centerpiece into place.”

Known as his *interCHANGE*© clasp system, Strelau’s version of the mount incorporates the clasp into the design and hides it invisibly at the front. “I’ve taken the basic concept where you might have a really nice strand of \$30,000 South Sea pearls with fancy clasps that no one sees. With the bayonet, you put a pretty clasp at the front and replace the center largest pearl with an ornament on the strand,” says Strelau.

“In the case of Stephen and Jason’s stones, I’ve given the aquamarine a very simple bezel.

On each side, there’s a slight step of matt finished 19K white gold in the same shape as the black jade that it rests on. On each side of the aqua are the two female components of the bayonet. Here’s where it gets interesting. My client has a beautiful strand of gray/green South Sea pearls that she can plug right into the aqua. She can wear just the aqua by itself with the white gold and pearls, or she can plug in the bezel-set jade pieces with pearls.”

Paramount to Strelau’s pendant design is the concept of versatility. “With such a large aquamarine, the more versatility there is the better. The possibilities are not limited. The client can keep adding to the piece down the road. One of my clients calls it my evil clasp system, because she wants to keep adding on. That’s one of the great things about custom jewelry design. Once you get somebody hooked, they need to keep coming back.”

Together, this artful trio cut gems, designed jewelry, and created beauty across many miles, mountain ranges, and methods.

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