



The author and his client consulting on a custom design.

Photos courtesy Lynn L. Strelau

Vision *quest*

Tips and tricks of custom design

By Lynn L. Strelau

Most of my career has centred on creating custom-designed jewellery for individual clients. As such, a review of my past work would show a comparatively schizophrenic collection of jewellery, since most designs were largely driven by my clients' needs and desires.

Since custom design clients are not simply pointing to a finished piece in my showcase or image portfolio and saying "I want THAT ring," I have had to develop a number of techniques to help draw out what he or she really wants.

My initial approach involves the use of a computer-based image portfolio written specifically for my business. Like most designers, I had a series of photo albums with images of my work that proved impossible to keep up to date and sorted without constantly re-arranging the photos, not to mention finding albums that would stand up to constant use without falling apart. A computer version of my portfolio solves all these issues.

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Photo op

Virtually every piece we make is photographed and these images are entered into our database, along with details of metal quality and weight, gemstone type, cut, dimensions, weight, and quality, a link to the original stone purchase, approximate number of hours for fabrication, and the final selling price. While price information rapidly becomes dated, it can allow for a quick calculation at current costs when I need to provide a client an estimate to create a similar piece. This finished jewellery database is linked to the visual portfolio I use when working with clients.

The visual database portfolio is separated into categories:

- rings with diamonds;
- rings with coloured gemstones;
- rings without gemstones;
- earrings;
- pins/brooches; and
- wrist wear and neck wear, which are further broken down into subsets, such as cufflinks and bracelets, or pearl strands, chains, or pendants, etc.

When a client comes in to discuss the creation of a new piece of jewellery, the first thing I usually do is sit them down with a computer mouse and ask them to take what amounts to a jewellery Rorschach test! (Alternatively, I have a second station with a touch screen-enabled computer where even computer-phobic clients can easily navigate the system themselves.) Their mission is to work through the portfolio and, without spending too much time analyzing their response, choose images of jewellery that appeal to them and drag these photos into their own personal ‘favourites’ folder.

The intention is not for them to find the perfect ring or pendant for their needs—after all, the portfolio is made up of all the pieces we have designed for other clients and no one has the same precise design requirements.

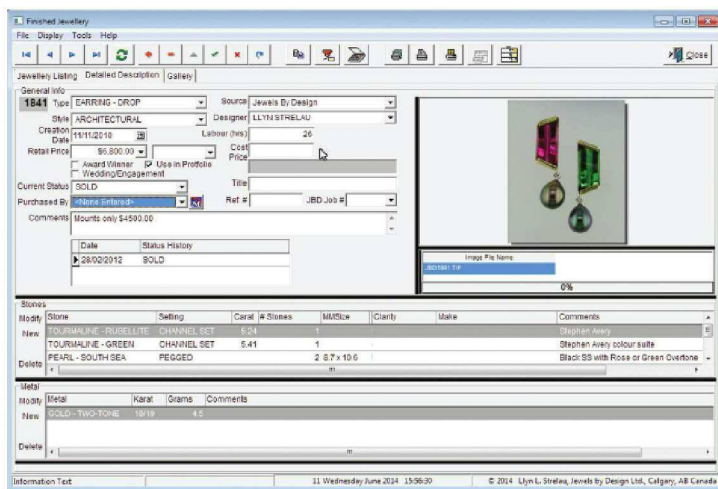
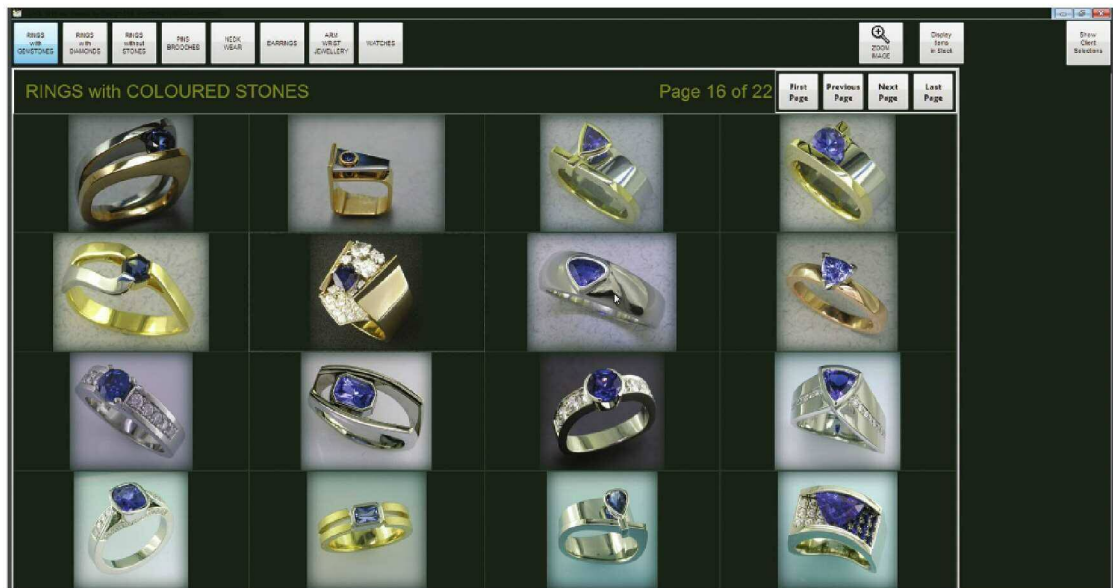


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Keeping a virtual portfolio like this one allows clients to scroll through previous designs for elements that appeal to them.



Consider creating a database of all your designs that includes details of metal quality and weight, gemstone type, cut, dimensions, weight, and quality, a link to the original stone purchase, approximate number of hours for fabrication, and the final selling price.

I prefer the client almost subconsciously choose images that speak to them in some subtle way. It could be the general form, a gemstone's colour or shape, the metal's colour, or simply a gut reaction to an image.

This initial pass through the database is intended for me, the designer, to delve deep into the client's 'psyche' and hopefully reveal a general preference or direction that will give me a starting point for the new design.

It can uncover things about the client even they did not expect to reveal.

Once the initial survey is completed, the client and I go through their selection of favourites and discuss what it is about these they find appealing. Usually, a theme becomes apparent (although there have been occasions when a client lands on one design that suits their needs completely and we move on to the next step). The choices they make jump-start a dialogue, which is the next stage of the creative process. As still photographs do not completely convey the intricacies of a piece's design, it is up to me to talk the client through the various choices and gently lead them to a clearer decision.

At this stage, the pencil generally comes out and I start drawing rough sketches to refine the concept. Since my skills as a draughtsman are sadly limited, I resort to using computer-aided design (CAD). Although we may ultimately have the piece milled or grown using computer-aided machining (CAM), at this early stage, simply being able to model and render various versions of a design is usually enough.

One tip to consider here is that sometimes it is better not to provide a photo-realistic render of the design. Some clients may take this image as being completely representative of the finished product. Even a piece that has been modelled and created by computer technology must still be hand-finished and the 'real' piece, while close to the computer-generated render, always has some variation (typically better in fact). However, if a client takes the render too literally, it can cause them to feel

bench tips



Software applications that render a design to look like a pencil or watercolour sketch may be something to consider, as some clients may take a photo-realistic render as being completely representative of the finished product and be disappointed with even the smallest deviation.

the finished piece is a deviation from the design. Instead, consider software applications that render a design to look like a pencil or watercolour sketch.

A matter of perspective

As the process continues, I have other methods to help a client visualize the new piece of jewellery. If a design

incorporates gemstones (either supplied by the client or sourced from our inventory), there are several useful techniques to help resolve design considerations. We keep a stock of silver models of some of our more popular styles. These are not usually highly finished and are deliberately left in a rough state, again, to allow for flexibility in the design. I have even also used a scissor and piece of lightweight card stock to make a quick representation of a piece of jewellery. All of these tricks help give a client a higher level of comfort during the design process.

Of course, the other method we find useful is showing the client a wax model of a piece prior to it being cast and finished. Even though it may mean he or she must come in for several appointments, with some designs and some customers, it is vital to take the process slowly and step by step.

By combining the actual gemstones being incorporated, the silver, wax, or paper models, and optional diamond simulants (I keep an inventory of cubic zirconia in a range of sizes and shapes), a piece can be mocked up in 3D form the client can hold and even put on their finger. One of the most useful tricks I have discovered is the use of blue tack, which is putty designed for sticking photos or paper to walls for temporary display. This material is perfect for attaching a gemstone to a silver model. For clients who do not have a strong grasp of spatial relationships and have trouble visualizing a design from a sketch or even a computer model, they will instantly be able to 'see' what their new piece might look like. The sticky putty does not leave a residue on gems and is strong enough to allow a stone to be attached to a chain or earring to really give the client a feeling for the design.

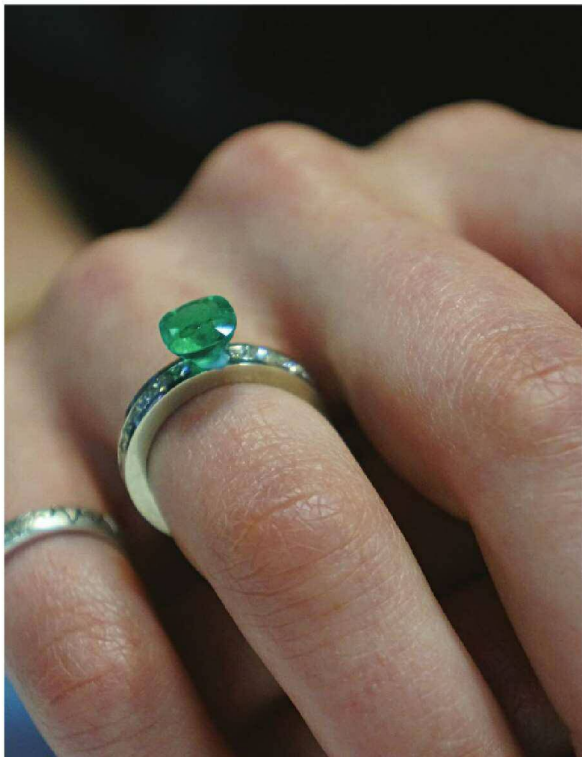
The use of these simple and effective techniques can pay big dividends when working with custom design clients. It's very gratifying as a designer to watch the 'lights' come on when I stick a diamond belonging to my customer's grandmother on a model, when previously they simply could not imagine what it would look like in a new mounting.

Another little trick that can help clinch a custom design decision is to have the client look at her hand or neck in a mirror. Getting a 'new' perspective on what the piece looks like from an observer's viewpoint, especially with rings, can be very useful.

Sizing up the situation

When sizing a client's finger, it is important to use a sizing ring that is close to the width the new piece will be. A narrow band fits more loosely than the same finger size in a wide band and you will need to allow for this difference. Although you can now purchase sizing rings that are

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The use of blue tack is perfect for attaching a gemstone to a piece of jewellery, providing a client with a sense of what a design will look like.

comfort-fit, we made our own set in sterling silver several years ago (a great exercise for an apprentice jeweller!). We also took a set of regular wide sizing rings and re-shaped them to soft-square, taking the guess work out of sizing this style of ring. Another factor that is sometimes neglected is to be sure all the sizing rings and ring mandrels in your shop (or on the workbenches of whoever makes up your designs) are calibrated.

I have seen ring mandrels and sizing rings that vary by at least half a size, which causes unnecessary problems.

One of the more ‘unpleasant’ events when working with a client, both for custom design and simply for cleaning or sizing a ring, is when the client is trying to take off a piece that is snug. Often, their first impulse is to lick their finger to make it slippery enough to slide the ring off and then they blithely try to hand the ring to the jeweller. I find this rather disgusting (to say nothing of unsanitary). To avoid this, I always have a small spray bottle of generic blue window cleaner handy and try to whip this out before the ring reaches the client’s mouth. (Eyeglass cleaner works well, too.) The cleaner is not only slippery, but it can add a bit of sparkle to gemstones.

Alone or in combination, these techniques can help avoid the unfortunate situation of a disappointed client. Rather than their eyes shining with delight, they complain the final design is not at all what they were expecting. These tips aren’t entirely foolproof—no matter how carefully you guide your client through the process, there are some who can only safely purchase a finished piece with no surprises. However, incorporating some of the techniques discussed here might allow for a smoother design process. And who wouldn’t want that! ♦



Lyn L. Strelau is the owner of *Jewels by Design*, a designer-goldsmith studio in Calgary established in 1984. His firm specializes in custom jewellery design for a local and international clientele. Strelau has received numerous design awards, including the American Gem Trade Association’s (AGTA’s) *Spectrum Awards* and *De Beers’ Beyond Tradition—A Celebration of Canadian Craft*. His work has also been published in *Masters: Gemstones, Major Works* by *Leading Jewelers*. Strelau can be reached via e-mail at designer@jewelsbydesign.com.