

# The first cut is the *deepest*

Adding the personal touch  
with hand engraving

By Lynn L. Strelau

**H**and engraving is one of the most effective ways to personalize a piece of jewellery. While it can be used simply as a decorative technique to accent a design, it can also provide a high degree of personalization to suit any client.

These days, an artist who is proficient in the art of hand engraving is not easy to find. Many of the old masters no longer work and few craftsmen have the technical and artistic ability, as well as the patience, required for this painstaking task. That said, it is possible in some applications for a good wax worker to carve low relief or intaglio motifs that are then cast. Even CAD has its place in the creative toolbox, while machine or laser engraving is adequate for some purposes.

However, the fluidity, finesse, crisp detail, and accuracy achieved by the hand of a master wielding a sharp polished piece of hardened steel can be quite astonishing.

#### **Attention to detail**

For the past 15 years, I have had the good fortune to work with Warren Smith of The

Photos courtesy Lynn L. Strelau



Coast Handworks Co., a hand engraver who lives and works on a mountaintop in British Columbia's interior. Although he is classically trained, he thinks outside the box and invents new methods as needed. Discussions with him have vastly expanded the possibilities of what I can offer a client. It is satisfying to work together to take classic techniques and adapt them into fresh, modern designs. Collaborating with a good engraver can open up a new world of possibilities for your designs.

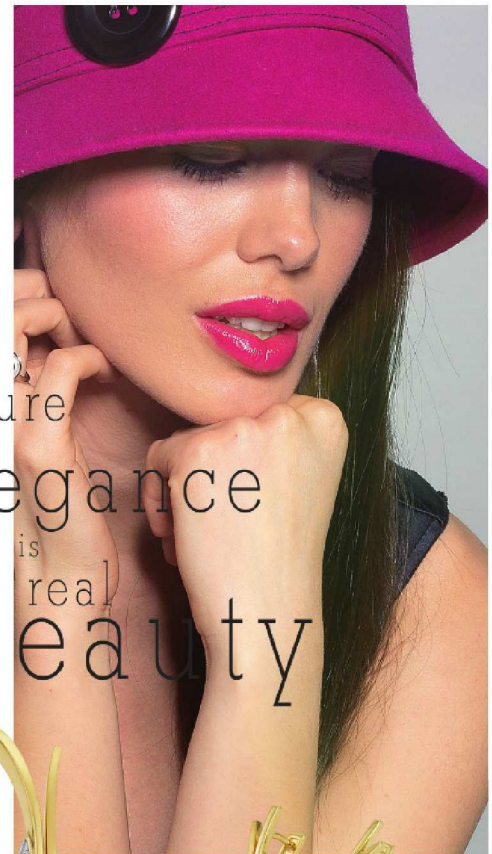
Engraved motifs can be inspired by many things, including a client's cultural background, hobbies, personal sentiments, art and industrial design, and even hobbies. Deciding on the motifs to be engraved involves the same process and level of dialogue required by any custom design. Occasionally the client comes in with an idea already formed, but more typically, they need coaching and a degree of discussion to come up with a final design. Often, these reflect the client's personality and require the designer's guidance to determine what is possible or desirable. Pencil sketches, images sourced from design books, and even the Internet can help inspire a final design. It is very useful to seek input from the engraver as well, since he or she has the expertise to know what technique or style of engraving would be the most effective for a particular purpose.

A motif may be engraved as intaglio where the design is carved down into the original surface or alternatively as cameo, a technique where the motif's background is relieved away. In many cases, a combination of the two techniques is useful, first relieving the background surfaces and then adding details by engraving into the areas left raised. More than two levels are possible, of course, resulting in low relief sculptural images, which when combined with a variety of textural and polished surface finishes, can offer a wide range of possibilities.

Sometimes a client wishes to re-use a piece of jewellery that has been passed down through their family or purchased in the secondary market. Since rings are typically worn for many years by the original owners, these estate pieces usually require significant structural restoration to make them wearable. We have frequently refurbished antique or vintage rings featuring beautiful art deco or Edwardian patterns, both eras when hand engraving was very popular. For these pieces, the engraver can work his or her magic to recreate or refresh the original surfaces.

Hand engraving can be as simple as a reminder of a couple's wedding date (hidden inside or proudly displayed on the outside) or depict messages of deeply personal significance to the wearer. Purely ornamental or used to mark milestones, the age-old techniques of hand engraving can go far beyond the traditional styles of the past and provide wide scope for design today. Let's take a look at a few examples illustrating some of the possibilities.

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 Wedding jewellery



When used for wedding jewellery, engraving is a very good method to symbolize the marriage bond, even when the rings are disparate in general shape and size. The photo above illustrates the rather diverse interests of my clients. They requested a design inspired by spiritual symbols of Native American and Middle Eastern origin coupled with matching engraved rims representing heads of prairie wheat.



In the photo above, you can see both rings shared a sinuous leafy vine winding around the band. His incorporated a series of Japanese family crest designs, while his bride's ring was embellished with simple flowers and diamond-set buds.



Mother Nature is often the inspiration for engraved designs, such as this wedding band carved with an asymmetrical pattern of leaves and vines inspired by the flowing lines of art nouveau. Seemingly simple, it takes artistry to achieve movement and grace with just a few lines.



A beautiful magenta sapphire became the centrepiece of an engagement ring with a diamond halo. The sides of the bezel and shank are engraved with a pair of butterflies, as well as floral and leaf motifs.



Anything goes in the case of clients of ours with a passion for nature. They requested bands with dragonflies, the sun, flowers, and even three-toed dinosaur footprints! Believe it or not, all were symbolic of their individuality and union. The engraver's skill was able to bring them to life.

### Match up



Some new rings are inspired by an existing engagement ring. We had a client whose fiancé proposed to her with his grandmother's 1940's vintage diamond ring. It had an open work motif on the shoulder and side plates that we used as the genesis for the hand-engraved wedding bands. Her ring incorporated some small diamonds, while his was simply an enlarged version of the same design.

Another common theme in recent years is the Celtic knot. We have made these by carving the knots in wax and casting, however, we find hand engraving can achieve greater precision and detail. There are many variations on the knot, ranging from a simple two-strand crossover to triskele knots to complex tree of life and multi-strand patterns varying in width. For one ring, we flush-set round white diamonds distributed evenly around a half-round band; carved Celtic knots encompassed each stone, maintaining its endlessness as a symbol of eternal love. An avid windsurfer, the client decided to add a personal touch in the form of a tiny, yet fully detailed sail and board engraved on the inside of his ring.



A recent assignment entailed creating an art deco engagement ring set with a baguette blue sapphire and diamonds. The wedding bands were not to feature any gemstones. (I find it problematic to combine round brilliants or other similar diamonds with the simple geometry of the baguette cut, however, the couple wanted bands that were more decorative than plain pipe styles.) In consultation with the clients, we spent some time with resource materials, such as art deco and design books. They eventually settled on a design inspired



by the mural in the Empire State Building, a classic art deco masterpiece. Translating this to wedding bands took a bit of doing. His band was 7 mm wide, but hers was both a small finger size and narrow at 3.5 mm to 4 mm. The mural's design was quite detailed, with a very vertical flow. Somehow we had to distill salient elements from this design that would translate to the bands. Here, our engraver came to the rescue and the result was a pair of elegant art deco bands that were a great complement to the simplicity of the engagement ring.



 Classics revisited



A wedding couple who loved the idea of Greek and Roman laurel wreaths of victory chose to have this design interpreted on their bands. His 7-mm 19-karat white gold band allowed for a generous area to realize the pattern. Her band, however, was only 3 mm and since both rings incorporated bevelled polished edges, the real estate for the laurel wreath engraving was tiny. Skilled engraving made it possible to achieve the intricate detail required and we added a small diamond to each ring as a finishing touch.



Designs inspired by West Coast native art are a popular theme in Western Canada. We have created rings featuring totemic animals, such as an eagle and raven that share a common 'head' with their individual beaks identifying each bird. In another ring, our engraver carved a pair of grizzly bear totems, which in turn, support a bezel-set trillion-cut blue sapphire (the "something blue" to complete the "something borrowed..." sentiment).

A more abstract design was used for a pair of engraved yellow gold wedding bands flush-set with black and fancy colour diamonds. After sketching the layout with a pen directly on the bands, we set the stones first and sent the ring off to our engraver who used a flat graver to carve a series of flowing 'ribbons' that wove under and over each other punctuated by the diamonds.



Of course, engraving is not only suited to wedding jewellery. A client with an oval blue topaz wanted it set in a ring. She and her husband had vacation property in B.C.'s interior and one of her favourite plants in the area is the Oak Fern. We incorporated white gold claws shaped like emerging fiddleheads repeated in hand engraving on the ring's shank, while the three-lobed fern fronds were engraved on the sides of the under bezel.



## bench tips



▲ A pair of sterling silver pendants commissioned for a 25th wedding anniversary presented a departure from our usual engraved work. We designed the pieces in the form of a book with a slipcase. The wife wore the outer case, which was engraved with a Celtic 'tree of life' motif and set with the family's birthstones. The husband wore the book itself, which featured the same tree motif, but opened to reveal the names of each family member and the wedding date. This piece was full of symbolism and treasured by the couple.



▲ Simple monograms or family crests have always been popular for rings, cufflinks, and other jewellery. Graphic lettering like these cufflinks suit any man, while a pair of wedding bands features the couple's initials turned into a repeated monogram to celebrate their union.

Moving forward in history, a client requested a ring as a graduation gift for her granddaughter with engraving inspired by the delicate tracery of Renaissance Italian art. The engraver began with a simple Florentine surface and incised a classic foliar and vine design.



Gold is a soft metal compared to others, which means engraving work tends to become less sharp over time. A new technique developed by our engraver allows him to engrave intricately detailed family crests and monograms into durable stainless steel plates that are set like a gemstone in gold jewellery. We are always on the lookout for new techniques that can be incorporated into jewellery design and this is one of them.

With all the available computer technologies, the jewellery industry is fortunate to still have skilled craftsmen and women who maintain the traditional techniques of hand engraving. It is a painstaking and time-consuming art, but the result of their skill is quite spectacular. It is up to us as designers to find new and innovative ways to incorporate hand engraving into our work and help keep this tradition alive and vibrant. ✦



*Llyn 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](mailto:designer@jewelsbydesign.com).*