

A LIFE DEVOTED TO JEWELRY

'I think of jewelry pieces as miniature sculptures'

By IRA SIMMONS
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Andrea Hall Carnahan's boss gave her an opal last week and told her to make something out of it.

The opal was a teardrop-shaped stone mined in Australia. It was iridescent, flecked with with gold, blue and red. He didn't exactly know what he wanted. Something nice, of course, something interesting, but beyond that....

Andrea listened carefully, nodding her head, looking attentively through tortoise-shell glasses, softly asking questions.

After the listening and question-asking, she sat down to sketch out some ideas for the piece.

She was doing what she had done many times before. She was starting a new project, taking some materials and ideas and mixing them with her own ideas.

Andrea is 24, a metalsmith and jeweler. She has pursued her craft for seven years, but in a sense, she has only started.

She peers through magnifying goggles at pieces of gold and silver, at glittering diamonds, rubies, sparkling blue sapphires, emeralds, shimmering aquamarines.

The materials and tools of her trade are tiny, but there is so much to learn about them.

The jeweler must be an artist but also must be enough of a chemist to master the technical intricacies of the craft. The jeweler also must be an economist with one eye glued to the precious-metal markets — the price of gold went up \$50 in one day last week.

"I'll never learn all there is to know about this," Andrea says quietly. "You learn as you go along, and you learn from everyone you work with. I'll never know enough...."

"There're easier ways to make a living. With a craft, you have to create your own place instead of stepping into a job slot. Perseverance, I guess, is the most important thing in a craft. You have to stick with it...."

She roughed out some ideas on a table in her suburban apartment.

She had decided to use the opal to make a piece that could worn either as a brooch or a pendant hanging from a necklace.

Andrea sipped orange juice as she worked. A small green parrot was perched in a cluster of bare tree branches propped up against the wall. (She and her husband, a landscape designer, are bird lovers who live with two parrots and a cage full of finches.)

Starting a new project usually means translating a client's desires into a finished piece. That can be hard to do. Some clients are picky and never satisfied. Some don't know what they want.

"It's fun to work with people and find out what their tastes are, but sometimes you discover they're not really interested in design. They just want a big stone stuck on a gold band. With something like that, the stone and the metal aren't



Starting with only a rough sketch and her tools, Andrea Hall Carnahan sets out to transform a few ounces of precious material into a piece of jewelry. Staff photos by Gail Fisher

back her hair. The jeweler's hair is golden-red, Titian red.

"I started out in metalsmithing making bowls and big objects, containers. The first jewelry I did was pretty heavy. I worked on large pieces. Being tall myself, I guess I made everything large so I could wear them." She grinned.

"But over the years, my work has gotten smaller and lighter, more refined."

She kept folding the paper. In each succeeding sketch, the designs grew simpler, the lines fewer and more distinct.

"I want something light and flowing. A graceful shape. I'm trying to pick out the lines that flow best as one."

"In high school, I did big abstract paintings with hard-edged, geometric shapes — squares, stripes — but I've moved very strongly away from that. Any geometric piece I do now comes out really flowing geometric."

She admires art nouveau design, the curving, sinuous, organic style that became popular in the late 19th century, but she doesn't want her work to look "dated" or derived from the style of any period. She haunts galleries and museums and studies books on metalsmithing. She tries to absorb influences and use older techniques to make something new.

"The craftsmanship of a century ago is better than what you generally find now, so it pays to study antique jewelry. People were apprenticed in those days, and the craft was their life.

"You have to look at all different periods. You can't tell when one little approach will solve a problem you're up against. What people did thousands of years ago — with the equipment they had — surpasses the work we do now."

A self-styled "corporate brat," she went to 10 different schools as her family moved about the country. She was always interested in art. While at Louisville's Atherton High School, she painted and made woodcuts. She also made her first jewelry. Her real discovery of metalsmithing came during her senior year of high school, while she was a boarding student at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Interlochen, Mich. "They had great equipment there, and they put you right in the studio." More classes and workshops followed. She studied for a summer under Heikki Seppi, a Finnish master who teaches at George Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.

She eventually was able to put herself through the University of Louisville by working as a metalsmith in local jewelry shops.

It took her three hours to come up with a sketch she liked. "Nothing was working... I don't know — maybe I was trying too hard. Sometimes it takes



integrated. I prefer to have both elements working together in an interesting shape. The metal should be accented by the stones, or the other way around.

"I think of jewelry pieces as miniature sculptures. That's the way they should be, at least. It doesn't take that much more trouble to get a good design."

She drew masses of lines, curving, arching. She folded the thin paper and traced over old drawings, adding more lines, shading, erasing.

She squinted at the paper and pushed

THE ROUTINE IS ALMOST HYPNOTIC

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you five minutes to come up with a nice design. Sometimes it takes five hours. . . .

Andrea envisioned the piece as consisting mainly of a loop of yellow gold cradling the opal. The yellow-gold loop would have a fanning, double-pointed end suggesting a petal or some other organic form. A thin band of white gold would curve along the yellow-gold loop, and then soar up past it to provide balance on the other side of the opal.

Two or three small diamonds would be set into the white-gold band.

"I wanted to use different colors of gold to have contrasting elements. The diamonds also would contrast with the opal. The shapes, colors, everything would contrast but also be in balance."

Creating the piece would require different procedures. The yellow-gold loop would be cast from a wax model. The slender white-gold band would be forged, or hammered out, from a gold thread.

At work several days later, she selected a small cube of blue wax and began carving out what would become the yellow-gold section. She used fine-bladed art knives, files and dental tools. It took her five hours to finish the model. It took four more hours to cast the model into yellow gold.

She smoothed out the gold's rough edges with a flexible shaft machine, a grinding and brushing instrument that looks like a dentist's drill.

"A lot of dentists make jewelry as a hobby," she laughed. "I don't have any interest in working on teeth, though."

She forged out the white-gold section, but didn't like the way it looked with the yellow gold. The overall shape of the piece looked "choppy" to her, unbalanced.

She talked over the problem with two other jewelers in the studio and decided to complement the yellow-gold loop with three pieces of white gold which would have leaf-like forms.

"Sometimes it's hard to translate your idea into a three-dimensional shape. It might look good in a drawing, but awful when you start working with the metal. You can't get too rigid. You have to see

After many hours of exacting work with hand and power tools, the opal-and-gold pendant assumes its final form. It is shown here slightly larger than life.

what works and you also have to think about whether it's comfortable to wear."

She began forging out the leaves of white gold, first painting the pieces with boric acid, then heating them with her acetylene torch. The acid prevents "fire scale," a discoloring burn on the gold. The softened pieces are cleaned and allowed to cool, then are run through the rolling mill, a machine that flattens the metal. After a few run-throughs, the gold must be reheated to prevent it from becoming brittle and cracking. The process is repeated again and again.

She worked in the small studio of Aesthetics in Jewelry, the company where she began working as a jeweler last year. Her time there is divided between the new project and more routine labor, such as soldering chains, putting charms on bracelets, repairing rings. "It's good to switch back and forth. You need variety," she said.

The routine of the jeweler can have an almost hypnotic effect. Hunched over your workbench, staring down through thick lenses, it's easy to become wrapped up, almost trance-like, in your work.

"Somedays I'll look around and realize two hours have passed. You come to work on a rainy morning, and someone comes in that afternoon talking about what a bright, sunny day it is. You realize you haven't even looked out the window. . . .

"It's an isolating, absorbing craft. In the early 1800s, the old metalsmiths would get money together and send one of their group out to see a play. Then he'd come back and tell everyone else in the shop about it while they worked."

One of the things you often lose track of is the value of the materials under your hammer or torch.

"I'll look at a little box filled with gold and suddenly I'll think of how it's worth \$10,000. Whoa! You try not to think about those things when you're working. You might get nervous."

She experimented with the arrangement of yellow-gold loop and white-gold leaves. When it looked the way she wanted it to look, she turned the piece over to jeweler Rob Prince, who engraved the leaves and set small diamonds in them. (Andrea is still learning those skills.)

After 30 hours of sketching, modeling, casting, forging, engraving, soldering, cleaning and polishing — the piece was done. It contained more than \$2,000 in materials and labor.

The other jewelers liked it. Andrea was satisfied.

"It's a little more literal than some of my recent work, but that doesn't bother me. . . ."

She looked at the piece. "I'm interested in the underlying forms, the flow of lines, rather than whether the surface is done in a realistic fashion. Georgia O'Keefe's paintings of mountains are about more than mountains. There're so many more things involved — the shapes and flow of forms. . . .

"I've learned from this project. When I make my next piece, if I run into a problem with balancing it out, I'll have this experience to draw on. I'll have one more frame of reference."

"It's so amazing to create something from just an idea." She looked back at the glittering object in her palm and smiled. "It was a lot of fun to get to work with that opal!"

