

Hidden Gems

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Canadian jewellery designers are mining the landscape for artistic inspiration.

THE WINDING ROAD cuts through rolling hills of lava rock, wispy silver birch trees and fields of golden corn – the perfect setting for the simple beauty of Walter Van der Molen’s jewellery. I’m on Highway 50, halfway between Montreal and the designer’s home studio in Luskville, Quebec, a picturesque community on the outskirts of Ottawa where, after a long day in the capital, residents commute home to a rural retreat that includes red cedar-lined hiking paths and sparkling views of the Ottawa River.

Van der Molen’s brand, WJewellery, is the epitome of sophisticated simplicity. Made of recycled gold and sustainable gems and pearls, his designs refine the idea of the precious object to its most minimal components: delicate filaments of metal adorned with the subtlest scintillating touch of a two-millimetre stone. A WJewellery piece says what it needs to with a whisper rather than a shout.

Van der Molen is not alone in this elemental approach to beauty. He is part of a new wave of Canadian jewellery designers who, by emphasizing subtlety and embracing imperfection, express a veneration of natural materials and forms in unique pieces that go leagues beyond bling.

Change of scene

Before moving to Canada in 2007, Van der Molen worked in his native Holland as a jeweller, watchmaker, goldsmith and, eventually, jewellery

store owner who travelled frequently to trade shows and fairs in Antwerp, Basel, London and beyond. “That stuff doesn’t do it for me anymore,” he confesses of his past careers, contrasting them with his current life in Canada with his wife and two young children.

“WJewellery is closer to myself. I was putting slate steps next to my chicken coop the other day, and it sounds silly, but that’s a million times more inspiring to me than trade shows.”

Out of that everyday experience came the idea for his first Stepping Stone ring, a fine band of hammered solid gold topped with a delicate display of different-size gold pellets that recalls the beauty and function of a stone path or steps.

In its refined simplicity, Van der Molen’s work is similar to the jewellery of Dorothée Rosen, from Halifax, who is most famous for her Onefooter Ring, made of a foot-long wire of 18-karat gold wrought and coiled by hand into a chunky one-of-a-kind criss-crossing spiral, enhanced with an optional white Canadian diamond. Rosen’s designs are inspired by the Nova Scotia shoreline and her study of the line, which she says is the foundation of all of nature’s patterns, from the horizon to striations in leaves and the motifs that ocean waves leave on a sandy beach.

On the opposite coast, in Vancouver, Leah Alexandra also draws inspiration from the ocean. As her love of turquoise and aquamarine would suggest, Alexandra was a water baby – her grandmother lived in Barbados, her first job was in Cape Cod and she spent every summer in the Hamptons. Now she has become the go-to girl for people looking for eminently wearable gemstone pieces, with fans including Jessica Alba and Reese Witherspoon. In an ode to uncomplicated prettiness, Alexandra places her stones in the simplest of settings, keeping her bands thin and her chains fine in a way that lets the natural beauty of the gems speak for itself.

“I work with a lot of stones that are accessible to more people because

they have flaws, like opaque rubies or moss aquamarine, which has lots of inclusions and cloudiness, and a beautiful blue-grey colour,” she explains. “Some of those flaws make them look like different stones entirely, and I think that’s part of their beauty. It’s so easy to replicate that perfect diamond or that clear aquamarine with glass or manmade materials, while you just can’t replicate the organic beauty of stones that hold such character.”

Mine and yours

While there are exceptions – last year, for example, acclaimed Toronto-based jeweller Reena Ahluwalia created the world’s first designer jewellery line made exclusively with lab-grown diamonds – most Canadian designers see the future of the trade firmly rooted in nature’s bounty. With mines all over northern Canada, the supply of ethically sourced, impeccable-quality diamonds is plentiful.

Plus, as Van der Molen argues, the Canadian identity itself is entrenched in the land. “The space, the living, the experiencing of the seasons, is so much stronger here than in Europe. And the biggest difference of all is this,” he says with a sweep of his arm. I peer out at the landscape around Van der Molen’s home as we stroll through his garden, and I feel as if I’m walking through a Tom Thomson painting. “In Europe, everything and everyone is just a tiny bit too close. Canada is so vast.”

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natural materials and forms.”

Tweet

This reminds me of something Lisa Elser told me a few days before. One of Canada’s very few gem cutters, the Swiss-trained, British Columbia-based artisan has won international recognition for the precision and creativity of her work with tourmalines, spinels, sapphires

and garnets. “I do think that as Canadians we have a better sense of ourselves in nature,” she told me from her home studio. “From my kitchen window, I can look out through the forest at the Burrard Inlet and see deer, sometimes bears and coyotes, walking past. That’s very important to me.”

Elser came to the trade relatively late, leaving a well-established career in IT to pursue an entirely different way of life. “Good women do not sit with empty hands,” she laughs. “I knit, I weave, I sew, and I wanted to get out of what was mostly a life of conference calls and writing papers. The idea of making something beautiful with my own hands was very compelling for me.” The new career also fit well with a taste for travel. “My husband and I are birdwatchers, and the very good gem places are also very good bird places. So we decided to go to the source.”

Today, the Elsers travel the world – Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar, Sri Lanka – to source the stones they bring back to Canada to cut. Aside from the custom designs and quality that make their product so coveted by goldsmiths near and far, there is another unique aspect to their business practices: They donate 20 percent of their profits to the communities that provide them with the gems.

“We gave an ultrasound machine and a trinocular lab microscope to a free clinic in Nigeria,” says Elser. “We donate to schools, we donate to women’s groups throughout Africa and Asia. That’s part of what we do and how we stay close to our providers.”

Elser isn’t the only generous jeweller on the scene. Winnipeg’s Hilary Druxman has made designing charity pieces a personal calling: Since her first design for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights seven years ago, she has created custom pendants for over 30 organizations – and the list is growing. Druxman designs widely accessible pieces out of sterling silver, mostly inspired by organic shapes such as fossils (in aid of the Manitoba Museum), pebbles (to raise funds for United Way Winnipeg) and forget-me-nots (for the Alzheimer Society).

“So many of our customers are involved in fundraising galas and charity work,” explains Druxman, “creating these pieces just felt natural.”



Anouk Jewelry (Toronto), 14K gold “Underwater Vision” ring with chrysocolla stone



Dorothee Rosen (Halifax), 18K gold “Onefooter Ring” with a 0.25ct Canadian diamond



Rudi Peet (Canmore, Alberta), briolette-cut aquamarine necklace



Leah Alexandra (Vancouver), Labradorite “Armour” necklace on a gold-plated chain



Mark Lash (Toronto), 18K white gold cuff with sapphire slices and diamonds

Romancing the stone

Walking into Galerie Noel Guyomarc'h in Montreal or Rubaiyat on Calgary's 17th Avenue feels more like entering a contemporary jewellery museum than a jewellery store. Both showcase the natural themes common to Canadian jewellery design. The collections run the gamut, from Dorothée Rosen's leaf-imprinted rings to Rudi Peet's elliptical shapes and angles. Originally from the Netherlands, Peet calls Canmore, Alberta, home, and he finds an unending source of inspiration

in both the nuances and raw grandeur of the Canadian Rockies. This translates into designs that are miniature wearable sculptures, where with the subtlest of allusions, a frosted gold surface indented with tiny diamonds can hint at the sparkle of sunlight on a snowy mountain range.

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With her predilection for blue-greens, teals and aquamarines, Anat Kaplan is influenced more by things aquatic than mountainous. The Moscow-born, Israel-raised and now Toronto-based designer behind the brand Anouk Jewelry makes pieces so eternal that they look like they could have been found in an ancient Egyptian pyramid somewhere along the Nile.

“It’s so much about water for me. The flow of water, the shimmer of water and all the textures that go with it, like sand, rocks and cliffs. Without being too figurative, I want to evoke that feeling. It has a very soothing and centring effect on me – it’s what I crave when I’m running around downtown Toronto!”

Kaplan spent most of her adult life making art and studying art history, never dreaming she would become a jeweller. Then, during her studies, she came across images of ancient Roman and Greek jewellery, and inspiration struck. Kaplan’s designs stand alone in their mix of solid-gold ruggedness and fairylike delicatessen, her signature stones being green sapphires and rough diamonds. She capitalizes on their earthy sparkle and encases them in pockmarked, nearly rustic bands.

“We live in such a structured world, and when we see shapes that are more organic, it’s as if our eyes rest,” she says. “There’s something very soothing about forms that flow and aren’t perfect.”

In order to enhance this connection between object and wearer, Kaplan sidesteps digital design and measuring tools. Instead, a consultation with

her clients about a ring, for instance, focuses on translating their story into an object that is meaningful to them, what she calls their own “personal talisman.” After sketching the design, she hand-sculpts the ring in wax before casting it in metal and adding precious gems.

Back to basics

Back in Luskville, Quebec, Walter Van der Molen is just as invested in the personal touch. As two tabbies intertwine around his legs, he shows me the ins and outs of his home studio, which, like his jewellery, is tasteful and understated. Since his studio is in his family home, he doesn't like using harsh acids and chemicals, so he works with natural gas and citric acid made from orange rinds. He says he just isn't the industrial type. Even his workbench is recuperated, a discard from George Brown College in Toronto that he has breathed new life into, and which is now scattered with glimmering bits and pieces – small pearls, shimmering stones and scraps of precious metals half-fashioned into future keepsakes.

“I like the idea of craftsmanship, and I love the tools of the trade,” says Van der Molen. “I like sitting behind this bench, feeling its history and showing people that yes, you can still produce beautiful things by hand.”