

STEP-BY-STEP JEWELRY MAKING

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MINERALS

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Lapis
Pyramid
Cuts a
Different
..... Slant
Atop
Intricate
Ring

Fiber Optics
Create
Sensational
New Gem
Display

*Will
Nevada Nudge
Namibia
and Mojave
as Producer of
Blue Chalcedony?*



LIGHT

Stephen
Greenstein's
fascination with
all forms of light
has led him on
a winding road
across three
continents.



SHOW

BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY

It's difficult to place Stephen Greenstein when you meet him. He seems American but speaks with a strong French accent, at times pausing to think of the English phrase for something.

Looking at his jewelry doesn't help to define him. It doesn't look like other American designers' work, yet it has neither the clean lines of German jewelry nor the baroque look of Italian. Some of his rings — especially those he designs around stones from the German lapidary firm Philipp Becker — have a matte texture and bold geometric forms. Others designed around ammonite or meteorite are more organic, like cast lava. Some of his burnished metals look almost Asian.

If he's hard to pin down, it may be partly because he's transplanted. In the 20th-century artistic tradition, he's an American expatriate living in France — the south of France, to be precise, that lush, temperate, Mediterranean zone. It would be difficult to find a place more removed from where he began.

Raised in a tough neighborhood of Detroit, he experienced the riots of 1964, some of the worst this country has seen. Jewelry was not what he set out to do with his life; he was 30 before he made his first piece. He brought to his new vocation a host of bizarre and fascinating life experiences and the technical skills of at least three other careers.

As a schoolboy, Greenstein fell in love with stargazing and joined an astronomy club that traveled to Maine to see a total solar eclipse. In college, he pursued an astronomy major — until he discovered that meant calculus and physics. "All I wanted to do was look at the stars!" he says now, laughing.

Instead, he quit school and got work as a lighting and sound technician for a local theater company. Eventually, he moved from behind the scenes to center stage, and was accepted into Michigan's Academy of Dramatic Arts. He began doing Shakespeare in Detroit's public parks during the day, and Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* in coffeehouses at night. He followed the hippie scene to San Francisco in the late '60s before landing in New York City, in a low-rent East Village neighborhood where cars were stripped and drug deals went down outside his apartment. He was mugged three times, but stuck it out, driving

OPPOSITE PAGE: "If jewelry works properly, eventually it crystallizes something in the minds of the people who wear it — especially if it's a ring, something they can gaze into, unlike a pendant or a brooch." This ring is 18K and 22K gold with a 28-ct. aquamarine cut by K.H. Neumann of Philipp Becker & Co.

RIGHT: Ring of 18K and 22K gold and peridot with tourmaline inclusions, cut by K.H. Neumann of Philipp Becker & Co.



a taxicab at night and, eventually, got into an all-male off-Broadway production of *Hamlet*. It became a hit — just as the first off-Broadway strike hit, putting him out of work.

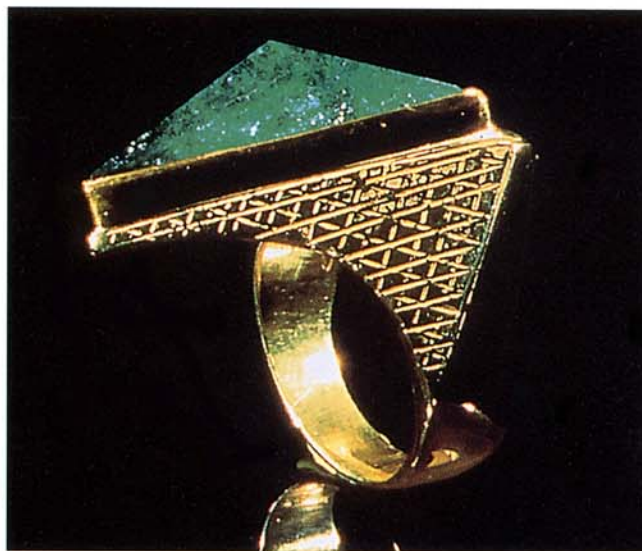
This led to a production job for a film company where he began producing commercials, then documentaries. A film about three drug-addicted Vietnam vets won some awards and, with about \$20,000 worth of borrowed film equipment, Greenstein took off for Europe — only to have the equipment vanish from a railway station locker in Amsterdam. Despondent, he wandered down to visit friends in southern France and stayed 11 months, working odd jobs and falling in love with the countryside.

After nearly a year in the rarefied Gallic air, life back in New York seemed distasteful. While filming a commercial for floor cleaner, he found himself down on all fours trying to wipe up something the much-vaunted cleaner had failed to remove. "All these people were coming down on me, and I just started laughing. I asked myself, 'What am I doing here? I had a lovely life in France!'" He returned 20 years ago and has lived there ever since.

"THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT, USING
TECHNIQUE TO TAKE YOU OUT THERE
AND THEN JUST FORGETTING ABOUT IT."



The pyramid is a form Greenstein returns to often in his work. "I like the shape, the force and the lines of the pyramid," he says. "I've made them out of metal as well. I have travelled in Egypt but I'm not really sure where this fascination comes from." Ring of 18K and 22K gold with blue topaz in a rounded pyramid cut that Greenstein designed himself.



Ring of 18K gold set with green tourmaline employs a sort of cross-hatching motif in the goldwork. Often, Greenstein will complement a spare form in stone with intricate detail in the metal.

BEAD-STRING BUDGET

He stumbled onto his jewelry career during a trip to Greece. He and a girlfriend (now a state senator) bought some ceramic beads and strung them on leather. "We were flat broke but had enough to buy beads for about 20 necklaces." They returned to France, where she sold them all. "We picked some grapes that autumn, made enough to return to Greece and buy more beads. We were very financially successful, but it was kind of a joke to me. After all I'd accomplished in my life, here I was stringing beads for a living! It was great."

He explains his transformation this way: "I was an idealist then — and I still am. I just couldn't accept what was happening in the film industry, all the manipulation."

Eventually, he met a designer who invited him to visit his workshop. "All of a sudden, my life changed. This really interested me." He stopped stringing beads and started making cast, one-of-a-kind silver pieces.

"Even today, I like to do the one-of-a-kind pieces, and then, if I think there's commercial potential, I make a similar one and have it made into a mold and cast." France wasn't a bad place to launch a career as a self-taught jewelry designer. Unlike in Germany and Switzerland, where five years of training and apprenticeship were required before a jeweler could call himself a goldsmith, he says, "In France, legally you could receive your registered mark from the government, you could become an official artisan, without schooling."

That is no longer true, he adds. "Since France became part of the European Union, things like that are lining up. You have to have the same kind of qualifications from one country to another. In France, two or three years of schooling is now required to become an apprentice. I'm not the only self-taught designer who shows in the designer hall [at the big jewelry trade show] in Basel. There are quite a few of us that never went to school. In some ways, it's a shame that people can't just do it anymore."

Greenstein produces about 20 original pieces each year, and about 300 copies. He works as intensely as he did as a young actor and film-maker, 12 to 14 hours per day — and then drops everything for six weeks each summer to travel. "That break is what makes the rest interesting. It's important not to get too beaten up in your work. I work very intensely for months, but if I can stop and not do it for a month, everything crystallizes and

new things start happening in my work. Because of the trip. It's very subliminal."

For the past five years, this annual scheduled epiphany has taken place in east Africa. He does no business during this respite, though he admits the gem market is tempting.

Brooch/pendant of 18K and 22K gold with ammolite and moonstone. "I liked the idea of putting the ammolite, which was in the Earth for millions of years, next to the blue light of the moonstone, representing the moon — which also came out of the Earth long ago. I gave the gold a texture of something that might have also come from far away, long ago."



"There are some beautiful stones there — rubies, tsavorite, Ethiopian tanzanite." But he's there for Nature's light show, and refuses to be distracted. "The light is extraordinary there," he explains. "Here in the south of France, it's temperate; for a long time I loved the 11 pm sunsets. But there, because it's on the equator, the sun moves through the sky very fast, so everything is changing all day long. The sun rises at 6:30, by 7:00 you take off your sweater and put on shorts. It's like someone is turning on the lights. In front of your eyes, the landscape changes. As the sun gets high, everything is crushed by the light. But it's very beautiful. Then at night, as I'm talking to someone, the lights go out."

LIGHTING THE WAY.

If there's one common thread holding Greenstein's odyssey together, it's his fascination with light. From the stargazing of his boyhood, to theater lighting design and film-making, it was the manipulation of light — and the desire to create a sense of magic through that manipulation — that motivated him. This is obvious by the way he displays his jewelry, in a case he designed himself. "It's like a miniature theater, like a traveling rock show. The lights lift up, they aren't covered. You can see them inside." He created "a floating glass cube. Inside, the jewelry sits on a platform. It's like Shakespearean scenic design."

His jewelry, too, is a study in light — light reflecting off various metal surfaces, light playing inside the stones he sets. What he searches for in stones is the light show. "It's very important to use stones that light comes in and then goes out again," he says. "Inclusions are very interesting when a stone is pure. A diamond gives off a pure, white light — but we've seen so many brilliant-cut diamonds, it gets tiring." He is intrigued with Munsteiner's Spirit Sun cuts in diamonds and white topaz. "The Spirit Sun is more brilliant than brilliant



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Photo courtesy Stephen Greenstein.



cuts," he says.

He has also begun designing around Philipp Becker's geometric-cut quartzes. "Rutilated or tourmalinated quartz I enjoy because of the theatrical world inside. And Becker stones have a very strong personality. If you start setting something like that, you have to be careful to express yourself in the jewelry while giving the stones some value for the way they're cut. You have to find the right balance or you'll lose it. Either the stones will look bad or the jewelry doesn't fit together. Frequently, those pieces need the kind of interior life that their stones have. They need clean lines around them."

Being surrounded by European designers at Basel has been interesting, he says. "The Germans' training is obvious; their work is top-notch technically," he says. "When they make a

clasp, it's perfect. But they have difficulty getting out of the technical end and using the technique as their wings. That's what it's all about, using technique to take you out there and then just forgetting about it. The technique becomes part of you.

"It takes the logical German goldsmith 20 years to get out of thinking about technique. My own problem is that it took me 20 years to learn technique! I didn't have the luxury of going to school. My creative area is where I had my wings. I had to learn technique from other goldsmiths and from what I read. Now I'm finally able to put my ideas into the right shape and form.

"There's a kind of dream world where you get off on while designing," he says. "You have ideas floating around in your head and all of a sudden, they come out in your work and the dream becomes a functional piece of jewelry. Looking at it always takes me to the dream world where it was invented in my mind. If it works properly, it eventually takes the person who wears it to that same place." ♦



LEFT: Pendant/brooch of fine gold burnished onto fine silver and set with white topaz in the Spirit Sun cut designed by Bernd Munsteiner.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Ring with .2-ct. diamond in Spirit Sun cut designed by Bernd Munsteiner set in 18K gold. "A diamond can give off a pure, white light when it's cut right," Greenstein says. "The Spirit Sun cut is more brilliant than brilliant-cut diamonds."

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: Greenstein has recently begun designing a line of pearl jewelry, such as this ring of 18K gold with 13-ct. Tahitian pearl.