

6/03
June 2003

AJM

THE AUTHORITY ON JEWELRY MANUFACTURING

BEHIND THE DESIGN

Sense and Sensibilities

Shahasp Valentine creates artifacts with modern materials

BY JOHN SHANAHAN There's an interesting dichotomy at work in San Francisco-based designer Shahasp Valentine's jewelry. The pieces are rich with the influence of Renaissance and Gothic styles. Clearly, they belong to another time. Which is why it's ironic that they are made with Precious Metal Clay (PMC).

But working with this relatively new material in her Archbishop series pendant presents problems that require more than a little Old World patience. The piece features four fleur de lis that meet in a circle, sectioned off by a cross, creating four "windows" inside the circle. Each window features a square-cut rhodolite garnet. And this is where the first challenge comes in: fitting a square stone into a not-square space.

"I take my smallest, sharpest pliers and try to manipulate the stone into the round edge first," she says, noting that the corners of the stone get tucked under the lip of the window, similar to a channel setting. "I push it into the clay. Then I push it down at the opposite side so it goes into the squared-off edge." The trick here, Valentine says, is to have a steady hand and use the right amount of pressure to avoid marring the clay.

Valentine then relies on the eventual shrinkage of the material to hold the stones in place. (PMC shrinks up to 30 percent.) "They have to go in perfectly flat so that when the clay shrinks around them, they stay flat," Valentine says.

When the piece is set and fired, Valentine oxidizes and burnishes it to make it look ancient. "When people see my piece, if they say, 'It looks like an artifact,' that's what I want to hear". ♦

Valentine bends fine silver wire into a "U" and embeds it into the wet clay to make her findings. Fine silver stands up to the material's firing requirements (1,650°F/899°C for two hours) better than sterling, which becomes brittle. Trial and error determines how far in to push the wire to combat the material's shrinkage. Too far, and there won't be enough space for it to act as a jump ring; not far enough, and the ring will be too large.

Although the piece is created in a mold, Valentine sculpts the details by hand. "I don't want it to be perfect," she says. "I want it to have a human feel. I don't want every single fleur de lis to be exactly the same."

When the piece is set and fired, Valentine oxidizes it with either liver of sulphur or MaxBlack, then burnishes each piece by hand to give it an ancient look and feel. She starts with a Freedom handpiece fitted with 3M bristle brushes to get the base finish, and then adds texture with ruby stones and wire brushes.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAHASP VALENTINE

