MJSA
GLOBAL TRADE MAGAZINE

AJM

4/01
April 2001

$4.50 USD

THE AUTHORITY ON JEWELRY MANUFACTURING

PRESSING DECISIONS

How to Ensure Stamping Success

LIQUID ASSETS

Precious Metal Recovery Techniques

THE SAFE BENCH

Tips for Avoiding Accidents and Illnesses

MJSA BULLETIN: LA TECHNOLOGY SHOWCASE

A Guide to the 2001 Event

BEHIND THE DESIGN

Using Optics to Create a Whole New Look

www.ajm-magazine.com

Taking the Long View

Christoph Krähenmann looks in a new direction

Christoph Krähenmann understands the "collection" mindset. He knows that customers often want a jeweler's new work to reflect the look and feel of earlier work, for the future to meld seamlessly with the past. He understands that for many jewelers, sticking with a collection's theme or a branded look provides a certain security, a way of maintaining buyer loyalty.

But what is the point of being an artist if you're not willing to take chances?

That was the question facing the Santa Barbara, California-based designer when he created a new line that, while having evolved from elements of his past work, is radically different from anything he's done before. In fact, Krähenmann feels that the new line, with its use of the optical properties of gemstones and the interaction between different colored stones and reflective metal, is different from anything *anyone* has done before.

When he started his business in 1993, Krähenmann's work centered around piercing repetitive patterns—"almost like the cornice of a building," he says—out of and into white or yellow gold. In 1998, he took the next step in the evolution toward his new designs.

"I started cutting polished concave shapes into metal that had a matte background," he explains. The matte surfaces, created by abrading the metal with a diamond pad, created contrast and added texture to the piece. Within a year and a half, he refined the look by combining his piercing work with his studies in the reflective properties of metal.

"I started to work with two layers of metal. I would cut shapes out of the top part—squares, circles, triangles—and give it a matte finish. Below that I would solder a piece of highly polished metal. The interaction between the two surfaces created a warm glow—particularly in yellow gold—that would appear through the holes."

The final step in the evolution, which combined the piercing, the reflective metals, and the optical properties of gemstones, happened, the designer says, quite by accident. "About a year ago, I was working with an aquamarine that, because of how it was cut—it was a flat briolette—had a 'window' in it that you could see through," he explains. "The stone was pale and had very large facets. I set it on a drawing for a design, and I realized that something was going on in the stone. I bent closer and I could see that the lines, viewed through the facets, made patterns that changed as the stone moved. I made a few more lines—criss-crossed and curved—on another piece of paper and ran the stone over it. I could see how the lines would appear to break and

PHOTOS BY PETRA LIEBETANZ.

Above, left to right: Quartz cabochon "bug" in 18k white gold with rubies, sapphires, and diamonds; 18k white and yellow gold cuff links set with sapphires; 18k yellow and white gold brooch with diamonds, 70 melee rubies, and an 85-carat citrine "lens."

change from facet to facet."

In his shop, Krähenmann already had the stone that convinced him to head off in this new direction: an 85-carat citrine he'd picked up in Tucson in 1999 and was planning to use eventually. "It was a marquise-shaped cabochon with a slightly rounded bottom," he says. "I held it over a wavy pattern, and the effect was amazing. The lines moved like they were alive. I immediately said, 'This is it. I'm going to do a new collection with this.'"

But first, he had to discover how and why the cut and color of a stone affected the patterns viewed through it. Off and on over the next six months, he played with the citrine—holding it over pavé stones, bending metal and drawing lines or dots on it with a Sharpie pen, raising and lowering the citrine to see how the effect changed.

"There is a lens effect with a cabochon," he says. "With two convex surfaces, it creates a [magnification] at the center of the stone and diffusion out to the sides. The image is sharper in the center."

From the time he discovered the effect, Krähenmann says, he knew that it would work well not just with patterns on metal, but with other gemstones as well. Once he felt confident that he knew how the citrine "lens" would work, he chose the stones that would be viewed through it: ruby melee, the intense red of which would pick up and play off the yellow of the larger gem. "I used about 70 rubies in a wavy pattern of three lines set next to each other with about 1 mm of space between," the designer explains. "I created a marquise-shaped setting in yellow gold to hold the citrine. I wanted something simple so that the center of the piece would come out more. The focus remains on the stone." After a bit of experimenting with the effect, raising and lowering the citrine, he settled on placing it 2 mm above the rubies.

The result, he says, is like liquid fire raging inside the stone. Both the rubies and the reflective gold play and stretch across the face of the citrine as it moves.

"I can't just sit still, doing the same thing or slowly progressing. I can't take the risk of not exploring."

But creating liquid fire is not as simple as grabbing a big stone and setting it over some smaller stones. There are inherent problems, Krähenmann says. First, the look works well only with paler, translucent stones—a drawback when the market is more interested in bolder colors.

Another problem is that the effect depends in no small part on the cut of the stone. Krähenmann does not cut the stones himself, instead relying on a professional cutter. "I talk to him, tell him what my intention is with the piece. He knows the optics better than I do," Krähenmann admits. "He'll know how shallow the bottom of the stone needs to be, or how the pavilion needs to be cut if it's faceted."

For example, the aquamarine that first showed Krähenmann the possibilities of optics was a flat, shallow briolette. The citrine "just happened to work," the designer says, but also notes that it, too, was shallow, its bottom only slightly rounded. "If it's too high or too flat, you won't get the full effect," he adds.

Even then, there's really no way of telling how the final product will turn out until it's actually assembled. Krähenmann makes models of the "lens" stones in clear plastic to get an idea of how the optics will play, but that can show only a certain degree of the effect. "There are irregularities within any stone, and each stone's properties are different," he notes.

Add to these uncertainties the fact that his new work is a departure from the style that has brought him success, and it begs the question: Why take the chance?

"I can't just sit still, doing the same thing or slowly progressing," Krähenmann says. "I think this [new work] is interesting and I believe in it. I can't take the risk of not exploring. That's what I had to tell myself when I started on the new line. I know that this will be a more difficult sale, but I had to make up my mind what direction I wanted to go in. I like to progress; that's my strength."

Although his new work has only appeared in one trade magazine ad, it has already garnered some response. "I have received a couple of calls and e-mails asking what it is or telling me how much they like it," Krähenmann says. "But no one's seen them [his designs] in person."

Nor will they until this June, when Krähenmann unveils the new work at the JCK Las Vegas show. He is now having stones cut, and he plans to debut 25 pieces.

Krähenmann has been asking himself many questions as he moves into this new phase of his artistry, but perhaps the most important one is this: Is it more competitive to continue to create a branded look that is proven and familiar to customers, or to do limited editions and take risks in design?

For Christoph Krähenmann, the answer is obvious. **JOHN SHANAHAN**

TO SEE MORE OF CHRISTOPH KRÄHENMANN'S WORK, visit the *AJM Online* Gallery at *http://www.ajm-magazine.com*