

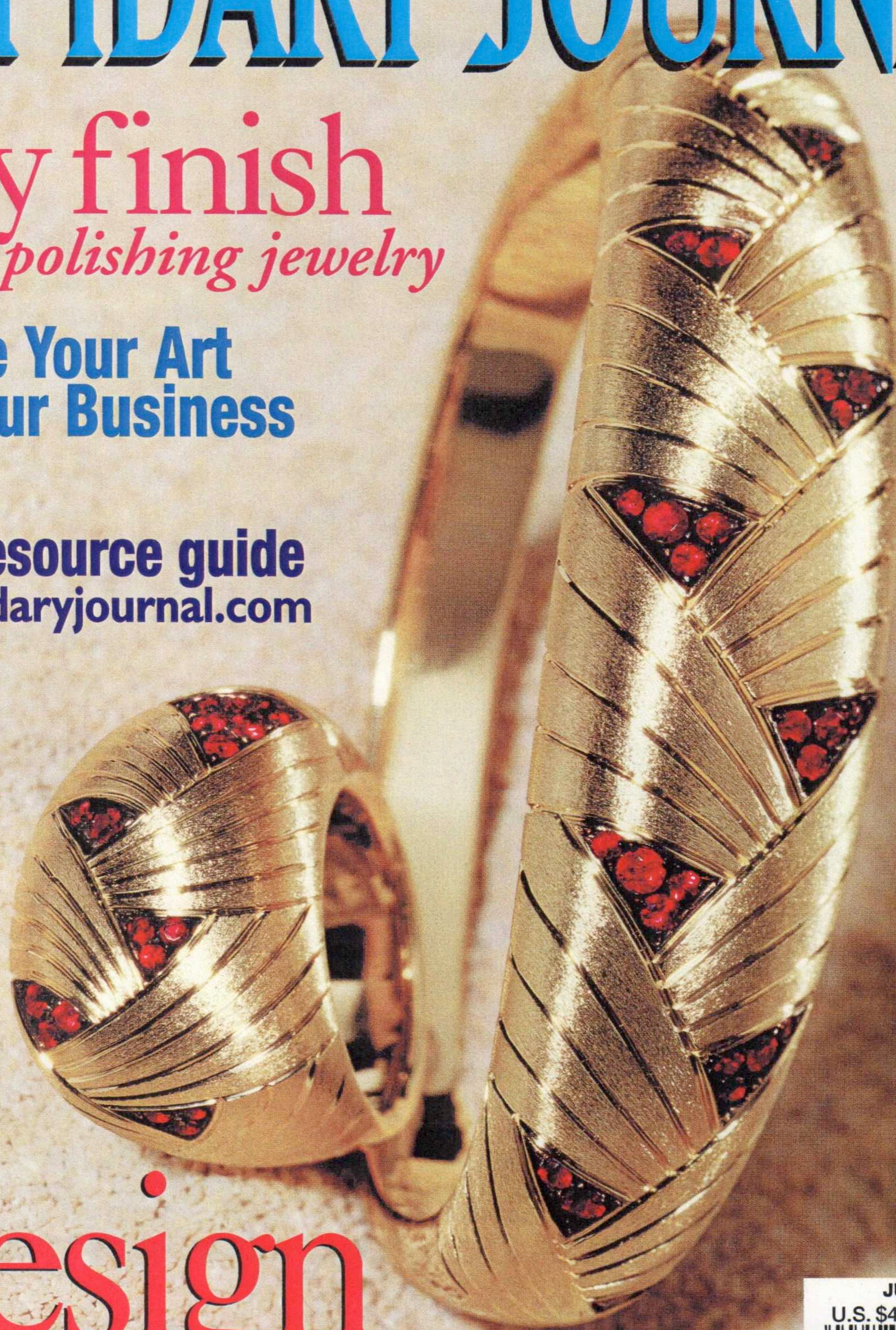
5-Way Pendant • Turquoise Freeform • "Spinning" Facets

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A ring and bracelet set from Christoph Krähenmann's Nile collection, of 18K gold and rubies. Photo © Harold & Erica Van Pelt.

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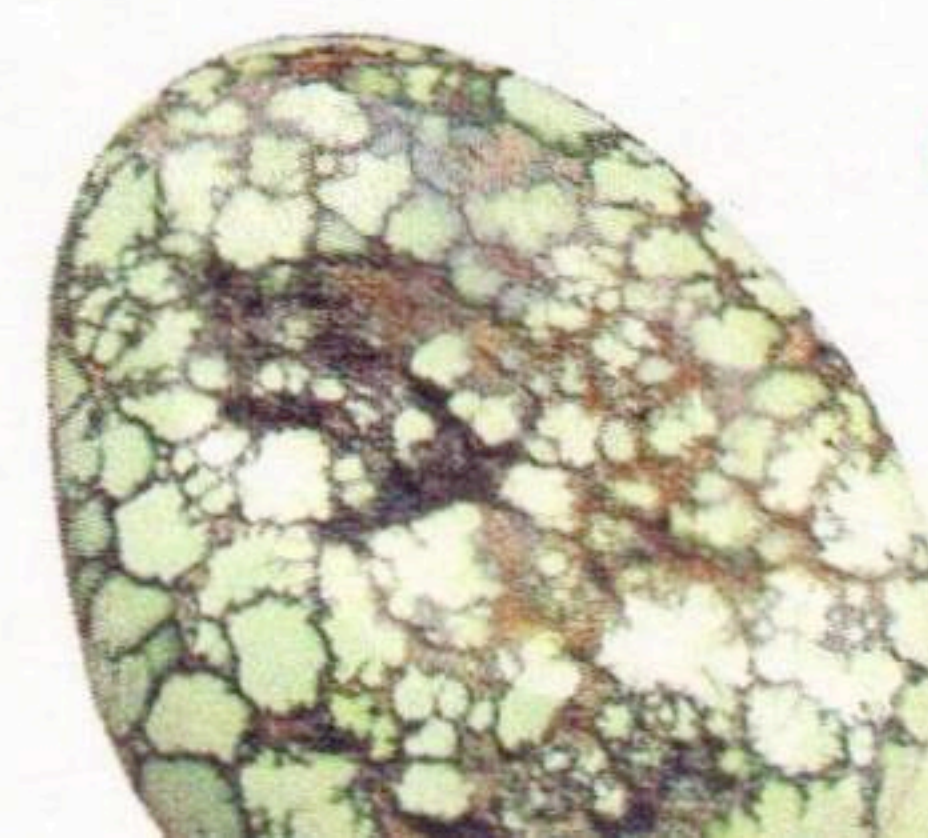
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A BEAUTIFUL TRADE

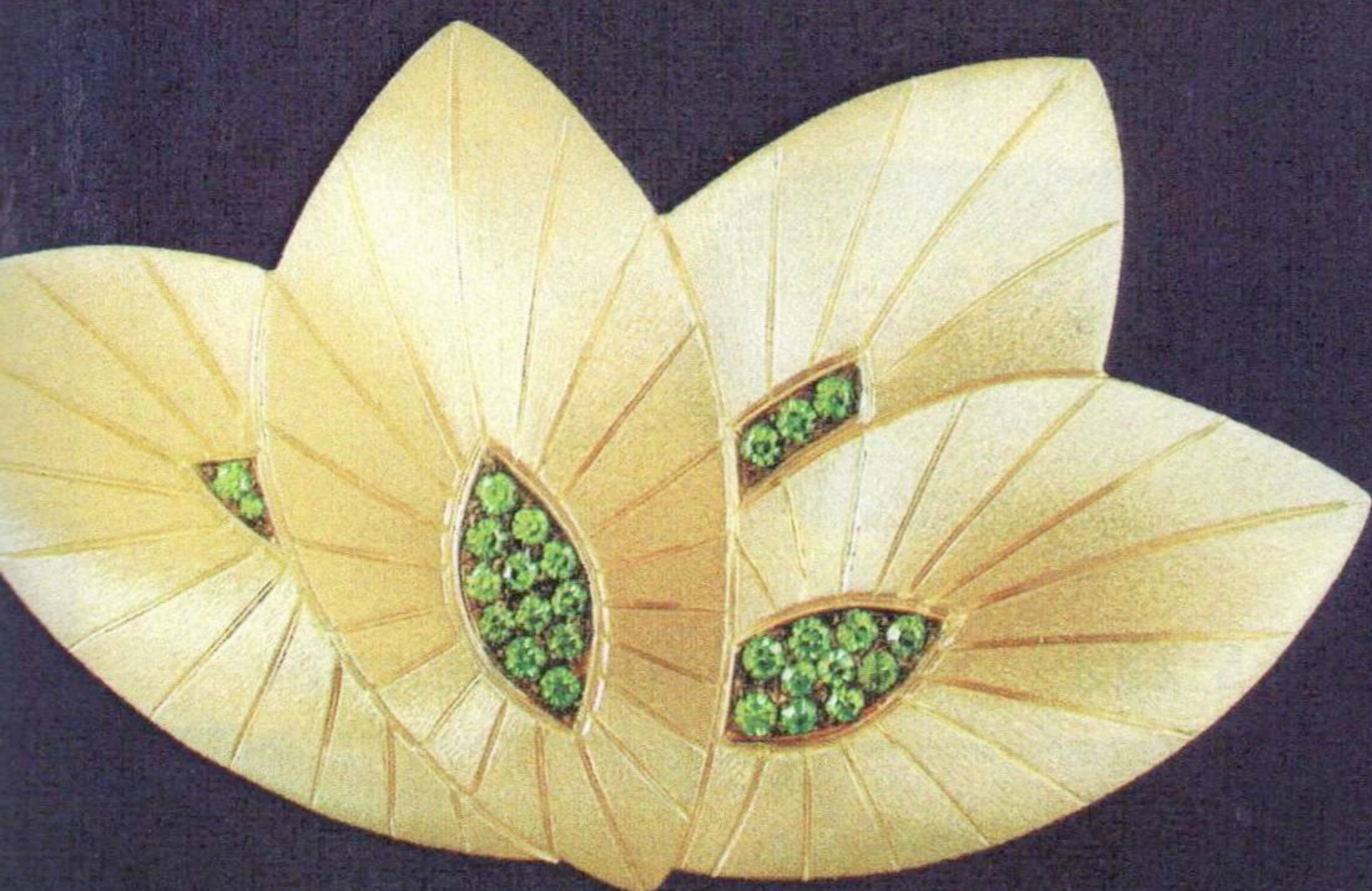
Christoph Krähenmann's jewelry is distinguished by superb craftsmanship

combined with unexpected twists.

Right: One of Krähenmann's non-traditional "jewelry" pieces, a belt with a buckle of 18K yellow and white gold, set with diamonds. Photo © Petra Liebetanz Photography.



BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY



Left: The new "Nile" collection shows some of Krähenmann's most elegant work, with engraved lines that invoke the wrapped silk costumes of ancient Egypt. Leaf brooch, of 18K yellow gold set with 27 demantoid garnets; the matching earrings are shown opposite page, top. Photos courtesy Christoph Krähenmann.

Opposite page, bottom: Y2K Bug, of platinum, 18K yellow gold, and diamonds. Photo © Petra Liebetanz Photography.



Christoph Krähenmann is not only a master goldsmith, he's the most focused and driven designer I know.

If he's not working on a commission, he's drawing or playing around with metal, trying to come up with something new. When he's away from the studio, he looks at the world for inspiration — and finds it everywhere.

One of our first conversations outside the jewelry trade shows took place in San Francisco during the summer of 1996. We were both visiting; Krähenmann lives in Santa Barbara. I was struck by the way he would stop, mid-sentence — mine or his, it didn't matter — to point out the reflection of light on water, a half-submerged lily pad, or the pattern created by parallel rings on a slice of redwood. When we toured the Fabergé exhibit, you could barely pull him away from each case, so closely would he study the metalwork or gem carving.

He would call me over to admire some detail, his voice hushed in awe, as though we were in church. Later we drove past a building that had recently gone up and he gave me the background of the architect as well as the site.

Over the years, I discovered that Krähenmann's enthusiasms are not only triggered by visual imagery but by anything new to him: a mineral specimen, Spanish street musicians, a PBS special on ancient civilizations. He finds beauty in everyday objects and is fascinated by insights into other times and cultures.

In short, he has the personality and temperament of an artist. He learned jewelry-making as a trade, practices it hands-on as a craftsman, but has elevated it to an art form.



FIRST IMPRESSIONS. I first saw Krähenmann's jewelry at the AGTA (American Gem Trade Association) show in Tucson in 1994. He had recently gone into business for himself and had already won four first place awards in the prestigious AGTA Spectrum design competitions. He was showing his collection to the public for the first time with the help of his twin sister, the charismatic Barbara Baptista, who still flies over from Zürich whenever her brother has a show.

It was a memorable collection even then — small but distinctive and exquisitely rendered. Krähenmann has always done his own bench work, fabricating each piece by hand. This alone makes him unusual among American designers. Each year, the collection seemed to evolve in an interesting new direction. I began to look forward to visiting the booth, and I wasn't alone. It helped that the twins had so much fun together and it didn't hurt that they stocked their booth with the best chocolate in the convention center. (They are Swiss, after all.)

And, of course, there was the jewelry. It's the kind that gets more impressive the longer you look at it. The metalwork was like nothing else in the vicinity, finished with the precision associated with the finest Northern European goldsmiths but always with an unexpected twist — tiny cut-out patterns or botryoidal formations in the metal, a diamond-studded pair of eyeglasses. At one show, Krähenmann apparently decided to demonstrate what "mixed metals" really means and showed up with striking combinations like brushed satin platinum against highly polished pink gold. Always, there were the most luscious pearls, and gemstones cut by friends like Justina DeVrie, Uli Pauly, or Arthur Anderson.

Krähenmann now shows only at the JCK show in Las Vegas and, most recently, at the Basel show in Switzerland, teamed with the renowned group of European designers known collectively as "Aspects."

If he had remained in Zürich, where he grew up and trained, Krähenmann would undoubtedly have his own shop now, as do most of the designers he befriended in his student days. The idea of the jeweler's shop has always appealed to him; he enjoys working directly with customers and designing collaboratively. But he landed in California at 21 and never left, and somewhere along the line began to see himself less as a Swiss guy in America than an American who came from Switzerland. And, as he puts it, "American designers do trade shows."

EARLY TRAINING. One of six children of a veterinarian, Krähenmann grew up on Lake Zürich. He was drawing and painting before he could talk and, like most Swiss craftsmen, chose his profession at an early age and received some of the best training in the world. But jewelry-making was not his first choice of careers.

His earliest attraction to fine craftsmanship came through museums and church. He was fascinated by the ancient armor and inlaid swords in museums and the ritual objects of the Catholic church — the ornate goblets and bishops' staffs, but particularly the organs. "They looked like pieces of jewelry to me from a distance," he recalled.

During a break from school when he was 15, he actually

attended a two-week workshop to explore the possibilities of designing organs for a living. "I thought it was fascinating but not creative enough," he says. His second choice was silversmithing, but workshops for that were offered only every other year and by age 16, he was impatient to begin training. So he opted for jewelry-making instead.

"I figured I would start small," he says. "I could always make the transition to larger work later." Walking home from school, he would pass the jewelry shop windows. "In Zürich in the mid-seventies, there was a huge variety of jewelry being made, from conservative, extremely well-made diamond pieces to the courageous, very modern approach of people like Paul Binder who would set four-carat flawless diamonds in African hardwood."



It was Binder's shop that ultimately inspired Krähenmann to pursue jewelry design. "He would create these incredible forms using all kinds of material. Back then, ivory and coral were the hot thing — this was before they were banned — and there was a lot of carved jade and inlays of coral, ivory, lapis, and turquoise, which Binder and a few other Zürich designers took to an extreme. His work was just fabulous. It reminded me of visits to museums and *National Geographic* magazine."

For four years, he served as an apprentice to jeweler Peter

Bürlimann and attended classes once a week. Each student in his class came from a different apprenticeship with its own approach to jewelry-making. Despite the fact that he was always at the top of his class in exams and technical skills, he was one of the last students to work with precious metal. Bürlimann was interested in technical precision more than design and Krähenmann worked for him for nine months before he was allowed to touch even a piece of silver. "I learned to cut, file, bend, and forge using brass — and it had to be perfect," he says. "I would do these things over and over. Bürlimann used to say it was like learning a musical instrument; you have to learn the scales before you can play a concerto."

NEW BEGINNING.

After graduating, he went to work for the Bosshard Co. in Zürich. "They had an office in California. That was the main reason I took the job," he says. In 1981, the promising 21-year-old was sent to Irvine, California, where he worked with another Swiss-American designer-manufacturer, Jean

all over the world. Each year he would spend a few weeks in places like Pakistan, Brazil, or Europe, making connections with miners, dealers, faceters, and engravers. It was inspiring just being around that kind of material on a daily basis. I learned a lot about gemstones and pushed me to use unusual material in combinations I never would have thought of."

After four years with Silverhorn, Krähenmann was ready to strike out on his own. "I wanted to explore myself as an artist and to design without getting anyone else's approval." He chose an unusual specialty: men's jewelry. Not many were designing for men and he saw the potential to explore new territory. His first collections were about two-thirds cufflinks and men's rings, using streamlined shapes inspired by modern architecture, a lifelong interest, and product design. At one point he became enthralled by a line of bicycles being produced by a design school in Pasadena. Then he discovered Formula One race cars and subtle allusions to air-intake valves began to appear in his jewelry. "A little twist on the form-follows-function idea," he jokes.

These days, his emphasis has switched to women's jewelry, although he still designs for men. Rather than falling into a comfortable rut, spinning and respinning the first well-received collection, he prefers to switch gears every year or two. Along the way, he has experimented with a number of techniques and created several unique styles. All bear his trademark surface treatments, clean lines, and meticulous finishing. Turn over a piece of Krähenmann's jewelry and you will never find a manufactured finding; he believes in making the backs of his jewelry as beautiful as the fronts.



Above: When Krähenmann established his own name, he chose men's jewelry as his specialty. Shown here are cufflinks of 18K red gold and platinum, set with chrysocolla cabochons. Photo © Azad.

Opposite page: letter opener, of 18K yellow and white gold, set with diamonds. Photo © Petra Liebetanz Photography.

François Albert, for the next seven years.

"It was like a new beginning," Krähenmann recalls. "I worked with 10 other jewelers, all with different specialties, from apprentices to people with 30 years of experience. I learned a lot working out problems with them as a team. From Jean François, I learned about precision and symmetry. He has an incredible eye."

During this time, Krähenmann began designing his own pieces in his free time. It was Albert and his wife who encouraged him to enter his designs in competition, leading to first place Spectrum awards in 1986, 1988, 1990, and 1993. He began to experiment with less expensive metals and had a couple local exhibitions of silver and copper jewelry and bookmarks made of titanium. "I knew then that design was my passion," he says.

In 1989, he moved up the coast to Santa Barbara to run the design workshop for the jewelry shop, Silverhorn, whose owner, Mike Ridding, had an impressive collection and knowledge of minerals and gemstones. "Mike traveled

classic jewelry design with what he calls his "optical pieces." These were born by accident after he happened to see some lines he had engraved through the prism of an aquamarine carving. Delighted by the visual distortion this created, he set an 84-carat citrine cabochon over a bed of rubies and called it the "Kaleidoscope" brooch; it was eventually exhibited at the Gemological Institute of America's Museum. He made several others from carvings he commissioned from Glenn Lehrer.

Seeing the "opticals" for the first time is like viewing an Op Art painting and realizing it was made with diamonds. They generated interest and astonishment but were not an immediate commercial success. "Sometimes I throw people off," Krähenmann admits. "I learned — or maybe I didn't learn — that the client has to be able to figure out how you're developing as a designer. Some clients love the design changes I make. They're looking for unique, one-of-a-kind pieces and they're fascinated by new directions. But others are more interested in consistency and gradual change,

RADICAL DEPARTURE.

Three years ago, he took his most radical departure from

Krähenmann's most radical departure has been with his "optical" pieces; shown here is his *Kaleidoscope brooch*, with 79 rubies seen through the distortion of an 84-carat citrine. Photo © Petra Liebetanz Photography.



RATHER THAN FALLING INTO A COMFORTABLE RUT, SPINNING AND RESPINNING THE FIRST WELL-RECEIVED COLLECTION, HE PREFERS TO SWITCH GEARS EVERY YEAR OR TWO.

because of their customers. Sometimes stores would stop buying from me. Through this whole experience, I've decided that maybe I'm not the kind of designer who needs to be or wants to be in every store. I want to stay exclusive — and that's sometimes strange."

Lately, Krähenmann has begun to look outside his own profession for inspiration — particularly to contemporary architecture. "I figure if Frank Gehry can sell his radically beautiful, challenging buildings for millions of dollars, I can find a market for my more unusual jewelry. If you want to stand out with something, it's riskier and more difficult. Not everyone is going to buy it, but then not every designer wants to take their design to the edge. That means those who do immediately get some recognition. There is a smaller market for it but there *is* a market. So why compete with people who are designing for the main base?"

Ironically, his latest creation, the *Nile* collection, is not that radical at first glance. In a way, it's another variation on the engraved lines that led to the optical pieces, but this time the result is a more subtle sense of drama. The *Nile* collection is very sophisticated design — it's arguably Krähenmann's most elegant and definitely his most luxurious collection to date. Its defining motif is a pattern of engraved lines and shimmery surfaces that invoke the wrapped silk costumes of Egyptian friezes and statuary.

It's interesting that just at the point of deciding not to be dictated to by the mainstream, he produced his most popular collection. The new collection has appeared in glossy consumer magazines. Yet the collection does not follow industry or fashion trends. Introduced at the height of the trend for white and mixed metals, it features the deep yellow gold of the ancient classical world. And while traditional precious gems such as diamonds, blue sapphires, and rubies are used, so are demantoid garnets, morganite, and citrine.

While he is still designing for men, the *Nile* pieces, like the bulk of his jewelry these days, is unquestionably for women — a strong, dramatic statement but feminine at the same time. What else could he produce with the likes of Cleopatra providing the inspiration?

Three rings from the *Nile* collection, of 18K gold set with sapphires. Krähenmann particularly likes combining blue stones with yellow gold for this collection, representing water and sunlight, the central focus of the Nile civilization. Photo: Mathias Zuppiger.



This is the work of a mature designer, comfortable with his vision and determined to follow his own path, wherever it leads. "I think I'll stay with this collection for a while," Krähenmann muses. "I'm still just on the surface of it. There is so much to research, so much potential. Designing is always an evolution of interpreting and learning. Sometimes I experiment just for the pure fun of it or to see what I can discover along the way. Jewelry-making is such a beautiful trade." ♦

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Cathleen McCarthy is a journalist based in Philadelphia who writes about jewelry, art, and travel for such publications as *Art & Antiques*, *Elle Decor*, and *The Washington Post*. She has been a regular contributor to *Lapidary Journal* since 1992.

