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# Valuing the Unique

Untreated gemstones, mid-twentieth-century styles and unique designs were key to sales at the Las Vegas Antique Jewelry and Watch Show.

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**D**espite its casual, relaxed atmosphere, the annual Las Vegas Antique Jewelry and Watch Show is an event where jewels carrying price tags in the thousands and tens of thousands of dollars are sold across the aisle from modern reproductions and designer-brand costume jewelry. With this kind of varied merchandise assortment, there is truly something for everyone, but one needs a trained eye to recognize the best of the offerings found at the show's Paris Hotel location May 31 through June 3.

### SHOPPING THE SHOW

With one-of-a-kind and period merchandise from both national and international dealers, this jewelry-week staple featured a treasure trove of jewelry items to tempt buyers. Making the most of the early opening day — one day before JCK — estate jewelry dealers enthusiastically shopped other dealers in the hopes of finding those rare items their customers are seeking. And, in fact, the show organizers, US Antique Shows, a division of George Little Management, allotted a two-hour dealer-to-dealer slot before each day's official 11 a.m. opening. To facilitate traffic, the show's layout placed the larger antique dealers at the front of the hall, independent firms in the middle and loose stone dealers at the back of the hall. This year's show, in its seventeenth year, hosted a record number of exhibitors — just under 400.

### HIGH COSTS

Exhibitors and buyers agree that this niche show fills an important need for this specialized market. One of the reasons is that today's high gold and diamond prices and continued economic uncertainty have given retailers the opportunity to buy jewelry from their customers, and many have enlarged the size of their estate jewelry departments. Attending a show of this type is important for learning what is viable for resale.

Aside from big names such as Van Cleef & Arpels, Tiffany, Cartier and Buccellati, and traditionally popular design periods such as Edwardian and Art Deco, dealers said uniqueness of design, high-quality materials and fine workmanship were among the most important attributes sought by buyers. Many also cited "value" and "wearability" as factors that made the sale.

Gary Thrapp, owner of G. Thrapp Jewelers, Indianapolis, Indiana, said he was working the show case by case and looking for something special. His key concern for purchases was finding something "wearable." While his Midwestern clients are fairly well-heeled, most don't frequent a social scene that requires important jewelry. Therefore, many have opted to sell their more elaborate, unworn pieces to him. Thrapp, who says he loves estate jewelry, both buys and sells jewelry at this show.

"Diamonds, untreated colored gemstones and natural pearls are top, top, top," noted Deborah Wilson, owner of Vendome, Santa Barbara, California. "My customers

want signed pieces that are wearable." She said that right now, antique and Art Deco pieces look too dressy, but ethnic pieces from the 1960s and '70s are "interesting and wearable."

#### MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Other exhibitors agreed about the growing popularity of designs from the 1960s and 1970s, usually bold diamond and colored gemstone pieces with fabric-like yellow gold, and clean-lined, organic silhouettes. There was always a small group of dealers who sold these pieces, explained Diana Singer, president of D&E Singer, New York City, but now that interest has blossomed, people who earlier had acquired inventory from that period are now being rewarded.

Sara Payne Thomeier, vice president of ProVocative Gems, New York City, said what her customers are looking for is uniqueness of design. She also noted the fashion world's renewed interest in bold, colorful jewelry, a trend that is exerting an influence on the sale of estate pieces. Unique color combinations such as coral and jade and emerald with turquoise, which were once thought passé, are enjoying renewed interest.

"The best part of this business is finding that perfect piece," said David McKeone, J.S. Fearnley, Atlanta. He cited important diamonds and signed pieces as top-sellers.

Period engagement rings are always a strong category. Jacob Gipsman, Jacob's Diamond & Estate Jewelry, Los Angeles, said the beauty of the designs and the fairly moderate cost make these items a strong seller, but top-color and top-clarity diamond engagement rings are hard to find.

Aaron Faber Gallery, New York, offers a range of product, from traditional estate pieces and branded timepieces to studio jewelry. This latter category, which spans the 1940s to the present, is characterized by art-oriented designs that are often made with silver and nonprecious materials. It is highly collectible and appeals to individuals of great personal style, says Patricia Kiley Faber. Traditional estate jewelry fills a niche for people who want style, but are a bit more conservative in their careers and lifestyles.



Michael Zobel bracelet.  
Photo courtesy Aaron Faber.

Sissy Jones, owner of Sissy's Log Cabin, Little Rock, Arkansas, works "every show and I don't miss anything." While she said she found a number of items to buy, she was disappointed to see many poorly repaired or restored pieces with obvious flaws, such as findings that didn't match, clasps that were wrong and workmanship that was shoddy. She and her buyer, however, were enthusiastic about a collection of Biblical-era coins from HH Gold, Canoga Park, California.

Howard Horowitz, president of HH Gold, said his "widow's mites," tiny coins in circulation during the lifetime of Jesus, were a hit with retailers such as Jones, who often buy them loose, set them into frames and sell them as charms and pendants. Horowitz, who offers a large range of ancient coins, said the majority of his customers are medium-to-better independent jewelers who want something different to offer their customers. His inventory, which includes ancient Roman and Greek coins and Spanish doubloons, ranges in price from under \$100 to \$14,000 for a finished gold necklace. According to Horowitz, the historical appeal of these coins, their materials, which include high-karat gold, silver, bronze and copper, as well as their beauty of design and well-preserved condition, make them highly desirable.

In all, exhibitors were in agreement that while customers were selective in their purchases, they were consistent in their desire for the unique, the quality and the salability of the piece. Singer summed up the feeling: "The dollar is worth less than it used to be and quality is worth more." ♦