

BEAUTY UNDER SIEGE

Third-generation gem and jewellery dealer Lee Siegelson is more akin to a curator than a salesman. He shines light on the golden age of jewellery with museum-quality offerings, in which paramount artistry eclipses intrinsic value.
By Melissa Pearce

One would expect New York jewellery dealer Lee Siegelson to have his own enviable personal collection of magnificent finds too precious to part with, but that has never been his motivation.

The most obvious expression of Lee's lifework is amassing the very best jewellery, gemstones and precious objects that history has to offer. He also lends his expertise to exhibitions and assists with museum loans of items from the most significant periods and makers in jewellery's annals. Verdura's 75th anniversary retrospective exhibition in late 2014, for example, featured the Verdura for Paul Flato aquamarine belt necklace that Siegelson owns and considers the best piece of American jewellery ever made in the 20th century.

The 44-year-old comes from a family that can trace a century's presence in the jewellery industry. His grandfather Louis Siegelson, who specialised in watches and watch repairs, founded the company in Brooklyn in 1920. Lee's late father, Herman, started in the family business when he came of age, rising to prominence as a diamond dealer and jewellery retailer in the city's Diamond District.



Lee Siegelson in his salon at the Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris

EMOTION, DESIGN, PROVENANCE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP ALL WIELD THEIR PULL, BUT LEE'S FINAL DECISION IS INSTINCTIVE AND BASED ON THE OBJECT'S BEAUTY

Herman was a consummate salesman, with great alacrity procuring gems and jewellery. When his health declined because of cancer, there became a sense of urgency for his son to master the trade. Lee joined the retail floor at 21 and at 23, with Herman no longer going in to work, accepted responsibility for the company's direction. The circumstances under which he was required to take over the business were not in any way ideal or easy. Herman only had a finite period of time to teach his son everything he needed to know, but the inquisitive Lee's retention was such that his father had to rein in his incessant questions with "Enough already! It's the end of the day."

MASTERING APPRAISAL

While Lee was hardly an overnight authority, he was insatiable when it came to learning. His power of selection is his most important attribute and a degree in Economics surely comes in handy as well. Emotion, design, provenance and craftsmanship all wield their pull, but his final decision is instinctive and mostly based on the object's beauty.

While he is forthcoming about his aptitudes, he is not one to self-aggrandise. "I think you've really got to believe in your taste. The power of instinct is really what my strength is. You have to be steadfast in what you want to represent and maintain that same high level consistently," he says.

And he's nonplussed about the ones that got away: "For the most part, if I really like something, I tend to buy it. I usually don't regret that I didn't buy something because *[it means]* I didn't really like it in the first place."

It is hard to resist prodding the affable Lee for potential tips on collecting and potentially, investing. Although he enjoys sharing his knowledge, he is disinclined to being prescriptive.

He reveals that Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels elicit the greatest interest in the market but pitting the great houses against one another is not the point. Excellence foils missteps: "I don't think you can really go wrong with quality."

Art deco's prolific elegance is a favourite but it isn't a rule of thumb. Each of the big houses needs to be judged based on how revolutionary their design were. For example, in the 1930s, in the case of artist-jewellers, such as René Boivin (then led by his wife Jeanne and expressed in the designs of Juliette Moutarde) and Suzanne Belperron, the focus was how they ruptured the rules

From top: Aquamarine and ruby Belt with a Buckle Necklace designed by Fulco, Duke of Verdura, for Paul Flato, New York, circa 1935; and Art Deco Aquamarine, Diamond and Enamel Bracelet by Jean Fouquet for Maison Georges Fouquet, Paris, 1926



Siegelson showcased its offerings for the second time at the 27th Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris in 2014

The Vanderbilt Rose by Theodore Fester, Paris, circa 1855. The former emerald, sapphire and diamond pendant necklace that features Mogul motifs is one of the most important examples of Cartier jewellery from the 1920s (and is in his possession); The Vanderbilt Rose, on the other hand, was an unsurpassed feat of scale.

Almost the size of a hand, the 250-ct diamond brooch was originally owned by Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, the niece of Napoleon Bonaparte. After her death in 1904, the jewel was auctioned off to art deco jeweller Janesich before being sold by Cartier to Cornelius Vanderbilt III for his socialite wife. It has since gone under the hammer twice — in 1972 and finally in 2004.

Lee recalls: "The Vanderbilt Rose was the greatest rose that was ever done. I think it is the scale, craftsmanship, complexity, the study of it and the proportion that resonated with me. When you have The Vanderbilt Rose in your hand, if you don't immediately sense that it's a great jewel, then it's not going to occur to you anytime soon."

The collections of the Duchess of Windsor and Daisy Fellowes have commanded reams of treatises, but if he could meet any collector from the last 100 years to discuss jewels, it would be the relatively unknown US heiress Lillian S Timken, he shares.

"It is interesting to learn about the uncelebrated collectors. I was delighted to find the remarkable 1960 catalogue of Timken's collection, one of many old catalogues from historic auctions that form our extensive library. It is so unusual for me to like everything in a collection but I would have bought every piece of hers. I would want to understand how her sensibility and mine could be so similar."

MODERN-DAY CLASSICS

Some might say that Lee was born in the wrong era, given how his aesthetics are undeniably aligned with those of earlier

of the preceding era of art deco by using sensual, sculptural approaches

Provenance is not a simple equation either. He often finds that there is an over analysis or oversimplification of the topic, especially with regards to investment value and credentials — all normal considerations of buyers, of course — when rather, it should be about an item's timeless beauty and how it evokes emotions.

"I think the backstory can lead to a blockbuster piece of jewellery," he says. However, he maintains that owning a piece at all costs because of its previous owner's fame is erroneous if the aesthetics or associations are not right. "I couldn't care less who owned a piece if it's unattractive or poorly made, or if the famous person it belonged to is not

really someone I'd want to emulate."

"Periods change but great design doesn't really go out of style. It's similar to when you like a building that has stood the test of time and there's nothing you could really improve upon," he continues.

THE PRECIOUS FEW

Although Lee's business objective is to close sales, he's not immune to seduction by certain items. "I definitely get attached to pieces. The financial incentive to sell doesn't take away from the reward that you get from looking at a thing of beauty. Beauty is the purpose of life."

Two pieces of jewellery have left the biggest impressions on him: The Timken Necklace by Cartier, Paris, circa 1925; and



The Timken Necklace:
An Art Deco Emerald, Sapphire,
and Diamond Pendant Necklace
by Cartier, Paris, circa 1925

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times. He is not as enthused by jewellery from the 1970s and 1980s because their craftsmanship is not usually of the level from jewellery's prime between 1918 and 1930.

While he practices no favouritism towards any particular gemstone, he admits liking older cuts such as the cushion-shaped Golconda diamonds. And as for the brandishing of diamond certificates that occurs in many commercial luxury exchanges these days, it exasperates him. Although he sells certified stones, he worries that granting too much attention to certificates distract from the inherent beauty of a stone. He says it is better to work with a dealer or advisor that you trust to better understand why a beautiful stone is important.

He is disturbed by how certification of high-quality stones makes symmetry a prerequisite, an issue that is detrimental to older specimens.

"One of the most important aspects that contributes to diamonds' transparency and watery quality is the old cut of the diamonds, fashioned by master stonemasons who took time to look at a stone and create the most beautiful shape and optical quality," explains



From left: Art Deco Tortoise
Clock by Cartier, Paris, 1928;
Kashmir Sapphire and Golconda
Diamond Ring by Siegelson

Lee. "The old cuts are the opposite of the symmetry of modern cuts and having slight asymmetry is the beauty of old diamonds."

Lee is not inspired by many contemporary jewellers with the exception of Daniel Brush, Hemmerle, Michelle Ong, and Lauren Adriana, who might just be coveted names of the future. He likes that each has a specific aesthetic or a recognisable signature: "Once you see their work, you can really identify it as theirs. I think that's very important. If you look at other great designers of the past, that's always the case."

He says Brush is an exceptional case of the uncompromising artist-jeweller with all his pieces made by hand. He admires the Hemmerle family's involvement in every stage of the jewellery process; while with Ong, the appeal is her elaborate and complex creations, such as a pair of black lace cuffs that he ranks among the "greatest of all cuffs".

Meanwhile, Adriana's own affinity with Lee's aesthetics has led to a collaboration on his in-house designs. "Lauren's designs are deeply rooted in the history and traditions of jewellery-making. She combines this exploration of history with brightly coloured

gemstones in audacious shapes to create something entirely modern."

Although Lee doesn't consider himself a designer by any means, he has extended his offerings to include his own jewellery because of the remarkable gemstones that cross his path. "My respect and study of what is required to make a great jewel inspires me. I design around stones and I try to have the jewel reflect the sense of proportion, construction and quality of how things were made in the past."

At the Biennale des Antiquaires last year, Siegelson's second presence at the exclusive event, he showed a ring combining a Kashmir sapphire and a Golconda diamond, which received a lot of attention. It almost rivalled that of the resplendent, geometric 1926 cuff by Jean Fouquet for Maison Georges Fouquet in Paris, featuring large step-cut aquamarine, pavé-set diamonds and black enamel. It was accompanied by the original drawing of the bracelet.

LIFELONG ERUDITION

The man whom French *Vogue* calls New York's King of Jewellery has a reputation that



accords him the first line of enquiry when people have something interesting to show. But he is not one to exult in plaudits: "When I receive a nice compliment about my work it's an honour to be recognised. But do I feel completely comfortable with being called the King of Jewellery? I don't really consider myself a king. For me it's an honour that people like what we have and I will try to continue that certain level of taste."

Many industry insiders acknowledge that Lee has some of the best examples from the top Place Vendôme jewellers. But instead of being viewed as a competitor to those who are buying back their creations, the relationship is a symbiotic one: There's not a major French house that he doesn't have communication with and he appreciates the invaluable resources their archives are able to provide when he is cataloguing his offerings. He also helps them out when they are looking for loans for their own exhibitions.

While it's a given that both Lee and the jewellery houses sometimes eye similar things, there's a reciprocity when it comes to preserving artistic heritage. Siegelson recalls that every major house took time to visit him at the fair, whether it is their curators, salespeople or CEOs. "They were all impressed by the pieces that are in our collection and marvelled at how beautiful they were especially when they were displayed together collectively."

On the quest to collect the very best, Lee assures that he will continue to be curious about new creators and techniques he wasn't before aware of. "I'd say I am learning continually. I don't think there is a day I walk in my office when I don't learn something, whether it's about life, jewellery, manufacturing or a particular designer. I think when that stops, then I'll stop." ■