

A Way of Life

Recycling Antiquities and Artifacts



RING, for index finger, fourteen karat gold, with ancient Roman carnelian carving of a nesting bird, set with lapis and turquoise inlays, 2007-8.
Photographs by Joseph Gatto.

Joseph Gatto



“I do not feel the need to explain or tell stories when I make and design jewelry as when I was a painter, photographer or poet. I choose to challenge the thought process of the consumer. I try to design complex concepts for complex minds.”

For many years I collected art and antiquities as an expression of my love for aesthetic objects made by hand. For an equal number of years, I worked with both non-plastic and increased plasticity materials—metals, stone, bone, hardwoods, plastic, leather, clay, oil paint, watercolor, photography, experimental film, video, text and poetry.

I have also been making jewelry off and on for many years and recently decided to explore it full time. At first it was difficult to admit that I had nothing to say as a painter, and with the development of digital versus film cameras, photography became less interesting as an expressive artform. I needed the control and challenge of designing jewelry as a more intellectual idiom of expression.

My work combines precious metals with sculptures in miniature from antiquity. Recycling has been a way of life for me for over sixty years, instilled by my parents who understood the sanctity of the earth's riches through the food we grew and the resources we used to better our lives as though it was expected of us from a higher universe. By recycling and reusing the antiquities that I have collected for many years, they are kept out of dumps or landfills as unwanted trash, but are also kept out of the landfill of the mind as objects to be seen only in museums. It is necessary for my personal growth to reverse the attitudes and trends witnessed in crafts, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, and to re-educate the new generation of consumers by producing aesthetic, functional and well-executed designs.



OJIME RING, sterling silver, set with finely incised ivory *ojime*, approximately 1995.

RING, fourteen karat yellow gold, with green glazed scarab and hardstone scarab, set hieroglyphic sides up, wood inlays, approximately 2008-9.



RING, fourteen karat gold, with ancient Egyptian green glazed scarab, 1970-71.



PIERCED RING for right index finger, fourteen karat yellow gold, with ancient Egyptian scarab, pierced hieroglyphics, approximately 1968.

My personal mission as a designer is to attitudinally alter the concept of the mind as a consumptive clone that has been trained to acquire objects just for the sake of consumption, rejecting the buying habits of our culture of objects that are designed to be thrown away after a few days, months or years, filling already over-flowing dump sites. It is important to earn the respect and dignity of my clients by making lasting objects by hand as unique, one-of-a-kind items that symbiotically offer the same respect and dignity to the consumer.

Making jewelry is not a recent phenomenon for me. The actual physical act has remained the same for many years, preceded by craftsmen who made body ornamentation for thousands of years before me. What has changed is the reliance in recent years of creating design challenges for the one-of-a-kind antiquities that I combine with precious metals as worthwhile investments.

Every piece of jewelry I make emanates from a concept, sketch or daydream. Many of the challenges develop into unique design problem-solving exercises; some designs change as different antiquities become available, or when referencing design solutions of ancient craftsmen from different cultures, or as materials become rare or extinct. But generally the problem solving remains fairly constant and is a marvelous way to assess my craftsmanship and how a particular design is successful.

When making jewelry, I try never to be repetitive— influenced as I transition from one piece to another, yes, but repetitive, no. Each antiquity is so singular and unique, it is rather impossible to repeat a design. My works respect the legacy of the ancient designer/craftsman. I will never know who made the object I use; very few can be attributed to an artist. The dignity of objects made by hand by the ancient craftsman has to be respected, as I would like my pieces to be in turn.

Many designs incorporate artifacts of metal, stone, bone, ivory, wood, porcelain and glass; Japanese *ojime* beads, Mexican fetishes, Greek terracottas, Roman *intaglios*, Byzantine seals and stones from Bactria, amongst others. The sculptures in miniature are very challenging because of their unlimited design potential. However, I try never to alter the object.

Over-designing the antiquity by needlessly drilling excessive holes, changing the patina, cutting, filing or scraping, destroys the original concept and eliminates the design problem I set out to solve. While this may be expedient, it fails to challenge me as an inventive designer. The mounting techniques for antiquities are by their nature limited. Great joy and fulfillment are experienced when, after a piece has been on my bench for some time, the eureka moment surfaces and the solution becomes effortless. As a designer, this is most gratifying.

I try to solve design problems where as many sides of the antiquity can be seen at one time. The Egyptian scarab fascinates me as a designer, and presents the greatest challenge as it is essential to show both sides of the stone. This demands that only the finest, most beautiful scarabs be used. Subsequently, I made a decision to work only with genuine, ancient scarabs, or stones and beads of equal significance. I specifically chose not to use reproductions, and out of respect for the ancient craftsmen, choose to learn from their works and not to replicate them.

I am not adverse to composing a piece that extends beyond the surface of the body, or finger. This concept allows me to design so that the piece engages the viewer, rather than being hidden or partially obstructed by an article of clothing. I especially enjoy designing rings to be worn on the index finger, enabling the piece to be enjoyed from the top as well as the side.

It is critical for me to extend the life of rare and near extinct materials by recycling and using them. Tropical hardwoods, recycled ivory from broken items such as salt shakers or candle holders, chipped or broken stones all have application in my work.

As a craftsman, it is essential to experience the creative process: to explore, to touch, to feel, to enjoy, to learn from and give new life to the materials and objects with which I have been entrusted. After all, we are only temporary custodians of the human and natural environments. Making jewelry gives me great joy. Designing brings challenges not necessarily available in our highly technological age, and with the dignity, respect and satisfaction of making things by hand, heart and mind. ☞

RING, fourteen karat yellow, eighteen karat rose-colored gold, with ancient Roman bronze horse, set with coral and turquoise. 2010. The horse is movable, in a rearing position or standing on all legs.



RING, eighteen and fourteen karat rose and yellow gold, ancient Roman fibula of a horse, stainless bolt with brass nut.