

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:

For some, an emerald, sapphire, or other gemstone is a more personal symbol of love and commitment. In these rings by Studio E Designs, cinnamon tourmaline and purple sapphire center stones are cut to illuminate their intoxicating colors. 1.87-carat tourmaline with side diamonds (.14 total carat weight) in a romantic marriage of rose gold and platinum, \$2,200. Pear-shaped 1.45-carat sapphire in yellow gold and diamond (.12 total carat weight) mount, \$2,200.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM:

Crafted of colored gold, these delicate, thin bands by Penny Larsen are used to mark the place where a permanent ring will go, or as a diamond alternative that stacks and grows with anniversaries, babies, and other marital milestones. \$120 to \$400 each.

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For him, heavy platinum is paired with tungsten to create a durable, scratch-resistant complement to almost any style for her. \$1,500, from Badliner Jewelers. Ultra simplistic, ultimately dramatic is the one-carat solitaire in a heavy bezel setting by Karin Jacobson, \$11,275. Also by Jacobson, a shining piece of symmetry in sterling silver with 10 sparkling diamonds (.50 total carat weight), \$3,650. Rock prop from The New Enchanted Rock Garden, Richfield.



Damiani International, the jeweler commissioned to make the one-of-a-kind ring, had reproduced it despite an agreement guaranteeing exclusivity to the Pitts. To make matters worse, they were using the couple's famous faces to sell the copies. In the end, the quarrel was "amicably resolved," claims a Damiani representative. Apparently so, as Brad agreed to design an exclusive jewelry collection for the company, and Jennifer agreed to model it. Whatever the story, seldom do you hear anymore of a groom walking into a store and simply picking out a ring for his sweetheart.

What gives? Lovers are looking for something very personal, and it's not uncommon for a couple to pick out the engagement ring together, says Karin Jacobson, who designs wedding rings sold at the Walker Art Center Shops. "Sometimes a man will start out wanting to design a ring to surprise his future fiancée, but will wonder, 'Should I really be choosing what she's going to wear on her finger for the rest of her life?' Usually he decides that it's enough of a surprise to ask her to marry him, and that they should both have input on the ring."

The stone is a good place to start. Diamonds are still the most popular stones for engagement rings, with classic round brilliants claiming the top spot and princess-cut stones running a close second. Colored diamonds have been gaining popularity over the past couple of years, particularly the "fancy yellow" or canary-colored stones. Some people are choosing to embellish colorless diamonds with colored ones; a popular arrangement is a round brilliant surrounded by yellow accent diamonds.

Diamonds may be forever, but they're also not for everyone. A favorite precious stone, such as an emerald or ruby, may be closer to the bride's heart or personal style. "Princess Diana really set an example of how beautiful other stones could be in an engagement ring with her sapphire center stone surrounded by accent diamonds," says Michael Knoll, certified Master Bench Jeweler and co-owner of Studio E Designs in Edina, Or, an alternate stone may be closer to the groom's budget.

"For couples starting out, hosting their own wedding or hoping to buy a house, it's hard to justify spending so much on a diamond engagement ring," Knoll says. You can get a substantial sapphire for a lot

less than a diamond of the same size. And because sapphires are virtually as sturdy as diamonds (nine on the hardness scale compared to the diamond's ten), they'll hold up nicely to daily wear. For a diamond that costs 25 to 35 percent less, Knoll recommends a clarity-enhanced diamond, which is a flawed diamond that has had glass forced into its fissures, or a "top light brown" diamond that's cut to mask its tint and if done well, has an incredible amount of brilliance, scintillation and color.

The setting, too, can reflect style and sensibility, be it old romanticism or modern simplicity—or both. Knoll has noticed a twist on the trend for settings inspired by designs of the past. "Think your grandma's ring, with a contemporary spin," he says. This means a lot of detailed filigree and hand engraving on a ring that's structured more simply than many Victorian originals.

Having rings designed especially for you and your fiancé guarantees you'll have something original to wear into your happily ever after (unless you're incredibly famous and adorable like Pitt and Aniston). Penny Larsen, whose jewelry can be found at the Walker Art Center Shops, specializes in delicate colored gold commitment rings. Couples looking for something unique that won't break the bank turn to Larsen. "A lot of people are looking for an alternative to the big diamond, and that's the idea behind the stackable rings I make. Because they're so thin, you can continue to add bands for anniversaries, births, et cetera over time, and create a custom look."

The material du jour for ring settings is platinum, a pricey and rare metal. Aside from its esthetics, the purity of platinum is also attractive to some. You can buy jewelry that's 95 percent platinum and five percent cobalt or iridium, as compared to gold, which is at most only 75 percent pure. The density of platinum means that it's not going to wear thin like gold can over time, and any engraving on the inside of the ring won't rub away. But platinum has its drawbacks. A common misconception is that platinum won't scratch because it's such a heavy metal. Not true, says Marc Badiner, the fourth-generation son to work at Badiner Jewelers in downtown Minneapolis. "Over time, a platinum ring will attain the same patina finish

that a gold ring will, showing the nicks and scratches of everyday wear." Also, because platinum costs around \$700 per ounce, as compared to white and yellow gold at \$300 per ounce, more couples are turning to white gold, which looks like platinum. "Gold, like platinum, is very durable, and scratching can be buffed away more easily," says Badiner.

If platinum isn't in your budget and gold isn't your thing, you might want to consider two newcomers on the scene: titanium and tungsten. Titanium, a metal most commonly known for its use in aircraft construction and bike frames, is light yet strong, making it a good choice for a lifetime of use. The tough gun metal tungsten has long been used in industrial capacities, and is starting to be fashioned into rings offering high shine and scratch-resistance.

How much does one have to spend to say 'I love you'? A lot! Or not. When Karin Jacobson of Karin Jacobson Jewelry Design takes on a ring-designing project, she first meets with the couple to discuss their ideas and their budget. "If a couple has limited funds, there are a lot of ways to make the price come down while keeping with the style they want," she says. One couple asked Jacobson to fashion a ring using moissanite, the highest quality synthetic diamond currently available. The ring ended up costing half what it would have if they had chosen a genuine diamond, and the couple was extremely pleased with the results.

Jacobson urges people to not feel locked into the lore of spending two-months' salary, and to go with the stones and metal that speak to their individuality. Badiner advises couples wanting to spend less on the engagement ring to go with a simple solitaire, so that they can get the best diamond possible for the money. "It's wiser not to tie up a lot of money in side stones, because a few years down the road you might want to reset your stone in a more elaborate ring, and you'll be glad that your diamond is of good quality." \*

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*A one-carat fancy yellow diamond is spotlighted by two, 1/2-carat trillion-cut diamonds on a simple platinum band, \$20,000, from Badiner Jewelers. A bezel-set one-carat white diamond, side diamonds, and encircling channel-set diamonds (.80 total carat weight) show their brilliance within an intricate, hand-engraved platinum band, \$12,000, also from Badiner Jewelers. In the dynamic, architectural design by Studio E Designs, a princess-cut diamond is suspended in a platinum and 18-karat gold tension setting, \$2,100 for the mount.*