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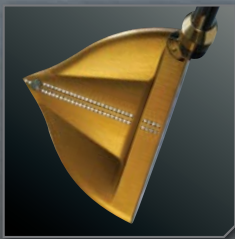
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ALL THAT GLITTERS AN UNPARALLELED VINTAGE JEWELRY COLLECTION
STRIKING IT RICH ARTIFACTS FROM CALIFORNIA'S GOLD RUSH

FEATURING *Neil Lane*



An American in Paris

While Neil Lane is best known as Hollywood's jeweler to the stars, his career and his vintage jewelry collection began on the streets of Paris.

BY SHAUN TOLSON



IN ADDITION TO BEING well-respected and versatile actresses, Renée Zellweger, Reese Witherspoon, and Jennifer Hudson all share two things in common. First, they each won a Golden Globe award in the same year that they later accepted an Oscar—Zellweger thanked the academy in 2004, Witherspoon in 2006, and Hudson continued the tradition the following year. Second, each paraded down the red carpet for those respective award ceremonies while wearing Neil Lane–designed jewelry.

The mid-2000s may have been the time when Lane’s ascension to the highest ranks of jewelry design was broadcast to the world, but Lane had established himself long before that. Earlier in his career, while serving as an ambassador for the diamond industry, Lane met with government officials in Botswana and South Africa; and he later revitalized once-forgotten European diamond cuts, including the Asscher, an innovation that was created—



Lane’s collection of vintage jewelry includes many pieces designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, such as a necklace and ring from the early 20th century (this page) and an aquamarine-and-peridot necklace, circa 1917 (opposite).

and later patented—by the Royal Asscher Diamond Co. in 1902. From a creative standpoint, Lane furthered his reputation by designing pieces for the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Barbra Streisand.

Needless to say, those who are well versed in the jewelry industry are likely to know Neil Lane. They may even know Lane for the vintage jewelry that he collects; after all, it's just as common to see an actress on the red carpet



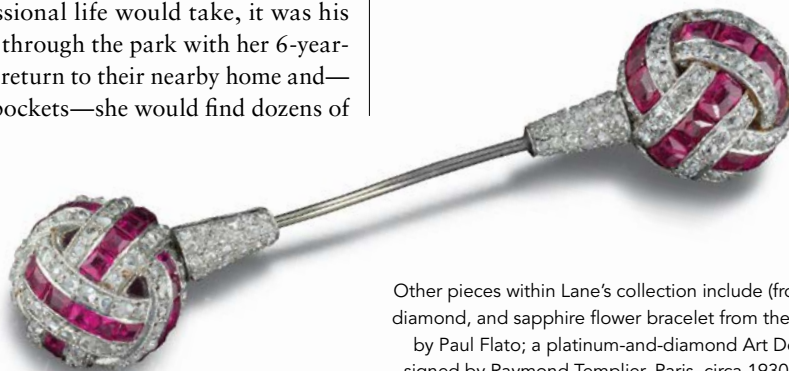
wearing one of his vintage jewels as it is to see her showcasing one of his contemporary designs. His dual life as a designer and a collector is not without precedent, however. Dating as far back as the mid-19th century (and perhaps even earlier), the visionaries behind the world's foremost jewelry houses—the Frédéric Bouchérons, René Boivins, and Louis-

François Cartiers of the world—collected vintage jewels for their historical value as well as for their inspiration. Lane is no different. “My collection informs me and teaches me. I wouldn't be the designer I am today if not for all these years of collecting,” he says. “I am inspired by the details—scrollwork and intricate patterns—from an ornate setting to sublime Edwardian refinement. Through my understanding of vintage jewelry, I have been able to bring a beauty and a romance of bygone eras to my contemporary work.”

Lane's story as a designer who collects may be common, but the journey that brought him to the elite ranks of collecting is unique. That journey started decades ago, in the unlikeliest of places—Brooklyn's Marine Park.



IF ANYONE COULD HAVE predicted the path that Lane's professional life would take, it was his mother. After walks through the park with her 6-year-old son, Pearl Lane would return to their nearby home and—upon emptying her son's pockets—she would find dozens of



Other pieces within Lane's collection include (from top): a large platinum, diamond, and sapphire flower bracelet from the 1930s that was designed by Paul Flato; a platinum-and-diamond Art Deco geometric bracelet signed by Raymond Templier, Paris, circa 1930; and a Cartier-designed platinum, ruby, and diamond cliquet brooch, circa 1924.

Coke bottle remnants and other pieces of colored glass that Neil had collected along the way.

A decade later, Lane was studying at the Art Students League in Manhattan, focusing mostly on figurative painting with abstract influences. As Lane recalls, his motivations for art were as pure as an aspiring artist's could be. "I just wanted to be an artist," he says. "I didn't focus on how to make money."

While Lane admits that he had no clear ideas about how he could generate revenue, he still knew that he needed some. Around this time, Lane was a regular visitor to a number of local flea markets. He also observed that when many families in his neighborhood settled estates or moved, they would strew the sidewalks with piles of unwanted heirlooms, trinkets, artwork, and other decorative items. Trusting his developing artistic eye, Lane claimed the items that he thought had value and later sold them at the flea markets that he visited. In this way, Lane slowly made some money, and as soon as he could afford it, he bought a plane ticket to Paris.

The French capital was a natural destination for a young art student from America, and Lane made the city's museum circuit his rotating classroom. The Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the Picasso museum, the Rodin museum—he frequented them all numerous times. His wanderings soon introduced him to Place Vendôme, a Parisian square that is home to some of the world's most esteemed jewelry houses. Yet Lane's love affair with jewelry wasn't cemented there; it was formed along Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, an avenue dotted with vintage jewelry boutiques. "I became

fascinated by the jewels in the windows of these wonderful vintage jewelry shops," he recalls. "The shops on Madison Avenue didn't sell jewels like that; we didn't have those aesthetics in America."

According to Lane, when it came to the impact that his discovery of vintage jewelry had on him, the city of Paris played a pivotal role. Not only was he introduced to distinctive, rare jewels; he also was surrounded by the architecture



Top: Jewels within Lane's collection that once belonged to Mae West. Above: A Van Cleef & Arpels platinum bracelet set with Asscher- and fancy-cut diamonds.

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—NEIL LANE



and the cultural cues that reflected the eras in which those jewels were made. “It all made sense,” he says. Lane was fixated by the extensive French jewelry collection on display in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (a museum of decorative arts and design in the Louvre’s west wing). He also took weekend trips to London, where he admired the jewelry collection on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum and spent hours riding the moving walkway that took him

by the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. “You can’t linger in front of them,” he says of the Crown Jewels. “So I had to keep going back around [on the moving walkway] to see them over and over again.”

Lane’s obsession also took him back to Paris’s vintage jewelry boutiques, and he eventually acquired his first piece, an enameled brooch in the shape of a dragon with a big pearl in its belly and a diamond in its mouth. Lane’s attraction to the piece, which he later learned was designed by Lucien Falize, eventually got the better of him and he bought it, spending almost half of the money that was intended to support his stay in Paris for the next 10 months. “I had to learn, I had to study, and I had to tremble and be nervous,” Lane says of his initial steps as a jewelry collector. “And then, once I had some money, I had to find the courage to spend it without knowing what I was doing. When I started collecting, I had no clue what was \$3,000 or \$5,000 or \$500. I didn’t know about signatures or hallmarks; I had no clue about these things. It was a total visceral response, and books were my biggest teacher.”

Lane also taught himself. Knowing that he didn’t have the freedom to spend thousands of dollars on a whim, the young jewelry enthusiast was methodical in his early acquisitions. “I had to look,” he says. “I couldn’t afford to make mistakes.” To avoid any potential blunders, Lane searched for vintage jewelry everywhere. “If I saw something that excited me, I would wait and go down to another shop or flea market, and if I saw something similar, I began to learn that the piece wasn’t so rare,” he says. “That’s how I slowly taught myself to look for rarity.”

It wasn’t long before Lane’s tireless studying began to produce dividends. Through his research (both in literature and in

Top: A suite of gold, emerald, and diamond jewels within Lane’s collection that were designed by Paul Flato and once belonged to Ginger Rogers.

Above: A Suzanne Belperron–designed bangle bracelet, which Lane recently loaned to the Louvre in Paris.



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museum exhibitions), Lane soon recognized the trademarks of the significant jewelry houses. By closely analyzing aesthetics and craftsmanship, he grew confident that he could identify a master jewelry designer’s work, even if the piece was missing his signature or his house’s stamped markings. “A lot of people collected signed jewelry because it gave them confidence; they knew what it was and they knew its known value,” he explains. “For me, it wasn’t about the signature; it was about the quality and the style. As I was starting out as a collector, I was able to buy many things below the market value because they weren’t signed, but I recognized who made it.”

IT’S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW but who you know: It’s an old adage that has proven true for many, including Lane. Yes, he benefited greatly from all the things that he learned through his own observation and analysis, but he received some shrewd guidance from a few mentors along the way. One in particular, the proprietor of a Parisian Art Deco gallery, not only encouraged him to purchase a client’s rare gold-and-ivory necklace—she told him that, for his career, it was an important jewel for him to have—she also loaned him \$17,000 to acquire it.

This Lucien Gaillard gold-and-ivory necklace, circa 1907, is one of the first significant jewels that Lane acquired, and it’s one that the collector still owns.

Later, when Lane returned home to the U.S. with the necklace, his father was displeased, thought its purchase was foolish, and urged his son to sell it. But although Lane felt overwhelmed at the prospect of owning the necklace, he didn't sell it. "I didn't know how to sell something that expensive; it was out of my realm," he says. "So I ended up keeping it."

Lane set out to uncover the necklace's history. The piece was signed by Lucien Gaillard and dated 1907, so that part was easy. Determining its significance took more time. Eventually, Lane found the jeweler's original drawing of the necklace, which revealed that the piece was created specifically for a jewelry exhibition in Paris, where it won a gold medal for its design. "Jewels from these exhibits are highly collected, because they represent the best of the best," says Lane, whose collection of more than 100 rare pieces from the 1880s to the 1940s includes numerous examples that have World's Fair and other exhibition pedigrees.

"The jewelry from the late 19th and early 20th century was so innovative not just for its style and design but also for how it was made," he continues, explaining why he focuses specifically on those eras. "The styles did more than mirror Edwardian, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco architecture, they reflected those lifestyles. With the revolutionary use of platinum and advances in diamond cutting, designers began to create jewels that the world had never seen before."

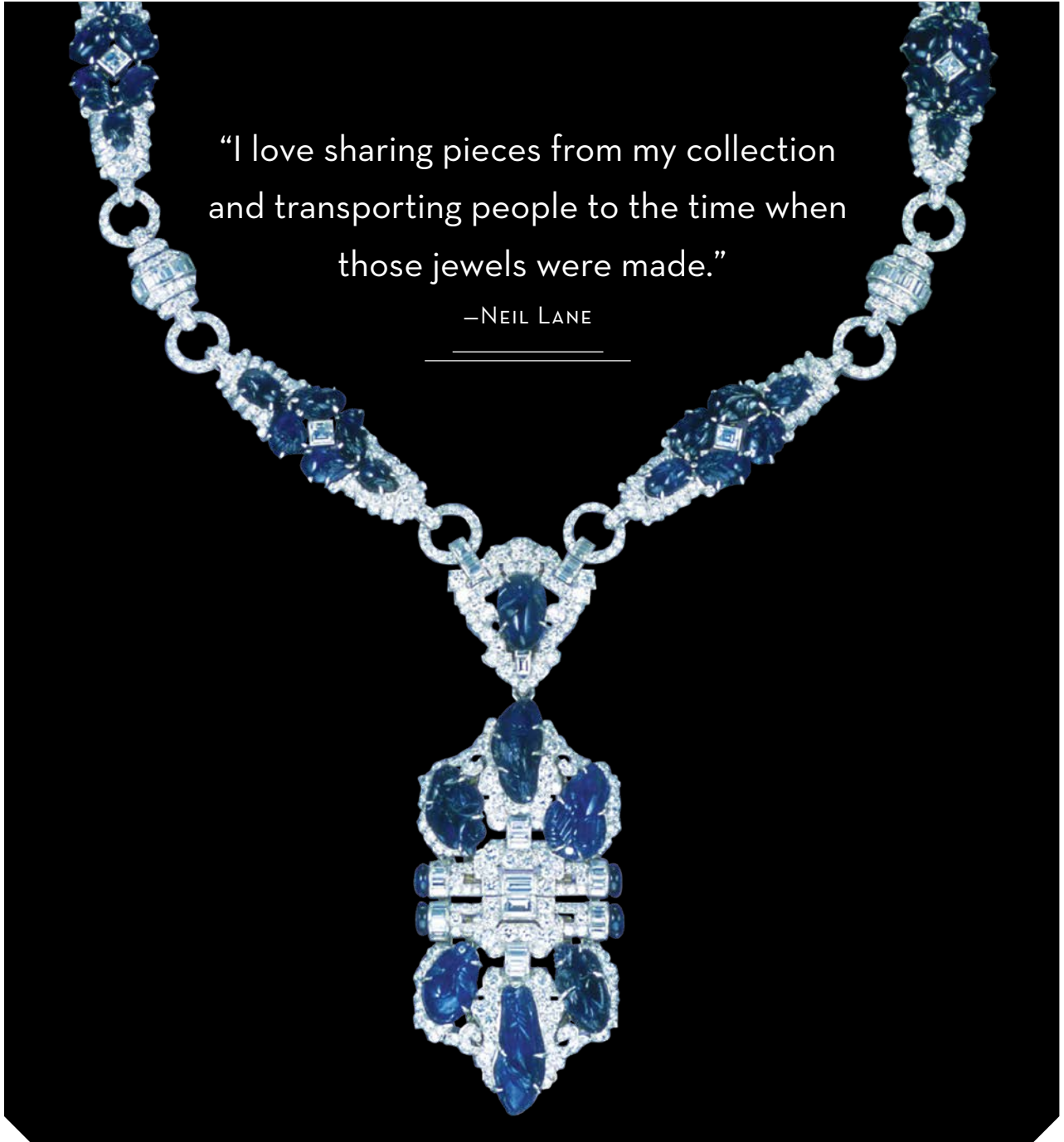


Above: This Paul Flato–designed citrine bracelet from the 1930s is an example of a vintage jewel that Lane will loan to actresses for movie premiers and awards shows. Below: A trio of Suzanne Belperron gold, sapphire, and diamond jewels from the 1930s.



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and transporting people to the time when
those jewels were made.”

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Even after years of collecting, there have been times when Lane has encountered a mysterious piece of jewelry, such as the carved sapphire-and-diamond necklace that he bought about 20 years ago. Lane was captivated by the piece, but he knew next to nothing about it. Much like he had done when he was younger, the collector trusted his instincts and bought the piece based on his visceral reaction to it and his suspicion that it had been crafted by Trabert & Hoeffler-Mauboussin, an American firm from the 1930s that was known for its use

of large, colorful stones and retro styles. “I knew that if something was an amazing design and extraordinarily made that it was probably the product of an important jewelry house,” he says. “And I knew that one day that would be revealed.”

That revelation came about four years ago when Lane visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Flipping through the museum’s archive of vintage jewelry drawings, Lane found the original blueprint for his necklace, which finally confirmed that his initial suspicions were correct.

The carved sapphire-and-diamond necklace that Lane purchased 20 years ago, long before he found the original drawings that confirmed it was designed by the renowned American firm Trabert & Hoeffler-Mauboussin.



Jewels from Lane's collection include (from top): a Cartier-designed, onyx-and-diamond bracelet; a Boucheron-designed, black enameled, coral-and-diamond Art Deco bracelet; and a Paulding Farnham-designed, enamel-and-diamond orchid brooch that once was exhibited at the World's Fair in Paris.



THESE DAYS, ACCORDING TO LANE, vintage jewelry collecting is much more difficult. "It's extremely hard to collect these jewels today because there's a global demand for them," he explains. "When things come on the market and they're extraordinary, there's no limit to what they might bring. The world of collecting these jewels is broad, but it's not about collecting just for style anymore. In the beginning, people collected jewels out of a passion because things were rare, but today, a lot of collecting is based on the values of the materials."

Lane recently loaned some of his vintage jewels to the Louvre for a special exhibition, which makes him all the more proud of his collection, especially considering the journey that he took to build it. Nevertheless, he doesn't believe that it would be possible for him to own that same collection if he started building it now. "It's not even about money," he says. "It's about finding the jewels. They're so rare and so finite to begin with."

Lane does believe that there are phenomenal vintage pieces out there waiting to be rediscovered, however, and that excites him, both as a collector and as a contemporary designer. "I love sharing pieces from my collection and transporting people to the time when those jewels were made," he says. "I love explaining their history and how they were worn and their cultural significance, and, of course, showing off their beauty." □

(Special thanks to Bonhams for assisting on this story.)