

Before emigrating from the Ukraine to the United States in 1906, Nathan and Oscar Heyman trained in the famously rigorous workshops of Fabergé. “They probably started off sweeping the floor and sleeping in the back room,” says Tom Heyman, a third-generation owner of Oscar Heyman, the fine jewelry company his great uncles founded in 1912.

When Nathan was drafted into the Russian army, the brothers fled to America as part of a major wave of European artisans who decamped to the West. Skilled in crafting jewelry with platinum—then a new metal in the United States—the Heymans quickly transcended the ranks of skilled laborer to become preeminent fine jewelry fabricators, creating pieces for

From Manhattan in the 1880s to Hollywood in the 2000s, a brief history of American jewelry—told by some of the makers and manufacturers themselves

BY EMILI VESILIND

boldface brands of the day such as Tiffany & Co., Cartier, and Marcus & Co.

The history of jewelry manufacturing in the United States is punctuated with countless similar tales of personal grit, determination, and a ceaseless drive to innovate. Its trajectory “is all about the gumption and courage to keep on going in the tough years,” and forging a path that eventually would allow American jewelry makers to compete with entrenched European houses, says Joyce Jonas, a jewelry historian and president emeritus of the American Society of Jewelry.

AMERICA'S JEWELRY PIONEERS

Lower Manhattan's jewelry district, centered on Maiden Lane in the late 1800s and early

NATIONAL TREASURES



Feather brooch by Paul Flato, circa 1940, with 2.6 cts. t.w. diamonds and 35 cts. t.w. sapphires, set in platinum; sold at Siegelson in New York City

1900s, spawned some of the country's seminal manufacturers and designers. Tiffany & Co., practically synonymous with American jewelry to this day, was founded in Lower Manhattan in 1837 by Charles Lewis Tiffany and Teddy Young. Originally operating as Tiffany, Young and Ellis, a stationery and fine goods store, the firm became the first U.S. manufacturer to win an award for excellence at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867.

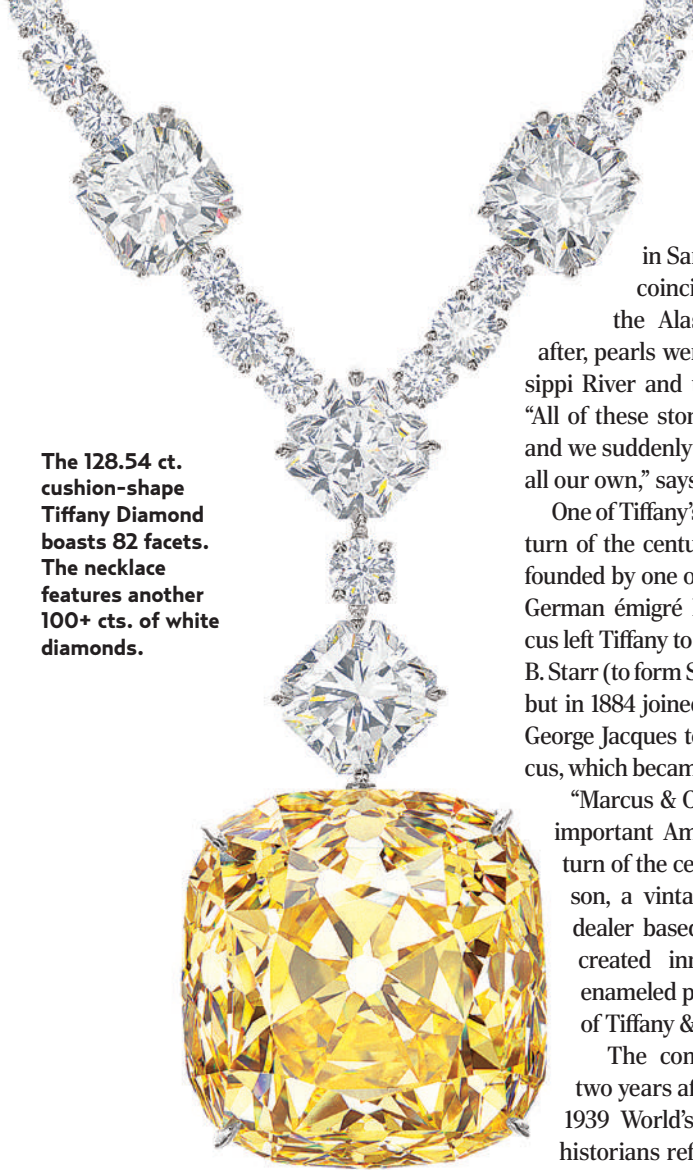
The company's milestones and innovations are famously extensive. Tiffany & Co. set the benchmark for the classic solitaire diamond engagement ring with its patented six-prong Tiffany setting in 1886. And the company is responsible for the discovery and naming of numerous gemstones, including kunzite and morganite. It introduced the first luxury jewelry catalog, the iconic Blue Book, and positioned itself, almost from its inception, as a dealer and collector of important gemstones through a series of bold acquisitions, including the 128 ct. yellow Tiffany diamond and the French Crown jewels.

The discovery of new gemstones and metals in the United States shaped the evolution of fabrication techniques in the industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The commercial mining of sapphires in Montana and tourmalines



McTeigue & Co. early-20th-century platinum and diamond ring

The 128.54 ct. cushion-shape Tiffany Diamond boasts 82 facets. The necklace features another 100+ cts. of white diamonds.



in San Diego County in 1898 coincided with the start of the Alaska Gold Rush. Soon after, pearls were found in the Mississippi River and turquoise in Colorado. “All of these stones were being mined, and we suddenly had a very rich source all our own,” says Jonas.

One of Tiffany’s contemporaries at the turn of the century, Marcus & Co., was founded by one of its former employees, German émigré Herman Marcus. Marcus left Tiffany to partner with Theodore B. Starr (to form Starr & Marcus in 1864), but in 1884 joined his son, William, and George Jacques to form Jacques & Marcus, which became Marcus & Co. in 1892.

“Marcus & Co. was one of the most important American jewelers at the turn of the century,” says Lee Siegelson, a vintage jewelry expert and dealer based in Manhattan. “They created innovative gem-set and enameled pieces that rivaled those of Tiffany & Co.”

The company closed in 1941, two years after participating in the 1939 World’s Fair—an event many historians reference as the moment American-made fine jewelry, via the participation of companies including Tiffany & Co. and Marcus & Co., officially came into its own. But the fruits of its skilled craftsmen remain highly coveted by dealers and collectors on the secondary market.

Another notable jeweler producing heirloom-worthy pieces at the time was Walter P. McTeigue & Co., which manufactured stunning designs for all the big jewelry retailers in the first half of the 20th century: Tiffany & Co.; J.E. Caldwell & Co.; C.D. Peacock; Black, Starr & Frost; and Shreve, Crump & Low.

Known for fine platinum and diamond jewelry in the Edwardian and, later, Art Deco styles, the company “was always a behind-the-scenes brand,” says Walter McTeigue, a descendant of the McTeigue family and former Harry Winston gem buyer who currently co-owns half of the fine jewelry firm McTeigue & McClelland. “It was the

Belle Époque, and wealthy people were very wealthy. We were making really incredible things, though the company wasn’t widely known. The people who did know it associated it with quality.”

Around this time, a group of jewelry manufacturers in Newark, N.J., including the long-standing Krementz & Co., composed America’s first epicenter for large-scale production of fine jewelry. The high-quality, lower-cost products they manufactured widened the reach and audience for fine jewelry. Suddenly, the middle class could aspire to own diamonds. Many of the craftsmen at these fabrication facilities ably copied the look of high-fashion jewelry from Europe. “The artisans made much less expensive Art Nouveau jewelry that was every bit as finely made as it was in Europe,” says Jonas.

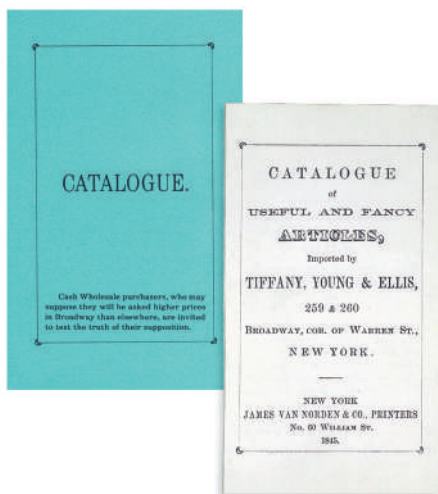
Founded mainly by German-born jewelry makers, the Newark manufacturers produced most of Tiffany & Co.’s silver up until the 1980s, and retailers (including Tiffany) supplemented their top-drawer baubles with less pricey pieces made in Newark workshops.

Mass production of fine jewelry eventually spread up and down the Eastern seaboard, with firms such as Napier Co. in Meriden, Conn., bringing both fine and quality costume jewelry (a relatively new category) to a middle class quickly developing a taste for Hollywood glamour at the local cinema.

THE DECO-ERA HEYDAY OF AMERICAN DESIGN

The 1920s saw the rise of the Art Deco movement, characterized by geometric shapes and clean lines. Raymond Yard, a former head salesman at Marcus & Co., is perhaps most synonymous with the bold Deco look in the United States. Encouraged by longtime client John D. Rockefeller, Yard opened a store on Fifth Avenue in 1922 that quickly became a favorite among the city’s glitterati.

But the original jeweler to the stars was Paul Flato, whose clients in the 1920s and 1930s included Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, and Vivien Leigh. “His



The first luxury jewelry catalog: Tiffany & Co.’s famous Blue Book

Pansy brooches in ruby, \$55,000, peridot and amethyst, \$22,000, and amethyst and yellow sapphire, \$26,000; Oscar Heyman, NYC; 212-593-0400; oscarheyman.com



Brothers Oscar and Nathan Heyman circa 1905–06

expressive, daring style contrasted with the conventional diamond designs available,” says Siegelson, “and they appealed to the height of fashionable society.”

Flato, who Jonas calls “one of the most imaginative jewelers in history,” opened a salon in New York in 1928 and an outpost in Los Angeles in 1937. The jeweler closed his business in 1943, but his figurative, often humorous style “reached its peak

in the 1930s when Adolph Kleaty, George Headley, and Fulco, Duke of Verdura, designed pieces for him,” says Siegelson.

The Great Depression stormed across the United States in 1929, but oddly enough, “the 1930s was an extraordinary time for diamond jewelry in America,” states Jonas. “New diamond mines had been discovered in South Africa, so everyone had stones. And Hollywood was huge in shaping the styles—Mae West and Gloria Swanson were avid collectors and wearers of jewelry.”

The Gemological Institute of America was founded in 1931, four years before competing jewelry trade publications *Jeweler’s Circular* and *The Keystone* merged to become *Jewelers Circular Keystone* (now *JCK*). In 1933, mass jewelry manufacturers adopted the lost wax process, an ancient craft that formerly had been used only in dentistry in America.

In 1932, Harry Winston made his indelible mark on the jewelry world with the debut of his first retail store in New York City. The firm would become known for its acquisitions of outsized gemstones, including the 45.52 ct. fancy blue Hope Diamond and the 601 ct. rough Lesotho Diamond, which was cleaved on live television in 1968.

McTeigue & McClelland's Tsvavorite Dandelion Bracelet with yellow diamonds, enamel, and 18k Bloomed Gold (\$12,000)



Buckle necklace by Fulco di Verdura for Paul Flato, circa 1935, with 566 rectangular brilliant-cut aquamarines and 39 oval-cut and fancy-cut rubies set in platinum; sold at Siegelson in New York City

The industry's trajectory of innovation—fueled by new stones, metals, and jewelry-making techniques—hit a roadblock in the early 1940s, at the start of World War II. "Everyone was pulling in their shirt strings and there were very limited materials available," says Jonas.

Stones from Europe and Asia were barred from coming into the United States and gold was rationed.

As a result, the popularity of stones native to South America, including aquamarines and tourmalines, soared. And the machinery of war began making its way into the jeweler's workshop: "A lot of the jewelry of the 1940s has a machine-type feel to it," says Jonas. "There are bracelets from that period that look like a row of tanks."

Because platinum was prohibited in jewelry by the U.S. government, which mandated that its use be relegated to war equipment, sterling silver was widely used during this era.

The 1950s ushered in a more upbeat national mood, and fashion designer Christian Dior's ultrafeminine New Look inspired a more whimsical period in jewelry, marked by huge gemstones and diamonds that were, for the first time,

being worn during the day. "It was a very prosperous time, and accordingly, the jewelry was gorgeous," says Jonas, who considers the era the apex of American jewelry design. "Manufacturers were copying the jewelry from the maharajas, so women were wearing these huge, fancy necklaces with big rubies and emeralds and rubies. It was all very glamorous."

Over the course of the decade, the introduction of various synthetic gems—including star sapphires, rubies, and the first successful production of synthetic diamonds at General Electric in 1954—contributed to the trend toward huge gemstone-laden looks.

The vogue for big rocks—along with whimsical interpretations of animals and other elements of nature—continued in the 1960s, fueled by Tiffany & Co.'s appointment of Jean Schlumberger, a French-born jewelry designer who had been working under his own shingle in New York since 1941. Beloved by royals and the fashion flock, Schlumberger's pieces favored natural motifs, including sea critters, flowers, and birds. His Bird on a Rock brooch, which depicts a bejeweled bird perched atop the yellow Tiffany Diamond, exemplifies his playful style.

THE AMERICAN JEWELRY REVIVAL

But the fervor for fine jewelry in the United States was poised to fade. Pricy gems were antithetical to the mindset of 1960s' free-loving hippies, and America's culture of



From sketch to (nearly) finished product: Oscar Heyman's gold, platinum, diamond, and enamel orchid brooch

of fine jewelry internationally for decades to come.

But while manufacturers in countries including India and China currently dominate the manufacturing of fine jewelry in the world on a volume basis, the U.S. market has seen the rise of boutique firms that use old-fashioned fabrication techniques to create collections in their

own workshops. Makers such as McTeigue & McClelland, Nicholas Varney, James de Givenchy, and Daniel Brush are creating jewelry that supersedes trends, using time-honored techniques to advance their own distinctive visions.

exportation and global manufacturing was taking root; more and more jewelry was being made in overseas factories. The market shifted away from quality and toward buying things that were produced in Hong Kong, "and only connoisseurs of craftsmanship could appreciate the difference between a hand-fabricated piece and something that was cheaply made," notes Walter McTeigue. The era did advance the use of semiprecious stones and non-traditional materials in both fine and costume jewelry. Pieces featuring rock crystal, wood, ivory, onyx, and coral were widely produced and worn. And cubic zirconia was first commercially marketed in 1976.

And, of course, Hollywood has fallen in love with craftsmanship all over again, as evidenced by the avalanche of press each celebrity's custom-made engagement ring inspires. Angelina Jolie's eye-popping ring, designed by husband Brad Pitt, made its maker, Beverly Hills, Calif.-based custom jeweler Robert Procop, a household name—at least for a few days. "I think it's a very exciting time for jewelry right now," says Jonas. "Hollywood started the big jewelry trend again in the 2000s, and there are some brilliant jewelry designers in the U.S." Of course, some of the industry's most lauded names are some of its oldest. Oscar Heyman, for one, still hand-fabricates jewelry in its New York City headquarters. "We're American-owned, American-made and we're still adhering to all the old principles," says Tom Heyman. "If there's a choice of making it a little better or a little cheaper, we go a little better. We've also always believed in hard work and rolling up our sleeves. And by dint of luck, we've survived." ■

In terms of craftsmanship and quality in fine jewelry, "the 1980s and 1990s are your dead years," says Jonas. Of course, big, bold stones and statement looks persevered, showcased in over-the-top TV shows like *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. The idea of heirloom-quality jewelry, however, wasn't prized on a mass scale. And the 1990s grunge era, with its emphasis on minimalism over opulence, certainly didn't help. Reacting to this dip in demand, many of the stalwart jewelry manufacturers in Newark and other Northeastern cities began swiftly closing their doors, cutting a clear path for foreign manufacturers to dominate the fabrication

own workshops. Makers such as McTeigue & McClelland, Nicholas Varney, James de Givenchy, and Daniel Brush are creating jewelry that supersedes trends, using time-honored techniques to advance their own distinctive visions.

And, of course, Hollywood has fallen in love with craftsmanship all over again, as evidenced by the avalanche of press each celebrity's custom-made engagement ring inspires. Angelina Jolie's eye-popping ring, designed by husband Brad Pitt, made its maker, Beverly Hills, Calif.-based custom jeweler Robert Procop, a household name—at least for a few days. "I think it's a very exciting time for jewelry right now," says Jonas. "Hollywood started the big jewelry trend again in the 2000s, and there are some brilliant jewelry designers in the U.S." Of course, some of the industry's most lauded names are some of its oldest. Oscar Heyman, for one, still hand-fabricates jewelry in its New York City headquarters. "We're American-owned, American-made and we're still adhering to all the old principles," says Tom Heyman. "If there's a choice of making it a little better or a little cheaper, we go a little better. We've also always believed in hard work and rolling up our sleeves. And by dint of luck, we've survived." ■