

ART MODERNE SILVER AND  
BLACK LACQUER BRACELET  
by JEAN DESPRÉS, Paris 1931

"Like many Art Moderne pieces, this bold and weighty bracelet needs to be tried on to fully appreciate it; it's much lighter feeling and more elegant on the wrist than you might suspect by looking at a photograph. Jean Després' aesthetic – called "bijoux-moteurs," or motor jewellery – was shaped by his time as a draftsman of airplane engines during World War I, and this was inspired by an engine gear. Someone on the street might not understand what you're wearing, but if you wore this to the Met Gala or a museum opening, curators would know exactly what it is – a masterpiece by the top jewellery designer of Art Moderne."



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Lee Siegelson, celebrated for his ultra-refined eye, presents a curated selection of outstanding Art Deco and Moderne masterpieces from his inimitable collection

# A COMFORTABLE LIVING

singular level of craftsmanship and attention to detail; designated a National Historic Landmark, it has been described as "one of the most enchanted architectural settings in America."

"I took it for granted when I was there," says Siegelson, "but in retrospect, being surrounded by the work of Saarinen, whose approach was holistic – he designed everything, from the buildings down to classroom chalk boards – had a profound impact on me. It's hard to quantify some things, but going to a school where everything around you is purposeful and intentional, where you are exposed to the best in craftsmanship, engineering and materials – that couldn't help but shape my love of superior design, and my appreciation for what goes into it."

His love is manifest in the museum quality vintage pieces that he collects and sells at Siegelson. Indeed, more than a few of them have been sold to or exhibited in museums, including New York's Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum; several of his pieces are included in the show *The Jazz Age: American Style in the 1920s* (on view until the 20th of August).

Siegelson's headquarters are in a warren of plush rooms inside an office building off Fifth Avenue. Physically, the office is just a block north of his father's old storefront, but the thrust of the business has made a quantum leap. "My dad's philosophy was to pile as much jewellery and as many diamonds as possible into the window to attract people," says Siegelson. That strategy resulted in the biggest store on 47th street, and, in 1992, just three weeks after he graduated from college, his father asked him if he might be interested in learning the trade. Herman had been diagnosed with lymphoma years before, and his health had begun to deteriorate rapidly. "Honestly, I could just as

His father was one of the most successful diamond dealers in New York City, and his grandfather, Louis, specialized in watches. You might think, then, that Lee Siegelson was destined to join the family business. In fact, the man who is now one of the world's most respected authorities on rare jewellery barely gave the subject a thought until he was 21.

Siegelson's parents divorced when he was three, and his mother remarried and moved to Michigan, which is where he grew up. His father, Herman, remained in New York, working in the Diamond District. "I would visit his store in the summers," says Siegelson, "and my most vivid memory is of waiting around, hoping another client wouldn't come in to keep my dad from doing something more fun with me."

Great design, however, was on his mind. Siegelson attended Michigan's Cranbrook Schools from middle through high school, and "more than anything that is what shaped my taste," he says. The school was founded in 1922 by George Booth, a man aggressively opposed to mass marketing and to industrialists like Henry Ford. It was Booth who hired Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen (father of Eero) to design much of the Cranbrook campus, and the result is a



ART MODERNE ROCK CRYSTAL  
AND DIAMOND BANGLE

by JULIETTE MOUTARD for René Boivin,  
Paris, 1934

"I love rock crystal jewellery – the floating diamond effect. It's definitely avant-garde for a lot of people. Juliette Moutard, unlike Suzanne Belperron, worked for Boivin her entire career, and her pieces tended to be extremely original and feminine. This bangle has all the characteristics of Moderne – it's bold, sleek, sculptural and large scale – but the variation of square and cut stones (there are a total of 157 diamonds) is very unique. In certain light, the carved flutes in the band enhance the light, giving a feeling of movement."

MODERNIST HAMMERED SILVER  
AND BONE NECKLACE

by JEAN DESPRÉS, Paris, circa 1930

"This Després necklace is super avant-garde, and it's pretty rare to find two of them [Siegelson owns a pair, the other in silver and blood jasper]. When I first bought them, I had them sitting on my desk – they were such beautiful objects, weighty and tactile like sculpture. There's no gem stone value here, but there's a real marketplace value for Després, and it never really goes down. He was widely collected in his lifetime – Josephine Baker loved his jewellery – and Andy Warhol and Michael Chow both bought his work. He made everything by hand, and what I love is that you can literally see his hand – his hammer marks – in the silver balls?"



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easily have gone to graduate school to study something completely unrelated,” says Siegelson. “I wasn’t super excited about the jewellery business.” But he decided to give it a try. What followed, he says, “was a trial by fire. I had less than two years to learn as much as I could from my father before he passed away in 1994. We worked non-stop – very late nights at the store, then, when he was in the hospital at the end, sitting by his bed, soaking up whatever I could.”

As it turned out, Siegelson did like the trade. But the frenetic pace of learning the ropes did not permit the development of something as esoteric as a personal aesthetic. That came slowly, in the years following, from reading books and 19th- and 20th-century jewellery catalogues, and from visiting the archives of the major houses. Though there was no mentor, per se, two people made a big impression early on. One was Murray Mondschein, known professionally as Fred Leighton, who singlehandedly revived America’s enthusiasm for estate jewellery. At his first jewellery show, in Monte Carlo, Siegelson ran into Mondschein, who was in raptures over a piece he was hoping to buy – the Princess Mathilde rose brooch, originally made for Napoleon Bonaparte’s niece in 1855. “Murray said, ‘It’s just the greatest piece of jewellery. It’s the size of my hand!’ I didn’t know what he was talking about, to tell you the truth,” Siegelson says with a laugh.

The piece, with its 250 carats of rose- and brilliant-cut diamonds, is unusual in that it is set in silver-topped gold, rather than gold or platinum. Mondschein managed to buy it and when Siegelson finally saw it, he thought, “That’s a piece of jewellery! It changed my understanding of what’s possible. The construction, the design, the workmanship were superb and the scale was wonderful – it’s the most beautiful flower ever created.” Later, he came to own the brooch, when Mondschein sold his private collection. “I remember coming home with it and I was just so excited.” Selling the brooch is one of Siegelson’s few regrets. “It should be in the Louvre.”

The other man was Joel A. Rosenthal, the New York-born designer behind the Paris atelier JAR, and the only living jeweller to have a retrospective at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I met him at a fair when I was 24,” says Siegelson. “He told me to drop by his shop if I came to Paris. Being the brash American, I did just that. I had no idea how important he was – I didn’t even make an appointment.”

Rosenthal, known as something of a gruff eccentric, could not have been more welcoming. “The first piece he put in my hand, I was, like, Wow! That is definitely another level of creativity and design and study,” says Siegelson. “I was humbled. There is so much emotion in his jewels.” As his expertise increased, he began to shift the business from retail to the sourcing of masterpieces. He is now considered one of the world’s top sources for rare gems and jewellery, though “even today I’m still evolving, developing my filter,” says Siegelson, who has been at the forefront of blurring the lines between art and design, and of finding one-of-a-kind pieces that remain wearable. In addition, he designs one-of-a-kind Siegelson pieces that highlight the perfection of a particular stone. Buying and living with jewellery, simply handling it and knowing when to let pieces go because a superior example has become available – those have been the most valuable lessons. “When you own it, you figure out a lot more,” says Siegelson. “My father definitely had a philosophy that I have too – he would rather have had the jewellery than the money from selling it. I sometimes have a client in mind when I buy a piece,” he adds, “but at the end of the day the client might not be interested in it. If that happens, you’re much better off if you feel strongly about it.”

The design of a piece is important, of course, but so is the craftsmanship. As he learned at Cranbrook, form must follow function. “You could have the most beautiful door in the world, but if it falls off its hinges, who cares?” says Siegelson. To his mind, the era that got everything right was Art Deco and its subset Art Moderne. “That was the golden age of jewellery.”

Siegelson prizes the history of every piece, and researches provenance assiduously. “One of the things I enjoy most about jewellery is learning what was going on at the time it was made,” he says. “The artists were not working in a vacuum.”

**T**he 1920s, when Deco and Moderne became popular, was a time of great change, when the modern was prized above all else. Everything – technology, design, the arts, fashion and jewellery – was in a state of revolution. Women, increasingly independent, were cropping their hair, wanting to move freely, to live freely, in mind and body, and to wear jewellery that expressed those aspirations. “If you ask the French, they will say they are responsible for Deco design,” says Siegelson, “but one of the things the Cooper Hewitt show is arguing, and I think there’s truth to it, is that they happened simultaneously in America.”

I sense that Siegelson is partial to Art Moderne, which emerged in the later years of Deco, and particularly the work of Jean Després. “There is definitely a sculptural attraction to Moderne pieces,” he says, “and his exude the period they come from.” Moderne – influenced by Cubism and the aesthetics of modern machinery – believed ornament was excessive. Després was absolutely opposed to mass production (ironic when you consider that much of his work was machine-inspired), and his one-of-a-kind pieces, more than a lot of Deco, look shockingly contemporary today. Nothing makes Siegelson happier than when a client remarks of a piece: “It looks so today.”

Three years ago, at the Paris Biennale, Cartier reintroduced some of their Art Deco jewellery. “People were coming up to me, not knowing that these were old designs, and saying, ‘Lee, what do you think? Those pieces are so chic, so revolutionary!’” Siegelson laughs at the memory. “‘Yes, I’d say to them, ‘they always were.’”

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANTS Karl Leitz and Jess Kirkham RETOUCHING Anonymous Retouch

ART MODERNE DIAMOND AND  
BLACK ENAMEL CUFF BRACELET,  
WITH REMOVABLE CLIP BROOCHES  
by MAUBOUSSIN, Paris, circa 1936

“At this point, in the late 30s, the Great Depression had hit and clothing was getting more conservative. Art Moderne jewellery like this would have had to work with more tailored clothing and conservative necklines. This kind of piece was great because it was so versatile, moving easily from day to night; the diamond clips can be removed to wear as brooches on a neckline or as accessories in your hair. The pattern of the clips is geometric and strong, but the diamonds make it more feminine. I like diamonds, but there has to be a sense of design, and the craftsmanship here is amazing. I think this looks as chic and young and wearable as it did in 1936.”

ART DECO DIAMOND,  
NATURAL PEARL, EMERALD  
AND ONYX BANGLE

by CARTIER, Paris, circa 1925

"Bangles are one of my favourite shapes because they're strong and sculptural and have a real weight to them. This one is a total work of art – Art Deco with a hint of Art Moderne. The lacquer base was being used by the great furniture makers of the time, like Jean Dunand, and this would be Cartier being aware of that. It's also loosely influenced by Indian design, particularly the emeralds and the three-leafed diamond foliate forms. The best of Cartier is when they step into someone else's world or culture and do it in the French style. A lot of houses did that but no one did it as well as they did – no one brought the same depth of craftsmanship or delicacy of design or overall refinement. Note the thoughtful engineering – the two terminals with button-shaped pearls that flip back, making it easier for a woman to slip it on her wrist. Providing this fits you, it's an incredibly wearable piece. I don't think you'll find anyone, in culture, design or art who would look at this and say, 'I don't like your bracelet.'"



ART MODERNE SILVER NECKLACE  
by JEAN DESPRÉS, circa 1935

"Després was part of the Union des Artistes Modernes, created in 1929. It numbered about 20 artists, including jewellers Raymond Templier, Jean Dunand, Gérard Sandoz and Georges and Jean Fouquet. They produced conceptual jewellery with modest materials, like this necklace, with its machine-inspired geometric links mounted in silver. Després preferred to work in silver, and I love how the oxidized and polished areas play off each other, creating volume and contrast. The necklace – complex, pure and perfect in terms of metal work – is so sculptural that, in the wrong context, it might confuse people. It's so important the way things are shown and put together; I see this with a very simple black gown or even a motorcycle jacket."

ART DECO PLATINUM, LAPIS LAZULI, DIAMOND AND ENAMEL PENDANT EARRINGS  
by BOUCHERON, Paris, circa 1925

“There are wonderful examples of American Art Deco jewellery, but the design could be rigid. The French had a softness that I find very appealing, which you can see in these earrings. In one sense they are quite simple, but the proportions are spectacular. Proportion is so important, and there has to be a harmony to it, whether you are talking about furniture, architecture, clothing or jewellery. The sensual briolette-shaped lapis lazuli stone combined with the diamonds is a very Art Deco style. Boucheron was a smaller atelier than Cartier, working at the same time. This is an example of when they got it just right.”



ART MODERNE GOLD AND BONE  
TRANCHE CUFF BRACELET  
by SUZANNE BELPERRON and  
JEANNE BOIVIN for René Boivin,  
Paris, 1931

“Jeanne Boivin was the sister of the fashion designer Paul Poiret, and she is famous for bold, sculptural work. She hired many female designers, among them Suzanne Belperron, who would go on to have an amazing career of her own, becoming a favourite of some of the most discerning jewellery lovers of the time – the Duchess of Windsor, Daisy Fellowes and Diana Vreeland. This is a collaboration between the two, and the curves are what attract me; it’s roundness screams Art Moderne. Maybe, too, the curvaceousness has to do with two women designing it. Boivin looked at jewellery as art, and the story goes that this tranche was inspired by a slice of melon she was eating, with the circular discs of gold suggesting the texture of the rind.”

All jewellery at SIEGELSON, NEW YORK

