

HAUTE JOAILLERIE

LEE SIEGELSON

Treasure Hunter

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English translation by Olivier Delers for Siegelson



He is the most respected of all the precious stones and high jewelry dealers. Lee Siegelson is more than a collector of the best jewelry artists. He is searching for the best piece, that which constitutes a turning point in the history of a company.

Siegelson is a name that people quietly acknowledge as a sign of quality in the world of high jewelry. There are those who know, and the others. But those who know him all

agree that Lee Siegelson is currently the most important dealer of precious stones and vintage jewels.

He was born among jewels and stones, but that has never been a guarantee of taste; he developed his sense of style himself. It is more something that he acquired than something that he was born with. The company has been around for about a hundred years, in New York, and Lee Siegelson is the third generation. "I started working in 1992, my father passed away in 1994, and I

began directing the company at that time. I knew virtually nothing. Since then, I have followed my own way, found my own path, by purchasing what I liked." Jewels for which balance is present in all aspects, the perfect alliance between design and execution, between stones and technique. Price is not the main criterion, which is a paradox for a dealer. Lee Siegelson talks about jewels in the same way a storyteller would and it is easy to be carried away by his tales.

While he is surrounded by jewels, he does not wear any. Not even a watch: "I am the perfect archetype of the jeweler who is unable to get his watch fixed, or who leaves it in a drawer because the bracelet is broken. In short, I have the same problems as everyone else."

Perhaps not *everyone* else. Not everyone will have the chance to see, even once in their lives, a necklace that belonged to the Duchess of Windsor, to buy the rock crystal ring set with a diamond that

Lee Siegelson: "What matters when you hold a piece of jewelry is the emotion. Do you feel something or not? Would you wear it? Would you like to own it? That is the question..."



Art Deco necklace with engraved emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds, **Cartier Paris, 1925**, from the collection of Lillian S. Timken.

Suzanne Belperron designed for herself, or to have owned the Vanderbilt Rose, a beautiful historic brooch that belonged to Mathilde Bonaparte.

Le Temps: Your job is a sort of treasure hunt. What do you hunt?

Lee Siegelson: Whatever their area of expertise, collectors must give themselves the means to buy what they consider to be the best on the market. The unique characteristics of a piece, its perfection, that is what I am looking for. Since it is a subjective idea, I try to find the most beautiful jewels that companies like Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Boucheron, or Bulgari have created over the years. Pieces signed by great designers, or jewels which have had a role in the way society has changed and which have broken with tradition. Take a Suzanne Belperron piece, for instance. Her style was her signature. Today, everyone loves her, but we forget that at the time, some thought her work was revolting. Only a few knowledgeable collectors, like the Duchess of Windsor, or Daisy Fellowes in particular, understood her work. Success and taste do not always go hand in hand. She had both.

How do you recognize pieces that have the potential to be a turning point in the history of high-jewelry?

They are the ones which were created with no compromise,

like so many masterpieces. We see the purest form imaginable. Everything is intentional, there are no mistakes. The more you look at the object, the more you understand why the creator chose these particular stones, why and how the jeweler made it. It is this level of quality that I try to acquire and sell. I do not have another way of judging jewels. It has nothing to do with price: all my pieces are at the same level, whether they are worth millions or a few thousand dollars. Take this Cartier manchette (below) made in the 1930s: even if it has no stones, you can feel the power of the design. This bracelet could have been created today: it is timeless.

If I understand your approach correctly, the jewels that you offer do not say "I am expensive" but simply "I am beautiful"?

Exactly. It is in this way that my approach is different. For older jewels, buyers would like to have a special formula to know what to buy or not. They could then decide, for instance, only to buy pieces signed by Cartier from the 1920s and 1930s. But even if the company was extraordinarily creative in that period, there are pieces—I will not tell you who designed them—that you would not even look at.

Which criteria do you use?

What must be selected are jewels which bring together extraordinary design, wonderful



know-how (the technical solutions found to hinge the piece, to set the stones), and a perfect sense of proportion. Proportion is crucial. Emotion as well. At that time, jewelers would work closely with designers. They really were a team looking for perfection in the proportion as well as in the emotion. The pieces they created are particularly enticing. You realize that they do not respect the rules of jewelry of our time but in an intangible way. The proportions are different. This is where the French genius of that period resides. The artisan and his or her sense of proportion gave a soul to the piece. These are underestimated elements; today, instead of talking of emotion, it is always about how much time it has taken the artisan to create a piece. But that's not the question. All that

matters, after all, is not to know whether it took a year to create an object, but whether it is beautiful!

Do you think that this characteristic of French jewelers of the first half of the twentieth century has been lost in the past decades?

The French have a sensibility, a delicate touch, a certain taste, a sense of proportion, and a know-how that made them unique, and that is difficult to find today. Paris was bathed in a particular atmosphere and aesthetic. Wonderful pieces were made at Cartier in New York, for instance, but they could not be compared with the ones made at Cartier in Paris.

Last year, at the Paris Biennale des antiquaires, you decided to dedicate an entire display case to the American jeweler Paul Flato.

This is a telling example. Look at this jewel (photo on page 7, bottom): I think that it is one of the most important pieces of American design in the twentieth century. It is the embodiment of Hollywood. It was designed for Linda Porter, Cole Porter's wife. Paul Flato was thought of as "the jeweler of the stars." From 1935 to 1940, all the stars bought jewels signed by him. They would go out to events wearing their own sets, were photographed buying them, they loved them so much that they would wear them on film sets. Nowadays, on the red carpet, stars wear jewels that do not belong to them. They do

not wear them because they love them, but because they were paid to do so, or because they were loaned to them. It was different for actresses in Paul Flato's era, since they knew that their collection was going to be studied, scrutinized, commented on—and they loved wearing their jewels.

Talking about actresses who loved their jewels, did you attend the auction of Elizabeth Taylor's jewels in December 2011?

Yes, I was there. That auction was a unique event. Elizabeth Taylor had collected and amassed so many gems! She had a true love affair with her jewels. The different lots were sold for incredible prices. I must confess that the 1960s and 1970s are not my favorite period for jewelry. What matters to me, first and foremost, is design. Provenance comes second. Bulgari bought back a number of pieces, and Cartier did as well. For these companies, it was also a way to prove to their clients that the jewels that they bought would stand the test of time, like all the other pieces made by the company before them. But will all the jewels created today find a place in salons and auctions in 50 years? It is hard to tell...

It is possible for people who do not belong to the profession to understand that they are looking at a truly exceptional piece, when it happens.

Yes, it's something that you feel. Look at this necklace (below), it is only made of three large stones. Its history began when someone put them on a table and decided to place one here, the other one there, and the last one in this way. Even if I spent an entire day trying to find a different configuration, I know I would not find it. It's like an architectural masterpiece. I am showing this piece because it is a simple necklace with three stones, but the design is elegant, the shape of the stones is beautiful, their color powerful, and the proportions harmonious; the execution is perfect. Nowadays, some are willing to spend millions on a piece that violates these principles. Still, even if you buy a jewel for its investment value, at some point, it will have to be worn. If a valuable stone can be an indication of the size of its owner's bank account, it says nothing about his or her taste, style, or elegance.



Art Moderne bracelet in silver and gold, **Cartier, 1930**.



Ring in platinum set with a Golconda diamond of 33.03 carats, **Siegelson**.



Art Deco Sautoir with aquamarines, sapphires, and diamonds, **Cartier London 1929**.

Le MET accueille les bijoux de JAR

Your company is a hundred years old. In the past, companies like Cartier or Bulgari, for instance, did not buy back their own creations to enrich their private collection. It is a new phenomenon, and a new form of competition. Has the market become more difficult?

Sometimes, we are looking for the same things, sometimes not. What is really exciting with Cartier is that they have managed to build the best possible collection. That company, more than any other, has managed to retrace its history through exceptional, but carefully selected pieces. They fill what is missing, little by little, year after year. They sometimes say no to a beautiful piece because it is not one of their priorities. Which means that it gives a dealer like me a wonderful opportunity to buy.

Have you ever regretted selling a jewel?

Yes, one piece in particular... I have also missed a jewel because I enjoyed admiring it or because I was proud to own that rare piece and to have the chance to show it. But I am first and foremost a stone and jewelry dealer. I am not a museum. Selling is my job.

You said one piece in particular. Can I ask you which one?

The Vanderbilt Rose. A diamond brooch designed by Theodore Fester in 1855 for the Princess Mathilde Bonaparte. Her collection surfaced on the market in 1902. This rose-shaped brooch, almost the size of a hand, is set with rose-cut diamonds coming from an old mine in Brazil. In the nineteenth century, every jeweler was making flowers. But, in my mind, this is the most beautiful flower ever created. It is a piece that should be in the Louvre. I should have bought it back. It's only after selling it that I realized what it meant...

Are there contemporary jewelers whose creations have the power to "stand the test of time," as you say?

Yes, Joel Rosenthal (see opposite). It does not matter if you like each of his designs. There is so much emotion in his jewels! I know that we will still admire them in 50 years. The first time that I met Joel Rosenthal I was 24 years old. I shook his hand, he told me who he was, and he invited me to meet with him. I did not even know how important he was. I rang his doorbell and

when he welcomed me, he put something in my hands. I was immediately struck by the uncommon aesthetics of that object. He is by far the man who has influenced contemporary designers the most.

Of all of the jewels that you have bought and sold, is there one that brought you a unique emotion?

In 1960, the collection of the American heiress, Lillian S. Timken, was auctioned by Parke-Bernet [the gallery was bought in 1964 by Sotheby's]. This woman owned what I have always considered to be the best collection of Art Deco jewels. By looking at the original auction catalog, page after page, whether it was jewels by Cartier, Chaumet, Van Cleef & Arpels, Boucheron, or just stones by themselves, I could see everything that I was looking for, everything that I dreamed of in aesthetic terms. A necklace, in particular, had caught my attention. I even used the photograph as my desktop wallpaper. It was part of my daily life. Then, one day, someone contacted me to tell me that they had a Cartier necklace to show me. The person came with a single slide. As soon as I put the slide under the light, I saw that it was the necklace on my desktop wallpaper. I bought it without even asking to see the jewel in person. Of course, I had a lot of trust in the person who was presenting it to me. For me, this necklace represents the best of that period. All the companies were influenced by the countries where they were doing business, Cartier did a wonderful job absorbing Indian culture and incorporating it in its French aesthetic.

What qualities must a jewel have in order to touch you?

Even when a jewel has the right provenance and was made by a renowned artist with interesting technique and an original way of using the material, in the end it can simply be not beautiful! That is why there is no perfect formula. What matters, when you hold a piece, when you move it and look at it, is emotion. Does the jewel touch you or not? Would you wear it? Would you like to own it? That is the question...



Joël Arthur Rosenthal est le joaillier le plus influent et le plus discret qui soit. Le Metropolitan Museum of Art lui dédie une exposition. Un événement.

JAR, trois lettres seulement pour celui qui est considéré comme le plus grand des

joailliers de notre époque. Deux consonnes et une voyelle que tous les collectionneurs et les passionnés de haute joaillerie prononcent comme s'il s'agissait d'un code secret leur permettant de reconnaître les initiés. JAR pour Joël Arthur Rosenthal.

L'homme est né dans le Bronx, mais a su en sortir. Il a étudié l'histoire de l'art et la philosophie à Harvard, puis en 1966 est arrivé à Paris. C'est là qu'il a rencontré son alter ego, Pierre Jeannet, avec qui il a écumé les antiquaires, les musées, les galeries d'art et ouvert sa première boutique de broderie rue de l'Université. Mais peindre des fleurs sur des canevases ne lui suffisait pas: il voulait les dessiner avec des pierres précieuses. La boutique n'aura vécu que onze mois.

En 1976, Joël Rosenthal retourne à New York où il travaille pour Bulgari. Mais il revient à Paris en 1978 avec une seule idée en tête: ouvrir sa propre maison sous ses initiales: JAR. Il s'installe place Vendôme. La particularité de sa boutique, c'est qu'on doit la connaître pour la reconnaître. Pas de bijou en vitrine. Pas d'enseigne. Rien. Il faut sonner et si l'on a la chance d'être reconnu, on peut entrer. Quant à pouvoir acheter une pièce, c'est encore une autre aventure. Joël Rosenthal est l'homme le plus libre du monde. Il s'est offert le luxe de choisir depuis la première

pièce jusqu'à la femme qui portera le bijou.

Une fois à l'intérieur, c'est ici, dans une petite pièce sombre, que l'on découvre l'art de JAR. Le maître de maison ne supporte guère les commentaires, surtout s'ils sont élogieux. Alors on regarde en silence. Joël Rosenthal est un peintre dont les multiples touches de couleurs seraient des pierres précieuses ou fines. Ses roses semblent avoir écloso, là, juste sous nos yeux, ses papillons vont sans doute s'envoler si l'on n'y prend garde. La nature sous ses doigts est à la fois magnifiée et respectée pour ce qu'elle a de plus magique. Aucune matière ne lui fait peur. Il a réintroduit l'argent noirci dans la haute joaillerie, il use du platine ou de l'aluminium indifféremment.

C'est la première fois que le MET accueille un designer de haute joaillerie vivant. Au total: 400 pièces sont présentées. Un événement à la hauteur du talent de ce magicien des couleurs. **I.Ce.**

Jewels by Jar, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, jusqu'au 9 mars 2014. www.metmuseum.org

PUBLICITÉ



Necklace in the form of a belt pavé-set with aquamarines and rubies, designed by Duke Fulco di Verdura for Paul Flato, New York, 1935.

Villeret Collection



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