

DEPARTURES

Home » Fashion » May/June-2005 » All That Glitters » [Urban Grit & Vintage Glitz](#)

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Urban Grit & Vintage Glitz

By Lynn Yaeger
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An extremely opinionated, highly selective, and potentially fabulous guide to shopping for antique jewelry on New York's 47th Street.

Shopping on 47th Street is about the hunt—the adventure," Ronald Kawitzky tells me as we chat in his booth in the heart of New York's Diamond District. As an antique-jewelry devotee, I have haunted these corridors for years, joining the throngs: couples in search of

engagement rings, mysterious characters toting briefcases that just might be crammed with cash, and an international coterie of collectors passing through searching for rarities.

The Diamond District—one solid block of Manhattan's West 47th Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues—is a crowded strip of showrooms called exchanges. For decades, about 1,000 independent dealers of vintage and contemporary jewelry have set up booths with everything from pedestrian tennis bracelets to centuries-old chokers.

When I venture to suggest to Kawitzky, one of a handful of dealers on the street I have come to trust, that transactions here, are, well, as raffish as they are sophisticated, he laughs. "I happen to have boxes, but some dealers just throw the stuff in plastic bags," he says. The stuff in question being 18th-century rose-cut diamond rings, Edwardian brooches, or emerald-encrusted Art Deco bracelets. The pieces sold here can sometimes be as exquisite as any found in antiques shops on Madison Avenue and Paris's Faubourg St.-Honoré, but the salespeople usually don't wrap them up for you in pretty blue bags or red velvet pouches, nor do they speak to you in hushed tones and seat you on a lushly upholstered bench as you eye the merchandise. Instead, 47th Street offers jewelry shoppers a different type of fringe benefit. As with the very best flea market, you never know *what* will show up; the stock is ever-changing, goods drifting from attic to showcase with barely a middleman in sight.

I may be a rather rabid fan, but I'm certainly not alone. James Taffin de Givenchy, a contemporary jeweler with a Madison Avenue atelier who has a clientele of chic socialites, nearly bursts with enthusiasm when he's asked about 47th Street. "It's the center of the universe for antique jewelry and raw stones, even better than a trip to India!" he proclaims. "Look around and you will see specialists from Geneva and London auction houses here to fill up their sales." Givenchy urges first-time visitors not to just patronize stations with window displays but to walk to the back of the exchanges, where tiny nondescript booths may harbor something very special. (I can personally vouch for this advice. I once found a rare Edwardian watch clasp, a piece I'd been seeking for years, in a dusty back booth that contained little else.)

The diamond district is essentially a wholesale market. Dealers come for merchandise they intend to sell at retail, so prices can be lower than they would be at formal shops. At Spencer & Jules (another regular stop on my circuit), Satinder Sood is perfectly content to let me play with a stunningly elaborate late-18th-century parure—a brooch, earrings, and a necklace of enamel, aquamarine, and topaz stones—so pristine it appears to have been worn one or two times in the last 200-odd years. "It's a wholesale state of mind here," Sood shrugs, explaining why he would offer me the same price (\$22,000) that he would the loftiest Madison Avenue or Bond Street dealer. However, I don't want a \$22,000 parure today. Instead, I home in on a diamond fox pin from the twenties, which at \$2,000 seems like a deal to me.

Shopping 47th Street does take some getting used to. Commerce is usually conducted out in the open, your discussions invariably interrupted by a steady stream of itinerant sellers who wander around the stalls pulling jewelry—a lot of it unspeakable junk, yes, but some of it incredibly beautiful—out of humble plastic sandwich bags. As you wend your way from exchange to exchange, from Fifth to Sixth Avenue, you are assaulted by voices—some polite, some not. "Psst, I have diamonds!" a voice whispers from behind a counter. "Let me make you happy!" a young man pleads as you pass booths where old women are stringing pearls and men are bathed in the blue light of welding torches.

Still, I am more than happy to spend a languid afternoon chatting with Kawitzky and Gray Boone, who share a space together. Over the years I have grown particularly friendly with this duo, not only because I trust their eye and ethical standards but also because I've learned so much about jewelry just by being around them. The pair love to teach: They're (almost) as delighted explaining the history of Whitby jet or Pinchbeck as they are clinching a major transaction. These are the kinds of relationships that develop on the street, and to many they are the most valuable currency. When I ask Kawitzky how lay buyers can tell if they are getting their money's worth and are not being fobbed off with reproductions, he simply answers, "Trust your dealer." What about bargaining? I ask tentatively, since the street does hold a rather indisputable horse-tradinglike atmosphere. "There's always room for discussion." He smiles.

Sometimes you'll stumble upon a piece that has survived in its original box. Kawitzky shows me a circa 1870 enamel pendant in its fitted coffer, which reads TIFFANY, AVENUE DE L'OPERA. The pendant is decorated with a Fontenay enamel depicting Terpsichore (the Muse of dancing and choral song) strumming a lyre; it costs \$18,000. I pass on it but gladly fork over \$650 for a heavily hallmarked mid-19th-century ring on which MIZPAH is written in diamonds, a common 19th-century acronym meaning "May God watch over you when we are apart."

"This is a happy business!" Boone chimes in, looking up from a 19th-century necklace composed of a trio of angelskin coral cherub cameos. Boone thinks the cameos were souvenirs of a Grand Tour, brought back to England and set as jewelry. Seeing those little faces reminds me of another item I've been coveting for some time: a locket that spells out "baby" in diamonds. Boone pulls down from a shelf a battered metal file box containing a list of customers' wishes and adds "Lynn—baby" to it. She has a far better chance of turning it up than I do since she has access to house and estate sales that the average person doesn't know about. In any case, "baby" lockets, she informs me, are hardly the rage right now. Customers, she reports, want chandelier earrings and Edwardian engagement rings with big center stones; the latter are a real challenge for dealers because they are so rare.

I am not the only person who enjoys whiling away an afternoon in the Diamond District. Writer Susan Braudy has been cruising the street for at least 25 years—and says she used to see Andy Warhol shopping here all the time. "He would just buy, buy, buy! I think of it as a great treasure chest." At any given time Braudy has a bauble or two on hold, which gives her an excuse to make weekly visits to pay off the balance. "You see things here," she says, "that you just can't get anyplace else." But even for a pro like Braudy there is, inevitably, the one that got away: She still mourns the ring that purportedly belonged to one of Queen Anne's handmaidens and was snatched from her clutches by a tipsy Irishman with a title.

Kawitzky and Boone have been on 47th Street for about a decade; Diane Krumholz, who has a booth and window display down the block from them in the Midtown Jewelry Exchange (and is another of my trusted favorites), has spent half a century here. Her business bears the name of its founder, her late mother Mary Finkelstein. "We're the old-timers," she tells me.

When I first came to the street about 20 years ago, I was mesmerized by Finkelstein's window and its velvet trays crammed with sprays of dark Victorian mine-cut diamonds. Today Krumholz shows me a forties Tiffany floral brooch incorporating coral, turquoise, and diamonds, with one branch that softly sways—a feature known as *en tremblant*—for a cool \$22,000.

Trembling a bit myself by now, I dash up the street to see what's new—or more accurately, old—at Eric Originals & Antiques. When I ask Marc Haziza, the owner behind the counter, to show me something incredible, he pulls out a mid-19th-century necklace with 48 carats of diamonds, a detachable six-carat diamond drop, and a \$98,750 price tag. "Will you take \$98,000?" I joke. I ask if there has been serious interest in the piece and he says, "It's been out on memo a few times." In other words, it has been loaned to potential buyers with nothing but their signature and reputation as collateral.

I was stunned at first by this practice. About two years ago Kawitzky suggested that I take home over Labor Day weekend a \$2,400 19th-century emerald and diamond brooch that spelled out "Milano," wear it around, and then either bring him the money or return the jewelry. I was surprised because at that point I had never done any real business with him and he had no particular reason to trust me. But landing on a handshake is part of the street's ethic. (As it turned out, I did buy the pin, so I guess he knew what he was doing.)

I linger a little longer with Haziza. He presents to me a signed Cartier piece, halfway between a starburst and a snowflake, with a turquoise center and a surfeit of diamonds—I start to feel faint. He suggests I repair to the Diamond Dairy, a glassed-in coffee shop on the second floor, overlooking the exchange. The Diamond Dairy is an institution on the street almost qualifying as an antique. "Order the blintzes," Haziza advises.

My last visit this afternoon is to Stephen Herdemian, perhaps the most egalitarian dealer on my list. A 25-year Edwardian wristwatch, Herdemian carries everything from a 1927 class ring to a vintage-and-diamond Edwardian wristwatch. In fact, Herdemian sold me the ring I wear almost every day, a ruby-and-diamond gypsy—which means the stones are set deep in the gold—that I purchased for \$1,100 a few years ago. (It would now cost at least double that on the open market.) I bring up the practice of letting customers take items home on spec, and he laughs and tells me an ongoing joke on the street: "If someone in the business asks for ten bucks out of your wallet you'd say no, but let them have a \$30,000 bracelet? No problem!"

It's been a long day, but as usual I have a hard time pulling myself away. The diamond-shaped lampposts just outside the window are glowing in the early-evening dusk. Herdemian sums up what makes treasure hunting here so magical: "Just when you think you've seen the most beautiful example of something—oh my God, there'll never be another antique bracelet or necklace or ring as good as this one—some guy comes along and reaches into a ratty bag and there it is. Your jaw drops and you're amazed."

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