

# David Webb The Legacy Lives On

Dressing society and defining American jewelry

By BETH BERNSTEIN

In the summer of 2013, months before the opening of David Webb retrospective on Jan 16, 2014 (David Webb: Society Jewels, through April 2014 at The Norton Museum of Art in Palm Beach), I had the treat of being invited to the David Webb atelier for a tour of the workshop, preview and discussion about the upcoming exhibition. Whisked up from the boutique on the ground floor to an elevator, which opened to the showroom and the behind the scenes workshop—I was transported to a fantastical world where culture, history and celebrity meet.

Since David Webb opened his first shop on East 57th street in 1950, all pieces still continue to be produced on his premises. Co-owner Mark Emanuel—who along with Sima Ghadadian and Robert Sadian, acquired the company in 2010 and moved the business to its newest location at 942 Madison Avenue—spoke enthusiastically about the expansion of the company, the archives: 80,000 original molds and over 40,000 color pencil sketches. I met the foreman and the jewelers, many who have been there at least since the 1970s, who still retain and display reverence for the technique and legacy of this eponymous house.

There were 18K gold pieces that were cast and hand-hammered and laid out to be connected into a bib style necklace akin to body armor. “Do you see yourself wearing this?” Emanuel asked. I answered that it might be slightly more of an overstatement than statement for my small chest, but I then immediately saw a color drawing of a pair of ruby, diamond and emerald earrings and said, “I would definitely wear those.” Turns out it was an original sketch of a pair of earrings Jackie Kennedy owned that were being recreated for the new collection. I went on to covet a carved emerald and gold necklace that was being pieced together. “This is very similar to one The Duchess of Windsor owned,” Emanuel explained. “We are changing the shape of the center stone and some of the other details,” he continued.



David Webb Zebra Bracelet with diamonds, rubies, black and white enamel, set in 18K yellow gold and platinum



David Webb diamond and white enamel cuffs, set in 18K yellow gold and platinum

Born in North Carolina in 1925, Webb moved to New York in the early 1940s to pursue his passion for jewelry. His pieces were worn by silver screen actresses of the early to mid sixties in sweeping, weepy melodramas: Susan Hayward in “Backstreet”, Lana Turner in “Portrait in Black” and later on in “Madame X” and Doris Day in “Midnight Lace”. He captured the essence of the characters these actresses portrayed in film and went on to help define the look of two decades in American cultural history. He won the hearts of renown women including Jackie Kennedy, The Duchess of Windsor, Diana Vreeland, Elizabeth Taylor, Nan Kempner, Gloria Vanderbilt and a veritable roster of who’s who of social and style fame. His society clientele that wintered in Palm Beach led to his opening at Worth Avenue salon in the early 1960s through 1982, which is why the venue for his retrospective is so be-fitting.

After my tour, while trying on pieces that would be on display, I met David Albrecht, the curator of the exhibition and Hope Alswang, the director of The Norton Museum of Art in Palm Beach. The exhibit showcases 80 pieces from the Webb archives and private collectors as well as comprehensive view of the designs. It includes archival sketches, Vogue layouts featuring Lauren Hutton and Marisa Berenson shot by Irving Penn wearing Webb’s jewelry and photos of his broad range of celebrity clients. “We have mounted this show to display the breadth and context of Webb’s work.” Alswang explained.

“Webb captured the cultural revolution of the later sixties and seventies as well as creating official gifts for The White House.” Albrecht explains, “I see 1968 as his turning point, when all his major influences came into play—his travels and mixing elements of distant lands, his play of earlier Cartier animals of the twenties and Chanel costume jewelry which he re-imagined in the most exquisite of materials. His passion for exoticism and recapturing the Art Deco movement for which he had a true affinity, always with his distinctive wit and humor and his own very unique and bold aesthetic. This is why so many of the important women of that time period adopted him as their jeweler.”

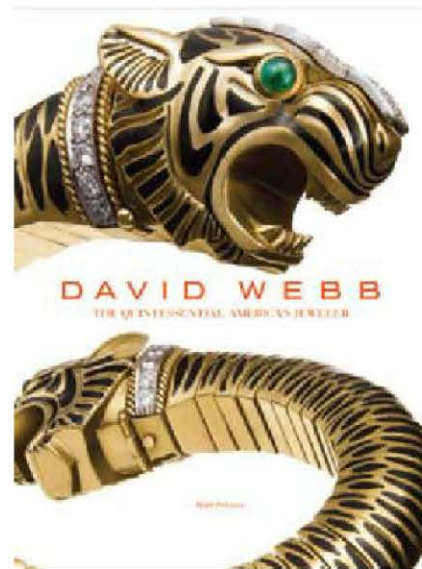
Alswang adds to these thoughts. “David Webb looked at the hippie styles of the sixties and the disco styles of the seventies and translates this ‘street style’ into high-end luxury. He chose to do it in a freewheeling, playful, stylized but not ladylike way that says I want to be seen! This isn’t jewelry that is part of a women’s outfit—it is what your outfit should be built around. It sets the stage for the powerful women to become clients and friends.”

Webb, who died young in 1975 at age 50, remains an inspiration for the jewelry designers and collectors today. His bold, powerful and colorful style and technique, which sometimes included 18 steps in production—represented the spirit and mood of the modern customer. He pioneered the way for jewelers who fulfill the desire for one-of-a-kind pieces that are as much art as they are jewelry and that meld imagination with heart, soul and intriguing motifs and materials. David Webb is as groundbreaking today as he was throughout his prime.

*An accompanying book by Ruth Peltason “David Webb: The Quintessential American Jeweler” (Assouline) is available.*



Nautilus Shell Evening box with diamonds set in 18K yellow gold and platinum. Clam Shell Evening box with diamonds and emerald, set in 18K yellow gold and platinum. Log Evening Box with diamonds, set in 18K yellow gold and platinum. Compact with diamonds set in 18K yellow gold and platinum.



David Webb book jacket cover



David Webb diamond, turquoise and black enamel cuff set in 18K yellow gold and platinum