



Metier SF mixes a Harwell Godfrey black onyx heart pendant with Georgian and Victorian jewels.

How to mix modern and vintage jewelry in your store

Having a stylized selection of pieces from both past and present periods makes for fresh looks and successful sales.

BY BETH BERNSTEIN

Curating a mix of contemporary and antique or vintage pieces is a rising trend at modern fine-jewelry stores, and it's turning shop owners into jewelry mixologists who cater to the growing number of women seeking rare pieces with style, character and meaning. Today, more designers are borrowing elements, symbolism and motifs from historical jewelry, while collectors are continually drawn to the storied and sustainable nature of authentic antique and vintage pieces. For retailers, stocking the best of both worlds can lead to multiple sales as clients build jewelry wardrobes that combine past and present styles.

DOING THE LEGWORK

Up until recently, retailers were keeping separate estate departments as a catch-all for antique (over 100 years old) and vintage (from about the 1930s to the early 1980s) jewelry. They saw these departments as catering to a different customer base than their contemporary

collections. However, over the past 10 to 20 years, smaller independent shops with an individualistic vibe have opted to merge the displays, integrating antique and vintage items into their more modern fare. They've joined the Instagram jewelry explosion, with posts illustrating how to combine old and new pieces for one-of-a-kind looks.

"Before you can decide on the periods of antique/estate jewelry, whether it fits into your store's aesthetic, you need to know your customer, what mix is going to work in terms of selection and pricing, and where you are going to find and buy your inventory," says Jim Rosenheim, the second-generation owner of Tiny Jewel Box in Washington, DC. Rosenheim's story is somewhat the reverse of the current trend: He took over his parents' 40-year-old estate jewelry shop and began adding contemporary artisans. "When you decide to carry antique/vintage jewelry, you will have to educate yourself on the time periods and the pricing, but the other side of that coin is how captivating and alluring

the romance and history of the pieces from different centuries can be."

Rosenheim says he does best with smaller Edwardian and Art Deco items, as they are easier to wear and understand, and tend to mix well with the modern jewelers he features. The important thing, he advises, is to "establish a selection that's consistent in quality and originality in both categories of jewelry."

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

For more than 20 years, Sheri Evans and Trina Papini of Metier SF in San Francisco, California, have been blending jewelry from Georgian through modern times. "We love contrast and find it most interesting when we combine minimal with ornate, shiny and new with rough-hewn and handmade," says Evans. "If you are going to get into mixing past and present, you shouldn't go for jewelry that is too fussy or overly feminine. We tend to buy mostly Art Deco, Georgian and Victorian that can look surprisingly current when combined in unexpected ways. We view designer collections and antique/vintage with the same selective eye and tend to buy pieces with unifying elements, allowing the pieces to coexist effortlessly in our clients' jewelry wardrobes."

A common denominator is often symbolism, she continues. "Contemporary ►

Metier SF mixes Gabriella Kiss rings with rings spanning the Georgian, Victorian, Arts & Crafts and mid-century modern periods.



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collections and antique jewelry that are infused with meaning are our best sellers. What woman can't relate to motifs that represent love, luck and protection?" She cites Gabriella Kiss's sculptural, pared-down, naturalistic motifs and eye engravings as styles that work with the more intricate pieces of the Victorian or Edwardian eras.

Marla Aaron is another designer whose work dialogues well with Metier's estate jewelry. Aaron's ubiquitous lock, a play on the carabiner clip — which Tiffany & Co., among others, has previously used for key chains — has become a must-have accessory. It comes in multiple shapes and sizes, with and without gemstones.

"Aaron's locks function in the way Georgian and Victorian locks did — as convertible and decorative closures for necklaces and bracelets, [and] as a charm holder to hang different pendants and locket," says Evans.

Other estate pieces that work well with the contemporary designers in the shop include Etruscan revival earrings, men's signet rings for women, and mourning rings in black enamel and high-karat gold that stack with modern gold bands.

ARTFUL MASH-UP

Laura Freedman of retailer Broken English takes a similarly eclectic approach. Her store in Los Angeles, California, opened in 2006, and she launched a second shop in New York's Soho neighborhood in 2014. "I wanted my

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first store to look more like walking into a well-organized closet rather than a fine-jewelry store. It was a mash-up of what looked great together in the cases — sometimes merchandised by color, other times by what was a surprise when we were laying out the jewelry — and all was meant to draw our customers in, to spot the piece that most intrigued them."

As for particular styles, she says, "the Victorian era is the easiest to mix with other pieces and the most accessible in regard to price and

collectibility. We also love mixing in '70s chains and pendants and a sprinkling of signed pieces from the mid-20th century." Popularity-wise, "rings and earrings tend

to sell most when a customer wants to mix different time periods."

Among the contemporary brands selling well with older ones at her store are Foundrae by designer Beth Bugdaycay — who has created a language of symbolism that harks back to the Victorian without seeming like a rehash — and Sidney Garber, whose pieces layer nicely with the chunkier gold of the 1970s and '80s.

"The key to a successful mix is not to get stuck on one style in either modern or antique/vintage jewelry, but rather have a diversified selection," she adds.

LINKING RINGS

Lauren Wolf, owner of retailer Esqueleto, designs a range of tactile silver and gold jewelry and engagement rings. Her shop — a go-to venue for bespoke and alternative bridal jewelry — has grown from the single location she opened in Oakland, California, in 2011 to include two more in Los Angeles and one in downtown Manhattan. Between her stores and her website, "70% of sales today are coming from engagement rings, with an emphasis on old and exclusively cut diamonds and predominantly diamond Art Deco styles," Wolf reports. "During the pandemic, there was a definite increase in engagement ring

sales, but we saw this trend in our stores start around five years ago."

Although she does buy "some Victorian and Georgian rings, early Art Deco [pieces] with old European-cut diamonds and platinum lend themselves to a modern marriage of materials and work well in the mix with contemporary designers' engagement rings. We also buy eternity bands from the early through the mid-20th century. Our customers tend to be experimental and don't want the look of a ring that was designed to line up perfectly with their engagement ring. They would rather have some fun and be more daring in their choices."

A section called "Stacks" on Wolf's website and Instagram presents bold and unpredictable ideas for fusing rings from various time periods, colors, textures and metals. She combines antique and vintage pieces with designers like TAP by Todd Powell, Johnny Nino, and her own alternative diamond ring collection.

Rosenheim tends to have a less edgy customer, but one who still wants an individual look. His shop offers antique and vintage diamond earrings in styles that have a universal appeal and pair well with modern necklaces and pendants.

All of these retailers cite links and long chains — particularly Victorian and 1970s chains in yellow gold — as fitting for charms and pendants of all eras. They are also wearable in various ways, wrapped and graduated around the neck or wrist.

Another thing the retailers agree on is the value of having multiple price points. "Mixing wide-ranging styles and prices was and still is the secret to our success for the past 26 years, from a \$100 bracelet to a \$150,000 necklace," says Freedman.

As Rosenheim notes, "a customer might start with the lower price points as they are figuring out their style, and then begin to go for higher-ticket items once they decide what works best for them."

Evans concurs. "Tastes in jewelry evolve, as does the price point that a client is looking to spend. We love the idea of high/low, depending on the materials and if the look works."

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

When purchasing antique and vintage jewelry, it's key to educate yourself and your staff on the design aesthetics,

CURATING TIPS

As creative director of estate dealer Fred Leighton, Rebecca Selva has been helping style A-list celebrities for more than 20 years, including actresses Nicole Kidman, Sarah Jessica Parker, Lupita Nyong'o, Meryl Streep and Natalie Portman. The legendary jewelry store carries pieces dating back to the Georgian era, but also includes new in-house designs. For her red-carpet looks, Selva taps into each client's distinct personality and reworks the pieces in unexpected ways.

"It's much more fun when styling jewelry not to stay true to one time period," she says. "This gives all of the jewelry a current feeling and allows women to get creative and wear their more dressy jewelry more casually and more often. It's all about finding balance in asymmetry and using some imagination and your instincts while doing it."

Here, she shares her tips for helping clients curate a good mix for their collections and wardrobes.

- **See which pieces speak to each other** — the textures, finishes and styles that cross periods, yet work together aesthetically.
- **Find one anchor piece.** You can start with a statement piece, be it contemporary or antique. "My favorite necklace to work around is a Georgian rivière necklace," says Selva. "You can graduate delicate pendants and beautifully designed gold chains from there."
- **Add little elements of surprise.** Playing off the anchor piece, add on a gold chain for layering and attach, for example, a modern pendant in the center and then one small vintage brooch or pendant asymmetrically on the side. It will add more interest.
- **Don't let a layered look get messy.** To achieve an impactful look, take any charm or medallion out — anything that is too fussy. Allow each piece to be seen and become a significant part of the jewelry story you are creating.
- **When it comes to metal colors, take an "anything goes" approach.** You don't have to wear all white or all yellow like you thought you did. Mixing up white gold or platinum with yellow or rose gold and using different styles of chains and components pops the styling.
- **Take seemingly disparate pieces and throw caution to the wind by wearing them together.** You can be spontaneous and get playful with even the most serious of jewelry.
- **If you have a favorite idea or piece that you love wearing one way, try putting it on another part of your body.** You might even start to prefer it that way. For instance, says Selva, "I love the look of gold vintage wedding bands on a chain around the neck."

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Store owners who already combine antique/vintage and modern jewels in their displays have some advice for those just getting started, particularly regarding mistakes to avoid.

- **Read the room.** "We are living in different times right now," says Jim Rosenheim of Tiny Jewel Box. "Women are still buying jewelry, but our lifestyles have grown very casual — working from home, maybe seeing a few friends in an environment that is outside and more distanced. It won't be like this forever, but it's something to think about for the next few years. Women are investing in pieces they can wear now, that make them feel confident and empowered and speak to their beliefs, hopes and strength. They aren't getting dressed up to go to parties, so it's important for the stores to rethink what they are curating."
- **Don't skimp on quality.** "If you are looking for finely made antique or vintage jewelry, you need to look for the same refined quality in the modern jewelry you offer," advises Sheri Evans of Metier SF. "Poorly made contemporary pieces won't translate well with authentic period pieces."
- **Positioning is important.** "Don't forget to juxtapose pieces," says Evans. "Ornate with minimal, rugged with more elegant, and bold with delicate are just a few examples."
- **Don't overbuy in either category.** "It's challenging knowing where to invest money and energy," acknowledges Lauren Wolf of Esqueleto. "It's definitely a balance between being well-stocked and having pieces that aren't moving, or bringing in more pieces before the ones you have sell."
- **Watch out for reproductions.** Replicas of items from the Georgian through Art Deco periods, as well as signed jewels, have managed to fool even the most knowledgeable dealers. "We are hyper-aware of what's going on and try and stay away from the categories that are being copied the most," says Evans. "But anyone can make a mistake — and when we do, we are always willing to give a refund."

IMAGE: METIER SF

distinguishing factors, and craftsmanship. These pieces come with their own stories, and customers often want to hear them.

"If you are working with trustworthy dealers, they can teach your salespeople about certain pieces," shares Freedman. "They are more than happy to impart the information if it's in their inventory."

Before the pandemic, Wolf and Evans shopped many antique shows, asking lots of questions and examining pieces for hallmarks or identifying information that could help them sell.

"We continue to ask questions, finding out all we can about the pieces that our dealers are sending to us or showing us, under the safest of conditions, socially distanced from each other, while still seeing the pieces up close," says Wolf. "We want to know all about the engraving, the techniques used, the gemstones, and how the pieces were worn. Once we have all of this information, we will impart it to our salespeople and clients. But there are times when we can't know all, and we share that with our customers as well."

BETTER IN PERSON?

All of the jewelers interviewed have an online presence and have seen an increase in digital sales since the pandemic began.

"During this year, we had to work online and spent most of our time going back and forth with clients," Evans relates. "We would hop on the phone, on Zoom, [direct message] about photos we showed on Instagram. And we did a lot of showing off the different ways to combine pieces in rings, necklaces and bracelets. Instagram has been invaluable for that. Often we sell those combinations exactly as they are shown. I think with all of the virtual sales this past year, people are much less afraid to buy something online."

Wolf echoes this sentiment. "Due to the pandemic, we began to sell a lot more online. Part of our 'new normal' will include more online sales of fine jewelry and engagement rings. It opens us up to different cities and customers."

But she and the other jewelers believe brick-and-mortar will always be relevant.

"It's where the real connection between pieces and the clients happens, the discovery and the surprise of how good something unexpected can look," Freedman says. ■