

## Bespoke Bling

canada.com

Aug 21 2006

Section: Shopping

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Source: Canwest News Service

I've never been in the lucky position to be able to spend real money on jewelry. Over the years, I've acquired a few nice baubles; some family heirlooms and some nicer pieces I've splashed out on, but I've been mostly uninvolved with the world of serious bling. The jewelry I do own is sentimental and expressive, not really about parading conspicuous consumption. Not that I am by any means immune to the dazzle of real jewelry: Like most girls, I've had heart-wrenching Cartier and Tiffany moments.



Linda Penwarden Jewellery

But I've always thought that if I did have the money to drop on a spectacular piece of jewelry, I'd prefer to have something unique made for me. I'd want my piece to be mine, and not the same thing you can see on every other rich woman in Holt Renfrew on a Saturday afternoon. So, I've always been curious about those smaller jewelers who work on site in their shops to design and create their own pieces. But I've also been reticent to walk in and check them out, not knowing anything about their craft or if I'll feel intimidated by the store.

### Linda Penwarden Jewellery

[Linda Penwarden Jewellery](#) opened in 2003. Having worked at Birks and being formally trained as a goldsmith at George Brown College, Linda was perfectly poised to venture out on her own. She has a taste for what consumers want and a clear style of her own. The phrase "modern classic" has been overused in recent years, but in Linda's case it really does apply. Her pieces are timelessly elegant, neither too edgy nor too stuffily old-fashioned.

Linda derives some influence from the Art Deco movement, which showcased brilliantly colourful gemstones in modern, sometimes startling and exotic, settings. However, Linda strips away everything superfluous, leaving the beauty of form and colour to sing for themselves, independent of excessive ornamentation or baroque embellishments. Although Linda's designs will appeal to women of broad and conflicting tastes, her collection is held together by a signature style that is inimitably her own.

## The Store



Jane Flanagan

[Linda Penwarden Jewellery](#) is located in the quiet enclave of Mount Pleasant in Toronto. Her store window is filled with a streamlined display case which belies a mere smattering of the treasures that lie within, and you must ring a bell to gain admittance. However, once you're inside, all your apprehension slips away. Linda and her staff are warm and welcoming, keeping themselves busy while you browse. And believe me, you'll want to browse! I didn't tire of surveying case after case filled with jewelry of every hue.

The store also has that industrious feeling of a small workshop. If the door to the upstairs is ajar, you might hear the sound of hammer hitting metal. Ironically, while I was there, the artisans upstairs were working in quiet reverie while Verdi's "Anvil Chorus" played in the background. It's immediately reassuring to know that the people who designed and finished these pieces are all working on the premises; 90% of the work is done in-house, with casting and certification being the only things that get done externally.

## The Process

While there are plenty of pret-a-porter pieces on display in the store to tempt you, Linda is there to help you customize a piece to suit your own needs and styles. There are, of course, various degrees of customization. Linda can improvise on any of the pieces you see in-store, swapping in different metals (silver, yellow gold, white gold, platinum) or gemstones, changing the chain or height of the setting. It's like seeing something in the Chanel collection, but getting Karl Lagerfeld to remake it for your body and taste.

You can also design something from scratch with Linda. You can walk in with a fully-fledged idea, a half-baked idea or no idea at all, and she'll work with you to make a piece that will be perfect for you or your loved one. Linda has worked with clients across Canada and even worldwide to create such unique pieces.



Linda Penwarden Jewellery

I was, of course, completely gung-ho to experience this kind of treatment, so prodded Linda for more insight into this process. To make a piece that's going to please, Linda has to get inside the mind of the recipient. She does this by asking questions about the woman: What she wears, how active she is, if she's classic or high-fashion, even her skin-tone (it will influence the choice of metal and coloured gemstones) and, of course, she'll take into account the customer's budget.



Linda Penwarden Jewellery

Sometimes, customers will have a design in mind or will even have sketched something out beforehand. While Linda will happily incorporate people's own ideas, she does explain that it can be

problematic if a customer has conceived a design that is not technically possible. In this case, she will do her best to modify the design so that it works, while retaining that original creative spark.

One thing Linda is adamant about, however, is that she will not entertain requests to imitate other jeweler's work; she will not take a diamond and recreate Tiffany's Etoile setting. Linda and her team are designers and artisans first and foremost. Together they aim at a different kind of market: A discerning customer who has a spark of originality, just as Linda herself does.

## Rock-shopping

As part of the design process, I'm given a lesson on the qualities of gemstones. I learn about the four C's: Cut, clarity, colour and carat, and also learn to look beyond the abstract numbers and prioritize what is really visible to the eye. Linda works only with diamonds that are either Canadian or conflict-free. We look through a loupe and examine a sapphire's inclusions or flaws. Indeed, I can also see them to the naked eye. However, if the stone was cut differently, with more facets to reflect light, the inclusions would not be so visible.

Through this process, Linda gets a grasp on the customer's predilections and goals. Some consumers want the best of the best, regardless of price. But the majority of us are on some kind of budget, and Linda can help make sure you allocate that budget to the areas that matter most to you, while still getting the piece you want.

One stone in particular caught my eye when we were going through this gemstone tutorial. It turned out to be a relatively inexpensive piece of quartz. Linda bought it while at school and had yet to design a suitable piece for it. It was emerald-cut and "rutilated" - a transparent rock crystal with golden needles arrayed in breathtakingly beautiful patterns inside. These needles are sometimes called Venus hair.

I was smitten and I also sensed a challenge, so asked Linda to quickly sketch a couple of ideas for a necklace made with this stone. Very quickly I was able to gravitate towards one design, and we took the stone upstairs to the workshop to play with wax moulds, the next step in the process. Linda carved the rough design out of a very hard blue wax. This allowed me to get a physical, three dimensional idea of the piece and further modify the design.

Ongoing consultations mean that the piece you end up with will not be a big surprise. It's really like going for multiple dress-fittings: The piece evolves as you go along and you get to tweak the design as it emerges from those initial sketches to a physical manifestation.



Jane Flanagan

If a customer is decisive, the whole process can take a mere 3 to 8 weeks, a short time to wait for something so special. Of course, a process like this can really take as long as you want it to.

Once completed, every piece that costs over \$1500 is sent to an external appraiser for certification and valuation.



Linda Penwarden Jewellery

### The End Result

Whether you're looking for that once-in-a-lifetime engagement ring, or a piece of jewelry that will serve as a finishing touch for a special occasion, Linda and her staff will ensure you get what you want. And if you're like me, you'll want to go back again and again. As I sat in the store and talked with Linda, many customers came and went, most of whom were return visitors and she knew them all by first name and could tell me the pieces they'd bought.

In a city as large and anonymous as Toronto, it's a happy discovery to find a store like [Linda Penwarden Jewellery](#). While Linda is an incredibly talented jewelry designer and maker, she and her staff are equally skilled at crafting a shopping experience that is engaging, educational and personal from beginning to end. While big box stores and retail chains will always serve a purpose in most of our lives, it's nice to slow down and take the time to enjoy the simple experience of getting exactly what you want while supporting a local artist and businesswoman.

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