

Trials and Embellishments

by Suzanne Smith Arney

Darcy Horn has been beading since 1996. Her bracelets, necklaces, brooches and cuffs truly fit her description as art-to-wear and because every step of the process is handmade, each is unique. Her free-form pieces are tour de force—some are framed artworks, others are stunning adornments. A bracelet called *Trials*

is made in peyote stitch using a mélange of materials: Japanese and Czech glass seed beads, Delicas, white turquoise, a fossilized dinosaur bone cabochon, wood, copper, vermeil, brass, freshwater pearls, Czech pressed glass and African pietersite. It closes with two buttons, one abalone and the other copper. Her free-form pieces grow organically, “I pull the components, get a sense of space, and then start weaving. Rather than have a rigid plan, I follow my concept and let it develop organically. This bracelet took about 25 hours to make.”

In 2000, she launched her personal website, The Jade Dog Designs (www.thejade.com). Her favorite stone is jade, and she was born in the Chinese year of the

dog—hence her logo, which combines the character for jade and a dog print. The Internet has been a vital link in her business, with both positive and negative aspects. Clearly the greatest asset is accessibility. Cyber-shoppers are unrestricted by distance, time or currency barriers. Horn’s studio is in Red Oak, a small town in southwest Iowa. An insomniac Quebecois can find a brooch she loves or the beads she needs and place an order at 3 a.m. using PayPal. On the other hand, there is detail, a nuance that is lost when looking at a pixelated image. The pietersite loses some of its noted sheen, or



the intricacy of a clasp goes unnoticed. A surfer may find something looking somewhat similar, but less expensive at another site, not realizing the difference in quality or the handwork involved.

"People don't understand that I make so much of it by hand," says Horn. "To relay all of that in a picture is difficult." She loves to try new techniques and incorporate them



into her line. Her latest venture is chain mail, which she calls *MicroMaille* to distinguish it from armor—these delicately coiled strands in copper, sterling silver, aluminum and even gold would hardly serve a feudal knight. Horn coils the metal wire onto a mandrel, then cuts it into jump rings. Holding pliers in each hand, she weaves them into patterns with names like Turkish Round, Byzantine and her favorite, Jens Pind. "It adds another dimension to the piece when I can say I've made every step myself," Horn notes. She also enjoys the effects of oxidizing the copper or mixing metals, an example is a necklace with a single barrel-shaped agate on a chain. Copper rings are woven in an Inverted Round pattern, oxidized with liver of sulfur, and finished with a coat of Renaissance Wax. The simplicity of the construction is a backdrop for the beautifully patterned and fissured stone.

A major, and sometimes unanticipated, requirement of e-commerce is maintenance. In addition to her personal website, Horn sells her work on Etsy (www.thejadedog.etsy.com) and 1000 Markets (www.1000markets.com/users/thejadedog). Etsy is self-described as "your place to buy & sell all things handmade." Like a gigantic craft fair, it's open to anyone, with a huge range of skills and experience. And like a fair's close-to-the-door tables, a website's front



page “display windows” attract sales. With open markets, that position is random. It’s generated by activity: changes made by the vendor, sales and/or participation in forums, postings and blogs. Active membership in social and professional networks is de rigueur. Like a pinball wizard, your move here, there and there *may* result in a prime position for your product. Of course, all this happens after establishing your presence, and for that photography (skills and equipment) is critical. “Maintenance is a full-time job in itself,” explains Horn.

Sites like these vary in their structure and costs. Etsy charges a listing fee plus a percentage of sales. Bead Art Originals (BAO), a subset of Etsy, is a “street team”—one of hundreds—wherein artists join with others representing a similar type of product or geographic area. Membership in BAO is by invitation only; Horn says she was thrilled when asked to join their selective list. Each artist pays an annual membership fee, and the site has a manager/promoter. Merchants at 1000 Markets are juried in and pay a sales percentage. Payment intermediary services (e.g. PayPal) also charge fees. Each of these costs is small, but niggling. “It’s a lot of work for so little profit,” says Horn. “Many online viewers are there to



get ideas, not to buy. I do better selling in real life than I do online, and I’ve increased that.”

E-commerce does offer a world of ideas, as well as products. Horn purchases components from two other BAO Team artists, raku buttons from an artist in New Jersey and polymer clay pendants from a French artist. Keen-eyed merchants are alert for such opportunities. But it is her flexibility, inventiveness, resilience and years of experience that keep her up and running during these tight times. She’s learned that less expensive jewelry sells well right now, as well as vintage components—sequins, beads and metals



(sold on her personal site). She also offers kits and instruction sheets and graphs. "Those sales are on the increase," she says. A fringe bracelet technique instruction sheet has been a top seller for almost seven years. Classes are also strong—Horn teaches at community colleges, a bead store where she works part-time and her studio. One of the stereotypes of small towns, their neighborliness, is evidenced here. "My classroom is small. If I need more room," Horn shares, "the coffee shop around the corner and the bank have offered me teaching space."



craft. "The market will come back," she feels, and believes that when it does it will be leaner and more professional, a benefit to both merchant and buyer.

At Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, three women are commenting on a display of her work. "Darcy Horn is a featured artist in Joslyn's Hitchcock Museum Shop," says shop director Jane Precella. "We particularly enjoy

her soldered collage pendants—always imaginative and made from unexpected items such as miniature tarot cards and foreign stamps." The shop is an exclusive outlet for these pendants, notes Horn. They also sell her recycled handbags, embellished with beaded embroidery. *Very Up Town* is a dramatic arrangement of moonstone, Japanese glass cabochons and pearls. "People are amazed at the intricacies of her beaded creations," says Precella. "When they handle it, they immediately understand the talent and patience involved in creating these unique pieces."^{TCR}

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