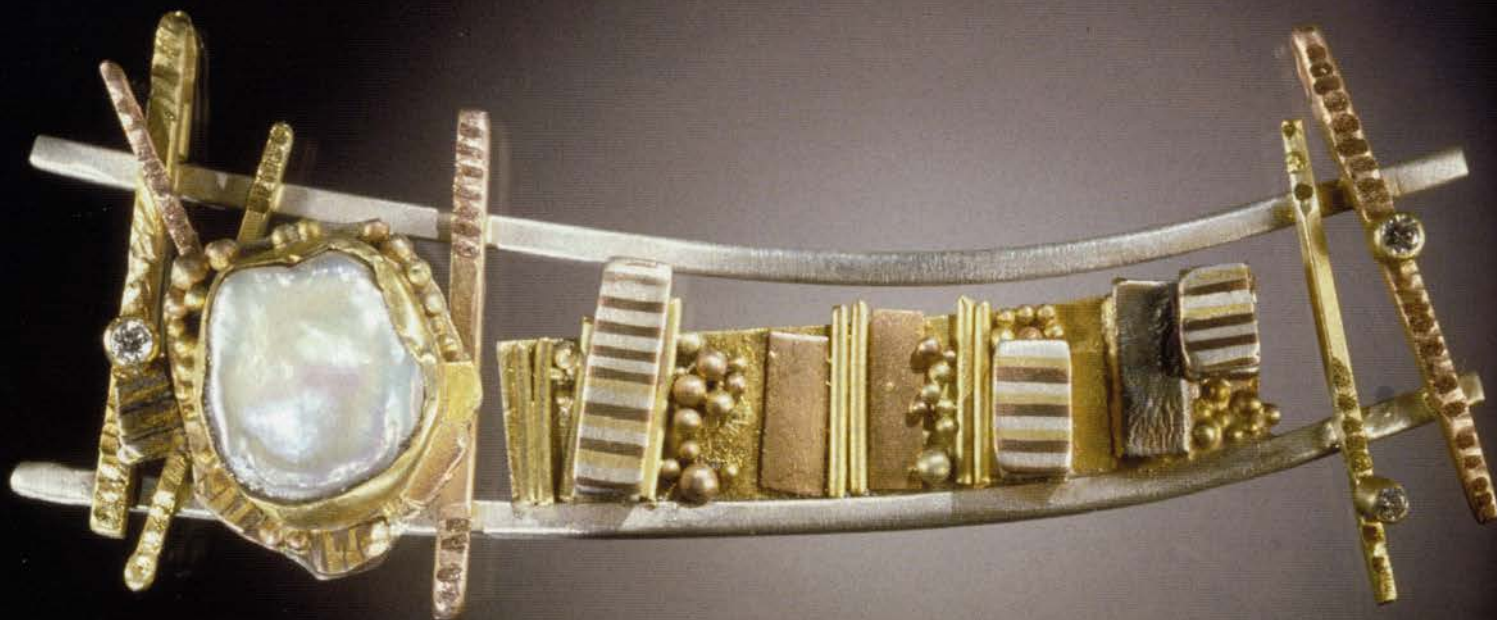


# MAGICAL MOSAIC JEWELRY



A CALIFORNIA COUPLE GAVE UP THE WORLDS OF ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DESIGN TO CONCENTRATE ON A SMALLER AND MORE INTRICATE PRODUCT

BY ETTAGALE BLAUER

Some jewelers begin their careers as sculptors. The scale is dramatically different, of course, but the notion of taking an idea and working it into a three-dimensional design in hard materials derives from the same artistic thinking process. But John Fullerton and Lynda Bahr have taken this a giant step further—they were ensconced in the fields of architecture and interior design before they found their distinctive, combined voice in jewelry.

The couple lives and works in the small town of San Gregorio, on the Pacific Ocean coast, 45 miles south of San Francisco. The psychological distance is much greater than that distance would suggest. “We live on the edge of a redwood forest,” Lynda Bahr, says of their beautiful location. It’s a farming community of about 150 people where the general store also houses the local bar and the post office. But the area is home to many Silicon Valley employees and is just

22 miles from Stanford University at Palo Alto.

In their intricately designed and crafted mosaic jewelry, Fullerton and Bahr bring both their sense of architecture and the maturity that comes with experience. Perhaps one could call their’s a “left brain, right brain” relationship. They have found a way to blend their various skills into a singular line of jewelry. And, as is often the case with working couples in the jewelry world, they have created a



symbiotic relationship that makes the best use of their complementary skills. The result: small but amazingly complex works of wearable art.

The architectural underpinnings of their designs are evident at a glance. Each bracelet, ring or brooch is a multi-tier construction, pieced and fitted together, then framed within an outline of metal. Fullerton and Bahr work with a “tool box” of various color precious metals: sterling silver, 22K and 18K yellow gold, 14K rose and green gold. One of their hallmark materials is a composite metal made in the ancient Japanese technique known as mokume gane. The term comes from the Japanese words for “wood grain” and “metal.”

The two-person team came to their original careers from opposite ends of the continent. Bahr received her degree from Syracuse University in upstate New York while Fullerton earned his from California Polytechnic. For 15 years they worked together as Mr. Outside/Ms Inside, doing commercial architecture. He did the exteriors, she did the interiors. At the same time, Bahr pursued her love of horses, becoming a competitive rider in the vigorous discipline of dressage.

Commuting 90 miles roundtrip to

business. Then, in the early 1990s, the recession hit. Architectural commissions slowed dramatically and with them Bahr’s business. She had been managing large scale interior design projects. The referrals dried up, along with the economy. At this point, Bahr began to study metalsmithing seriously, and with Fullerton’s help, worked up a jewelry line. “We both had training in design but he was better at working with his hands. He could figure out how to do anything. I had the ideas,” she recalled.

With her interior design business essentially dried up, Bahr plunged



into jewelry making. She began doing small shows where the work was well received. However, she says it “exploded” in 1996 when she did both the Rosen Buyer’s Market and an ACC show. At that time, the work was silver and pearls, a long way from

San Francisco took three hours out of their lives every day. It made it impossible to fulfill their desire to have a child. “I wanted to have a business I could do out of my home,” Bahr related.

Around 1990, Bahr started taking lessons from a metalsmith while continuing to run her interior design

the complex creations they now show. “We have had up to five or six people working for us and every year we were trying to learn something new,” Bahr relates. “It’s a good way to keep people engaged.”

Fate stepped in when one of the women working for them said she wanted to learn mokume. That was five years ago and, Bahr says, “We are still learning. I bought Steve Midgett’s book (“Mokume Gane – A Comprehensive Study”) and we went through it. We tried out everything.” She also called fellow jeweler James Binnion who was remarkably generous in helping them work out certain aspects of mokume, the method he has made his own signature.

The distinctive building blocks of the jewelry are the billets of mokume and shakudo that are made in the workshop. Shakudo is a combination of silver and copper—40 layers of it—while mokume is an intricate sandwich of different colors of gold, twenty layers thick.

Each mokume billet begins by taking sheets of different colors of gold. “We make them meticulously clean and flat,” Bahr says. “The layers are bound together very tightly and wrapped in



a metal wrap that’s like a very heavy Reynolds wrap, but pliable. We fill the inside of the chamber (in the oven) with charcoal, in an oxygen-deprived atmosphere, and seal it.”

The process follows the lead of James Binnion who pioneered this

process. After eight hours in the oven, the billet is cooled and then the hard work begins.

"We pound it with a hammer to get it thin," she continues. "We etch it and drill holes in it, and then it goes through the rolling mill and then we pattern it."

Eventually, they wind up with a long sheet with the trademark wood-grain look. "We slice off a piece of it, solder the edges to keep it together and then roll it through the mill, over and over," Bahr says.

On and on the process goes until a new piece of totally patterned and completely integrated metal emerges, looking as Bahr says, "like a piece of striped candy."

Fortunately, all those hours of hard physical work result in a quantity of material that lasts for a few months. From there, it's up to Bahr's imagination and artistic sense to come up with the designs.

From the time the business could support helpers, Fullerton-Bahr has employed Stacy Bennett. Just 18 years old when she started seven years ago, Stacy was home schooled. Her introduction to the jewelry shop was part of her education. Now, she is an indispensable part of the team. To help both student and the business, Bahr enrolled Stacy in a class at a metals conference to learn other metal techniques. Then, almost like surrogate parents, Bahr and Fullerton went to see how she was doing.

"They were doing mokume in a very rough format, building a little oven and watching the color of the metal while it was in the heat," Bahr recalls.

The couple were intrigued by the process and decided to incorporate it

golds—pink, green and white—and colored diamonds. "I found women love diamonds. They make that little sparkle. People just fall in love with it. I just about put them in everything. They're the best gem," Bahr says.

Speaking from the standpoint of the jewelry maker, she particularly appreciates their hardness. "You can solder with them in. When we were using inexpensive gemstones, taking a stone out (to do metalwork) was a nightmare. You don't have to do that with the diamonds. When I started working with diamonds, I never wanted to go back to



into their own work, but they wanted to use gold as a major component. As Bahr says, "We were on our own with the gold."

They turned to another jeweler, Steven Dixon, for help. "He spent an hour on the phone with me, and it was just the right information," Bahr says.

Once again, the incredible sharing that goes on in the metalsmithing community worked its magic. They were able to leap ahead in their own interpretation of jewelry using the mokume technique. The mokume sections are fitted together with other metals, other colors and other textures into a balanced mosaic.

Around 1988, they started doing bracelets, working in colored

the other gems," she states.

With the business well established, and the commuting time virtually eliminated, Bahr and Fullerton collaborated on one very special project—their son Will, who was born six years ago.

Bahr teaches art for his first grade class, a nice combination of the parental and professional sides of her life. Fullerton continued to work in architecture until two years ago when he joined the jewelry business full time. "He has organized the computer work and the website and he talks to most of the clients. And, he started doing watches. He is carving out a niche," she says. Just as the Fullerton-Bahr collaboration has carved out its niche is the world of contemporary American goldsmithing. ♦