


The world-famous pioneering gem artist
delighted and inspired students at San Francisco's
Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts.

Master Class *with* Bernd Munsteiner



BY SI & ANN FRAZIER, Foreign Correspondents

"Recognize chance and eliminate the arbitrary," declared world-famous gem artist Bernd Munsteiner to a group of students at the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in San Francisco last spring, and for the rest of the five-day seminar, the students eagerly tried to apply this attitude toward design to their own gem projects. In doing so, the students learned not only how visually satisfying the results of cutting with this approach were, they also discovered how exhilarating the process would prove to be.

Munsteiner, 57, who hails from Stipshausen, Germany, in a region well established as a center for gem and jewelry technique and design, gave the master class at the invitation of Academy founder Alan Revere, who regularly brings outstanding individuals to the school for special presentations in their areas of expertise (see box "The Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts"). The occasion was made all the more special by the fact that this most well-known of gem artists seldom teaches; although we have known him for many years, we know of only a few, very fortunate apprentices the master has ever brought into his studio.

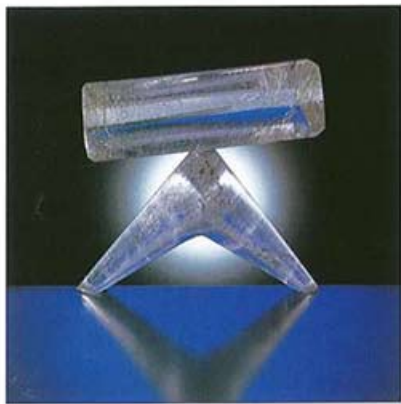
With the encouragement of master gem artist Bernd Munsteiner, students at the seminar focused on maximizing "extra stuff" inside gem rough rather than minimizing it, the traditional approach.

Opposite page: Oval "scenic" quartz that shows off inclusions suggestive of a landscape; triangular "phantom" quartz, in which inclusions dramatically outline a stage of crystal growth; and amber, by Roya Tadayon, that highlights variations in color. This page: Rutilated smoky quartz, in which clever cutting takes advantage of the quartz's optical properties to create the illusion that the included rutile crystals are curved, though they are not. Photos © Leo-Carraher.



"Break all the rules.

There are no rules."



Above: The phantom outline in the two-legged base of this two-part sculpture points to the rectangular quartz balanced above it. A horizontal "window" of clear quartz in the top piece accentuates the jaunty angle at which it sits on the base.

Below: The "eye" effect in the rutilated quartz oval in the center relies on light reflected from inclusions; carving has added to the naturally produced interest in the included quartzes at left and right. Photos © Lee-Carraher.

With little question, Bernd Munsteiner has contributed more toward the advances of gem art in modern times than any other individual. One of the special cuts he developed, marked by asymmetry and the use of negative cuts creating special optical effects, became so popular during the 1980s and '90s in the upper-end jewelry world that his name became synonymous with the cut. Indeed, these "Munsteiners" (also known as "fantasy" cuts) have been so widely copied that knockoffs are commonly known in the trade as "Clonesteiners."

What is less well appreciated is Munsteiner's use of gem material with inclusions and other natural internal features, and the fact that he has been fascinated with these internal "oddities" since his childhood, when his father and grandfather, also gem cutters, made him aware of the wealth of interesting characteristics to be found in agates and other kinds of quartz. His interest in highlighting visible inclusions in gems by designing stones around them is in direct contrast to the traditional attitude toward most inclusions: thinking of them as "flaws" and trying to minimize their visibility, if not eliminate them altogether by cutting off that part of the rough, like a bad spot on a piece of fruit.

That he saw the design potential of inclusions in gems and of included gems in jewelry, and that he began pursuing this artistic challenge as a student (see box "Bernd Munsteiner"), is all the more remarkable given the very rigorous hold that traditional gem cutting then had in his native Germany. Bucking the trend was not the way to get ahead — at least not until Munsteiner came along.

"THE FIRST THING Bernd said to us," recalls participant Ron Wilson, a 63-year-old gem carver from southern California, "was: 'Break all the rules. There are no rules.'"

"There were a lot of factors in the class," Wilson added, "and you know how they are: very precise. One of the ladies in the class was a factor, and all her stuff was in neat little boxes. Munsteiner came along and squashed them all up." Wilson says he wasn't sure how the woman would react to that kind of enforced disorder, but she hung in there and was glad she did, although "by the end, she didn't know if she'd ever think right again." Apparently, she had learned to break the rules, though perhaps if she was worried about thinking "right," she hadn't quite grasped the idea that there really are no rules to break.

In his introduction, Munsteiner posed the rhetorical question that underlies his interest in the unexpected. Is there any crystal in nature so perfect, he asked, that nothing — no inclusions, no structural changes, no inhomogeneities — could be detected under magnification?

The answer is "Hardly any," and if you look on a small-enough scale, it really is "None." A quirky turn here or there is the essence of a natural object, and it is precisely these irregularities, especially those that are easily visible to the unaided eye, that fascinate him as an artist. Included foreign minerals, cavities, fluid inclusions, growth zones, color zones, twinning lamellae, fissures, and negative crystals are all wonderful surprises for Munsteiner, who sees it as his challenge to find a way to show them off.

(For the record, we'd like to note that Munsteiner used a lecture he gave in Germany in 1999 as the basis for his introduction to the master class in San Francisco, and that because of translation concerns, what we quote here is actually taken from both addresses, though he expressed the same essential ideas in both his talks.)



"The study and appreciation of such phenomena have fascinated me all my life," Munsteiner remarked, "but as an artist and a gemstone cutter, I must give these fascinating crystals an outer form that transcends Nature. I want to make visible what might only be suspected to lie beneath the surface, [or] as St. Thomas Aquinas [1226-1275] said, 'to bring more splendor to reality.' That also applies to the cutting and shaping of gemstones with natural inclusions.

"Goethe said, 'Shape is a molded form which develops as a living thing.' A form is also molded by the creativity and personality of the person who worked the crystal. Goethe's phrase 'die leben sich entwickelt' I interpret as meaning 'giving form that is in accordance with the times.'

"We are at the beginning of a new millennium," Munsteiner went on. "Styles in art, literature, architecture, and also music will see great change. Our duty as designers and creators is to change with the changing styles in the arts, so that the design of gemstones and jewelry is in step with the other arts.

"Science and technology are changing our world so rapidly that it is scarcely possible now to keep abreast of what all

of these changes will signify for us. Neither gemstones nor jewelry can be looked at as isolated from the changing world. Gems and jewelry absolutely must participate in these changes, and when possible set their own impulses.

"That this is true is illustrated by the public's willingness to accept the changes that we usually refer to as fashion or trend. New products are sought after by the public. We must establish new relationships between the modern public and the gemstones and gem-set jewelry that will be compatible with new needs and new lifestyles."

Then the master offered this definition from the teachings of design: "Design is a personal creative search of the form, the comprehensive and visible expression of an individual which, through becoming aware and recognizing an order, sets the undefined bounds, recognizes chance, and eliminates the arbitrary." His theme, he explained, is summed up in that last phrase: "Recognizing Chance and Eliminating the Arbitrary."

Chance, we are to understand in this context, are those irregularities and surprises that Nature has hidden in rough gem material. Munsteiner made it clear to the assembled

Bernd Munsteiner

Widely regarded as the person who broke the barrier and brought nontraditional gem cuts into the mainstream jewelry world, Bernd Munsteiner grew up in the very heart of traditional gem cutting. Born in 1943 in the small German village of Morscheid in the hills above the famous lapidary center of Idar-Oberstein, Bernd grew up surrounded by villages in which the cutting and polishing of gemstones had been the principle industry for generations. He comes from a long line of professional gem cutters, as did most of his childhood chums. He was taught the secrets of the trade from an early age in his father's and grandfather's shops, and between 1957 and 1960 received a thorough lapidary training at the famed lapidary school in Idar.

From 1962 to 1966, he attended the technical academy for design in Pforzheim, Germany (then the Kust und Werkschule, since renamed the Fachhochschule für Gestaltung), an experience that would prove pivotal in his development as an independent artist. There he met students from other parts of Europe who were interested in breaking loose from the tight strictures on form in gems that were so fixed in the industry. He also had the opportunity to study other art forms — metal sculpture, painting, jewelry design, art history — all of which would come into play in his future career as a gem artist.

In many ways, he was at the right place at the right time: a leading gem and jewelry design school in the early 1960s, when a mood of upheaval was sweeping through the jewelry industry, just as it would soon sweep through all walks of life in the tumultuous era known as "the '60s." New forms of jewelry called for new forms of gems, and Munsteiner would become the pre-

eminent name in the new forms of gems. There he also took on a dual role as student and technical advisor, offering his intimate knowledge of the lapidary tools and techniques of Idar while learning to put them to new uses in the experimental atmosphere at Pforzheim.

Under the influence of his fellow students and particularly of Professors Schöllmayer, Relling, and Ullrich, the young Munsteiner looked past the traditional ideas of gem design that had been drummed into him before. He began to think about showcasing the inclusions that had long fascinated him, instead of treating them as one of Nature's mistakes to be excised, avoided, or falling that, hidden under the girdle of a stone. The Pforzheim experience, he says, "enabled me to see crystals in a completely new light."

On a student trip to Jablonec and Nisou (a.k.a. Gablonz), a glass and jewelry center in Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, he became intrigued with the technique of working glass with an air-blown stream of corundum grit. He adapted this technique for use on agates with flat layers of color, particularly the brown-and-black stained agate known as sardonyx, to create both gems for brooches and larger stones that could be used as decorative panels, to be hung on walls just like paintings.

When, in our travels to Idar as gem dealers in the early 1970s, we first saw examples of this work on display at the regional museum there, we thought, "How weird. What would you do with that?" and thought that our customers would think the same. Were we ever wrong, but by the time we'd figured that out, Munsteiner was world famous, and those "weird" stones were collector's items and were being featured in very upscale jewelry.

His colleagues back in Idar-Oberstein



were almost as slow to appreciate this totally new style of cutting as we were, where it was panned by prominent figures. To the credit of the American craft jewelry community, particularly on the West Coast, Munsteiner's freely designed gems were embraced in the New World, though his first sales were to Denmark, where the modern Scandinavian style in jewelry, as in furniture, was catching on.

In 1967, he and his wife, Hanna, returned to the Idar area, where he set up shop in a spare room in his in-laws' house. He began winning awards in 1968, and in 1969 won the prestigious gold medal at the Handwerksmesse in Munich. Since then, he has won far too many awards to list here, and has become the world-famous figure who inspires awe in many quarters, including among his colleagues in on-creation-bound Idar.

In 1997, Bernd turned his atelier over to his son Tom, and the family continues the new tradition of innovation. Tom's brother, Jorg, is a goldsmith in Lugano, Switzerland; Tom's wife, Jutta, is herself an award-winning designer and goldsmith, and works closely with Tom. —S&A F

Longtime gemologist and newer cutter Robert Kane worked with off-cuts from Mumsteiner's *Metamorphose* sculpture to create this four-piece set of rutilated quartz; carving at the back of the stones subtly echoes some of the patterns of the rutile within. Photo © Lee-Carvaher.



The Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts

When he discovered that making jewelry was the most exciting thing he had ever encountered, Alan Revere, founder of the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts, determined to learn absolutely everything about jewelry making that he possibly could. Although he already had earned an MFA in sculpture, he was eager to go back to school for a thorough grounding in the jewelry arts. Unfortunately, he couldn't find the level of professional training he desired in any American school, and he enrolled in the rigorous program of one of the world's oldest jewelry schools, the goldsmithing school in Pforzheim, Germany, founded in 1877. Pforzheim (where Bernd Munsteiner studied gem design; see box "Bernd Munsteiner"), is to jewelry making what Hollywood is to movies.

After returning to the United States, Revere was besieged by jewelers wanting him to teach them what he'd learned in Europe. He offered some classes and before long there was a waiting list, and thus encouraged, in 1979, he assembled a group of outstanding master artisans and established the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts. Today, the school occupies a ninth-floor suite in the Phelan Building, which has housed jewelers and gemstone dealers since the previous turn of the century. The faculty includes over a dozen master craftsmen and craftswomen who are acknowledged experts in their fields and gifted and enthusiastic teachers. A more detailed description of the school and its founder appears in "Revered Teacher," November 1997. —S&A F

students that they should recognize this chance as an opportunity for creative design. "Eliminate the arbitrary" is an admonition against cutting all stones in a preconceived manner, which traditionally entails cutting out those chances/irregularities, but instead to search for a way to bring out their potential beauty by treating them as valuable design elements.

For many of the students at the master class, it was an entirely new way of thinking. "He kicked us into trying to figure out what to do with inclusions, phantoms, and things like that," Ron Wilson explains. "Now I'd like to cut rough with chlorite, rutile, tourmaline, anything but clear... and I have so much clear at home!" While Wilson laments his former focus on homogenous material and the included quartz points he'd given away because they hadn't interested him before, he is thrilled to have reached this stage.

A longtime goldsmith as well as more recent carver, he adds, "I've seen the shows with a thousand diamond rings, and then another room with a thousand emerald rings, all the same, all predictable... [but] this new stuff is exciting." He has recently been experimenting with Japanese alloys and techniques, such as the wood-grain appearance of mokume gane, and says he sees a lot of possibility for combining the irregular metal patterns with the irregularly patterned stones he's recently come to appreciate.

WHILE MUNSTEINER FOCUSED on design in the class, design and technique are rather inseparable parts of creative work, and there is a major difference between traditional German carving equipment and what, until the 1990s, was all that was available in the U.S. (see "The Making of a Machine," May 1994, and "Gem Carving with a Fixed Arbor," January 2001). Would that be a problem, we wondered?

The Germans carve on a heavy machine with a spindle into which they can chuck various tools, bringing the work to the



Left: Bernd Munsteiner's carved necklace with amethyst, citrine and 18K gold. Photo: courtesy Revere Academy. Below: At left, Munsteiner discusses how to approach a piece of rough, and right, he demonstrates his approach. Photos: Ann Frazier.



tool rather than the tool to the work, as is done with flexible-shaft machines. Hauling any of those heavy arbors across an ocean and a continent from Munsteiner's studio to the Academy would not have been feasible, but as it turned out, there was no need to. The equipment provided for the class bore little resemblance to the German arbors, anyway. Besides, what he would teach was far more important, interesting, and useful than just technique, tools, and technology, although he is world famous for his innovations in all three. ♦

The Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts may be contacted by phone at 415-391-4179 or via the Web at www.revereacademy.com.

Si & Ann Frazier have been in the gem, mineral, and jewelry supply business since 1965 and are currently working on The Encyclopedia of Quartz. Si has also taught gemology, mineralogy, and related courses at the university level, and is a lifelong rockhound.

