

The Perils and Rewards of Custom Ring Design



The market for bespoke engagement jewelry is booming, and to deliver the goods, creators have to balance aesthetics, mechanics and client expectations.

Wedding jewelry is often one of the first large joint purchases a couple makes. That means it's exciting, but also nerve-wracking, particularly when the rings in question are custom-designed. The jewelers responsible for creating custom bridal pieces have to learn to balance an intricate design process with a complex customer relationship.

That's an especially important skill set now, since custom jewelry orders are on the rise. The segment accounted for 35% of all wedding sales in 2020, a 27% increase from 2019, according to JCK's 2021 State of the Jewelry Industry Report.

Custom bridal orders have always been a significant portion of sales for Catherine Angiel, who owns the New York-based fine-jewelry retailer of the same name. However, she affirms that interest has increased over the past few years. "I would say our business is 60% custom, maybe even 65%. The new consumer wants something that's a little bit more individual."

For some retailers, the percentage is even higher. Joseph R. Villarreal, president of Villarreal Fine Jewelers in Austin, Texas, says roughly 85% of his business is custom. "It has always been this way for us, because this is our niche," he explains.

Sales at Judith Arnell Jewelers, which has showrooms in Portland, Oregon, and Chicago, Illinois, are approximately 80% custom. “I have a ton of inventory, but I never seem to sell any of it,” says owner Judith Arnell. “They all want something a little bit different.”

What’s possible — and what’s not

When it comes to this segment, it’s important to be flexible and realistic, says Arnell. “I’ve had some crazy suggestions in the past, but we’ve worked through them. If it’s completely impossible to do, I let them know. But for the most part, I always get it done.”

Angiel takes a firm stance on reworking a design after it’s finished. “Things aren’t made on speculation. We’re not going to custom-make this to see if you like it,” says the jeweler, who asks for a percentage of the product’s final cost as soon as a customer commissions it. “If they want to make changes outside of the scope of our [initial] conversation, they have to pay for a new [computer-aided design (CAD)].”

It helps to go through as many questions as possible and show customers plenty of visuals, including samples, during the initial design process, she adds. “Sometimes you can edit [a design] slightly, but time is money. We’re really clear about that. That’s the key to successful custom orders. You have to manage their expectations. It’s not refundable. It’s not exchangeable.”

The mechanics of jewelry are sometimes difficult for customers to grasp, Arnell acknowledges, and that can lead to near-impossible requests. “I tell them I’m happy to make what they want. However, I’m not responsible when the head breaks off or it gets bent out of shape and they lose stones. I want it to last forever. I don’t want [to make] something that’s going to be too fragile to wear.”

She explains to her clients that jewelry is not meant to be worn 24/7. “You don’t sleep in it. You don’t work out in or swim in it. But they don’t like to hear that.”

Angiel agrees that customers have trouble understanding sometimes what works and what doesn’t. She, too, has seen more clients asking for delicate designs that “are not meant for everyday wear. These teeny-weeny micro-pavé bands are really pretty, but those are not going to last. The same with this little skinny band that everybody wants. Certain things work. Certain things don’t work. The biggest challenge is to try and explain that to them.”

The bottom line

Cost is an issue that often comes up, says Villarreal, whose average prices start at \$2,500. “The biggest misconception is that custom is too costly,” he says. “However, we inform our clients that [it’s] no more costly than the majority of the cookie-cutter designer brand names that have flooded the retail chain stores [and that, unlike custom, offer] no exclusivity.”

Arnell charges \$250 to do the initial design, then gives clients a price for the complete piece once they approve the planned look. It usually takes her about a month to finish a project. Working with the client on the design is her favorite part. “I love talking to the customers and being a part of their life journey. And of course, when I finish a product, and I go, ‘Oh my god, I want this for myself.’”

In 50 years of business, she has never had a client try to return a custom piece. Some do get impatient, though. “They want it overnight. They think you’re a magician and that you can wave a magic wand and their custom ring is ready.” Convincing them that it takes time can be a challenge. “They can be a part of each of the steps, but don’t expect it in a week.”

Villarreal, who has an average turnaround of 15 working days, says his favorite part is delivering the finished product to the customer. “I never get tired of seeing the joy and satisfaction of the client when they see a piece of jewelry created exclusively for them.”

Angiel, whose custom prices start at \$3,000, says her pieces usually take over a month to complete. Because most customers don’t think three-dimensionally like designers do, she observes, it can be hard for them to visualize the finished piece, no matter how many angles and samples they see. That’s why showing them the final product is especially gratifying.

“They can only picture so much as you’re going along,” she explains. “Then the final result is just watching their expression. Some are brought to tears. I really do think that is very rewarding.”

Firsthand account: Anna Hollinger

The sales and development director of Symmetry Jewelers and Designers in New

Orleans, Louisiana, shares how she helped craft one customer's engagement ring

A client had an engagement ring with three pear-shaped diamonds surrounded by halos. The center stone was an impressive 6.75 carats. However, the gallery had an open, blank space, and it always bothered her.

She drew several ideas, which was helpful in that she knew what she wanted. We did an initial design with all three of her stones, but the model was massive, too large for her hand. She then wanted to incorporate an Edwardian style, with diamond bows wrapping themselves around the gallery. My designer did a great job of trying to make that happen, but it was not giving the visual the client was hoping for, and physics just would not allow it. We ended up resetting only her center stone, and providing new stones to make the halo look like a heart, in platinum and 18-karat yellow gold. We also added scrolls to the gallery and hand engraving to the band.

One concern was making sure the two metals' connections were smooth. But the biggest challenge was that it's always a little nerve-wracking when you're setting a sentimental stone, especially one of that size. In the end, she was thrilled. It was a fun process for her, and so it was fun for us, too.

Image: Villarreal Fine Jewelers