



JADED GLORY

Denver jeweler Mason-Kay has specialized in exquisite pieces made from rare, natural jadeite jade for the past 40 years

It's a stone that possesses a rare kind of beauty—and, as the Chinese believe, can increase health and wealth. Yet consumers often overlook jade when it comes to fine jewelry purchases.

This is partly down to misconceptions, one of which is that jade is a less precious gemstone because it can be used in inexpensive jewelry. In fact, there are two types of jade. Nephrite jade is the less expensive, more common type, while natural jadeite jade is rare and exclusive.

Another misconception comes from the fact that jade became popular among westerners in the 1970s, gaining a reputation for use in lightweight, Asian-looking jewelry. "Some still think of it in this way," says Jeff Mason, President of Mason-Kay, the Denver-based leading jadeite jade provider. "In contrast, we're proud to create jewelry that makes use of jade in contemporary, one-of-a-kind pieces."

World jade centre

Mason-Kay offers a highly popular range of westernized, fine jade jewelry to the high-end US market. "We've experienced a real resurgence in the popularity of natural, untreated jade jewelry," says Jeff. Auction houses are also seeing jade jewelry prices soar. In 2014, Sotheby's Hong Kong made history with the highest-ever dollar sale of a jade jewelry item—a 27-bead necklace, formerly owned by the heiress Barbara Hutton, which sold for \$27 million. A pair of jade and diamond earrings also went for \$6.6 million previously, and a jade ring fetched \$1.5 million.

"Seven figure sums are not unusual at Christie's or Sotheby's," says Jeff. "Unlike many other gemstones, when people take to jade, they often become collectors."

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It's why Jeff is in the business today, as a third-generation jeweler. His grandfather dealt in Mexican pearls and opal, before his father found jade—buying loose gemstones in Asia in the 1960s to sell to L.A.'s large jewelry trade. "Little by little, jade started selling better," says Jeff, "so he bought and sold more and more."

In 1976, Jeff's father and uncle started Mason-Kay to offer the industry the first full-service jadeite jewelry company, and became the clear market leader. Forty years on, it remains so.

Along with supplying the market, Mason-Kay has also created one of the most trusted jadeite labs in the industry, offering testing services for appraisers, stores, and auction houses, as well as providing estimates and jade certification. "At auction," says Jeff, "the description of a piece will often say: 'Accompanied by Mason-Kay report number ...'"

An industry specialist

The company's award-winning designs also owe much to its exclusive designer, Kristina. Trained in fine arts at New York University, her work spans what she describes as "current contemporary" and "nouveau traditional" styles.

"Each piece of loose jade is unique in color, shape, and quality," she says. "It means I start my process by analyzing every piece to determine what I think its place in the world may be. It is a similar process to the jade cutters and carvers in China. They inspect the rough boulders to ascertain the best way

to extract the best possible pieces and the most popular shapes of jade. Then they need to select which pieces will be transformed into smooth cabochons, bangles, beads, and so on, and which will be carved to whittle away the less desirable material and ultimately produce a gem.

"I approach each as a work of art," she adds. "It is crucial for me to produce a piece of jewelry that feels luxurious to wear, evokes emotion, and will be treasured for a long time."

For Jeff, his experience of jade tallies with the Chinese belief—a healthy career dealing with a wealth of beautiful gemstones. "For fine jewelry," he says, smiling, "don't overlook it."

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