

Regional Profile: New England's Craft Scene

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# Experimental CREATIVITY

## Trends in New England Jewelry Design

by Linda Post

This issue highlights the art of jewelry design, and it seemed a natural step to talk with several jewelers, specifically those in the large craft scene of New England, and take note of their reflections about living, working and selling in their home territory. We were also curious about how the changes in the economy have affected their creative, marketing and business decisions over the past year or two.

Two of these jewelers are at the start of their careers, and although this does not seem like an auspicious moment to decide to make a living as an independent artist, their enthusiasm and optimistic outlook is inspiring.

All of these artists embrace creative growth and constant experimentation as their best defense against hard economic times. They have each forged a very distinctive "look" that sets them apart from many other jewelers and is instrumental in being accepted into Paradise City Arts Festivals (see sidebar on page 43) and other highly competitive shows in the area.

### Jacob Albee, Vermont

Thirty-three-year-old Jacob Albee ([www.jacobalbee.com](http://www.jacobalbee.com)) is a hard core Vermonter. With a double degree in wildlife biology and studio art, he took a summer job (that was really an apprenticeship) in a Burlington, Vt., jewelry gallery that changed his career course from raptor biology to jewelry. He thinks that "Burlington's an awesome place to live. There is an amazing, supportive community of artists, and



Above left: Goldsmith Jacob Albee with his wife Above right: "Yin Yang" by Albee



an appreciation of the spirit of the handmade."

Albee started his own jewelry business in 2005, after working as a jeweler and in sales at the Burlington gallery for seven years. Since he works with very unusual materials, he often allows the materials to inspire his designs. That is especially true of the jewelry made with meteorites and rubber. He is just starting a new series using hardwoods combined with gold and gemstones. His work ranges in price from \$500 to



"Artemis" bracelet by Albee

Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont

\$8,000, with his most popular price point somewhere between \$1,000 and \$3,000.

Albee began participating in shows in New England in 2006, and while he still travels as far for shows as in the past, he now assesses the shows more critically before making a decision. He also counts on the recommendations of his peers, especially the older artists. He says: "As a young artist, I get to have the benefit of access to my heroes—older artists who happily share their time and experiences with me! I love the fact that the craft industry is such a friendly, cooperative place."

About half of Albee's shows are in New England. He reports especially strong sales at the Paradise City show in Northampton, where the crowd is very "educated and artistic." He has also just started selling in the Midwest, and finds it a receptive area for his distinctive style. Albee also mentions that people were spending much less on purchases during fall 2008/winter 2009 than before. It's now coming back, and he has had some excellent shows starting in spring 2009, along with a great bridal season!

**Angela Gerhard, Massachusetts**

Angela Gerhard ([www.angelagerhard.com](http://www.angelagerhard.com)) is 32 years old and started her business in 2007. She began attending Paradise City shows as a teenager with her mother, and that was the inspiration for her career. The price range of her work is \$50 to \$1,200, and she participates in six to ten shows a year, at least 75 percent of which are in New England. She plans to add more shows in other regions over time.

Gerhard's work is inspired by modernist paintings. She is always working with new materials and experiments constantly with techniques. She fuses vitreous enamel directly onto metal (either with a torch or in a furnace at temperatures up to 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit). Intrigued by the interaction of materials, she says, "I enjoy the technical challenge of creating pieces in which the handmade rivets, tab settings and/or bezels not only securely fasten and protect the enamel, but also become



Bracelets by Angela Gerhard

an integral part of the overall design."

The recession has affected her sales. She says: "I did two great shows, and then the economy fell off a cliff. I don't have much to compare it to, but I started making some new work in a lower price range, and that's been selling very well for me. I now sell to fewer galleries, but I get much larger and higher-end orders from those galleries. Custom orders have been about the same since I've been in business, and are usually for higher-end work. Sometimes it's from people who have seen the work in person at shows, and sometimes just directly from my website."

I asked each artist why they choose to live in New England. Gerhard says, "I grew up here, the atmosphere is very conducive to the arts, and it's an extremely convenient location for traveling to shows. However, I did live in the Caribbean for a few years, and I miss the warm weather!"

**Lisa Svedberg and Thomas Whiting, Maine**

Lisa Svedberg, 50, and Thomas Whiting, 53, make high-carat sculptural jewelry ([www.athenaeart.com](http://www.athenaeart.com)) incorporating unusual gemstones. Their designs are inspired by their travels and by visiting museum collections, and they are also greatly influenced by ancient art and architecture and natural forms. Most of their jewelry has interchangeable parts, which encourages repeat customers who add to their collections.

Lisa explains: "We've both been 'rock hounds' since childhood, and in our newest work we carve quartz and opal into tiny vessels, based on ancient amphoras used to carry olive oil and wine on ships. We use them in pendants, and they have a plonget cap with a contrasting gemstone cap, and they can contain perfume or scented oils."

The general price range of their jewelry is \$750 to \$7,500. Their average sale is \$1,500, which is up from the past. Lisa says: "The more unusual, one-of-a-kind pieces are selling best in the current economy, more so than in the past. As I said, my average sale is higher than it was. It's more important



Pendants by Gerhard



**Below:**  
Tanzanite ring by Lisa Svedberg and Thomas Whiting

Citrine amphora by Svedberg and Whiting



now to have those innovative, colorful, larger pieces that make people stop at our booth, remember us and want to come back or custom order."The couple travels to about a dozen shows a year, although this past year they spent some time in Florida doing more shows than usual. About one-third of their current shows are in New England, but they do plan to expand their geographic base further to the west.

When asked about sales trends in their New England shows versus other regions, Lisa stated: "In New England, the shows are definitely more consistent, and higher-end pieces are actually moving better here this year! Many of those are custom orders, some in the \$5,000-to-\$7,000 price range."

They choose to live in New England because of the natural beauty; they like open spaces, being near water and the changing of the seasons. "Being an artist here is very accepted, and people respect and understand our work," she concludes.<sup>TCR</sup>

**Linda Post is a founding director of Paradise City Arts Festivals. She spent more than 20 years as an artist on the show circuit before founding Paradise City in 1995. See the sidebar for more information.**

## Paradise City Arts Festival

Previously published in the February 2009 issue of *The Crafts Report*; to view the complete article, visit [www.craftsreport.com/craft-scene/paradisecityartsfestival.html](http://www.craftsreport.com/craft-scene/paradisecityartsfestival.html).

**P**aradise City Arts Festival was founded in 1995 by a painter and a fiber artist with ambitious visions. Linda Horvitz Post (the painter) and her husband, Geoffrey Post (the fiber artist) wanted to create a show that incorporated the best of both worlds: the inspiring quality of the finest indoor craft shows with the excitement of an arts festival. Paradise City is unique among high-end indoor shows in that it includes a substantial percentage of gallery-quality paintings and sculpture in addition to fine crafts, and presents both in a well-designed exhibition setting. This combination has been exciting for collectors and stimulating for artists.

As directors of Paradise City, this couple approaches the building of a show with the perspective of an artist, the hands-on creativity of a designer, the eye of a collector and the passion and enthusiasm of an arts festival devotee. Upon awarding their events the number-one spot in 2008 in the annual "Top Ten Art Fairs and Festivals in America," *AmericanStyle Magazine* declared Paradise City Arts Festivals "truly innovative." It is that sense of innovation, the feeling that "there's always something new at Paradise City," that engenders intense loyalty among their patrons. The Posts design the shows they want to attend: beautifully juried, very diverse and including many artists you won't see anywhere else, with exceptional on-site features and a dynamic, joyous ambiance. You'll find live jazz, international foods and extensive sculpture gardens, special themed exhibitions and sometimes even theater performances!

The National Association of Independent Artists (NAIA) has recognized Paradise City for its creative and successful approach to publicity and marketing over the years. Paradise City's on-site press boards are always filled to overflowing with press clippings from major newspapers and magazines; the shows are often covered by television crews and radio programs. In addition, a full-color, glossy magazine, the *Paradise City Guide*, has been mailed and distributed to over 100,000 collectors' homes twice a year since 2004. This magazine contains information about that season's Paradise City shows and, through editorial features and profiles, promotes the work of the independent artists and fine craft designers who participate in Paradise City Arts Festivals.

Since its genesis in 1995, Paradise City has become a nationally respected arts and service organization, producing five events annually. In 2000, the Posts were among the very first show directors to invent and convert their jurying system to digital images projected in a database format. Paradise City also initiated and sustains a groundbreaking artist membership base that currently includes more than 200 artists who take advantage of its sophisticated marketing and mailing services, automated application process, user-friendly payment plans and simplified paperwork. The marketing partnership between Paradise City and its artist members has actually increased artists' sales—members tend to average 25 to 30 percent higher in sales figures at Paradise City shows than non-members.