

SPOTLIGHT

It’s got diamonds. But is it fun?

Some makers of fine jewelry are finding inspiration in favorite toys and childhood nostalgia

BY VICTORIA GOMELSKY

When the French jewelry designer Marie Lichtenberg was growing up in Paris in the 1990s, she loved playing with the Magic 8 Ball. The toy, when shaken, acts as a kind of fortuneteller, revealing answers to questions in a small window: “Don’t count on it.” “It is certain.” “Ask again later.”

“My parents traveled a lot,” Ms. Lichtenberg said on a phone call from her home in Paris. “Each time they went to the U.S., they brought back some goodies for me and my siblings, and the Magic 8 Ball was one of them.

“I still have this ball, and my daughter and little boy are playing with it,” she added.

Last summer, Ms. Lichtenberg was sitting on her couch, thinking about what to design next, when she noticed the ball on her coffee table. “I know what we have to do,” she remembered thinking. “We have to make the 8 Ball in gold and diamonds!”

In June, at the Couture jewelry show in Las Vegas, the designer presented an 18-karat gold, diamond and enamel version of the \$10 plastic toy, but with a price of \$21,560. The pendant — which



Four years later, the toy company Hasbro proposed that she turn a trio of its most classic products — the Twister and Monopoly games and Mr. Potato Head — into jewelry.

“Because I build out faces, Mr. Potato Head really resonated with me,” Ms. Chemla said. “I replicated the Twister board, with the spinning wheel, as a pendant.”

Tatiana Van Lancker, a London-based interior and product designer, drew on similarly nostalgic themes in 2019 when she introduced a line of gold and colored stone robot jewels based on an articulated pendant that her mother wore when Ms. Van Lancker was growing up in Sydney, Australia.

Designed to evoke the retro-futuristic vibe of Rosey the Robot, the maid on the 1960s animated sitcom “The Jetsons,” Ms. Van Lancker’s line of robot pieces, called Van, caught on when she wore a prototype to a party in London and sparked the interest of a fashion editor. “They are absolutely meant to be your friendly bot,” Ms. Van Lancker said on a call from her home in Rome, where she and her husband relocated in 2022 for his work, putting her even closer to her workshop in Tuscany.

“My clients never take them off,” she added. “And because they’ve got this tactile element of being articulated, it becomes soothing. It feels like your little friend around your neck.”

Bella Neyman, the co-founder of NYC Jewelry Week and a frequent lecturer on jewelry history, said that in addition to evoking a more carefree time, toy-inspired jewels also served to “elevate the everyday by dressing it up in precious stones and metals.”

She cited the contemporary studio jewelers Emiko Oye, Margaux Lange and Lisa Walker as pioneers in the category.

“Margaux was using Barbies in her designs way before the movie was a thing,” Ms. Neyman said on a recent call. “Emiko has been sourcing vintage Legos. It’s also about upcycling and taking these things that are mass market and elevating them.”

In describing the work of Ms. Walker — “Her thing is about subversion, and surrealism” — Ms. Neyman mentioned Elsa Schiaparelli, the 20th-century Italian designer whose collaborations yielded fantastical jewels like the Aspirin necklace of blue porcelain beads that looked like the pain relievers, created with the novelist Elsa Triolet; and Ruby Lips, a brooch of a mouth with pearl teeth and lips of rubies, created with Salvador Dalí.

Ms. Zarsky of the Seven also alluded to the influence Schiaparelli still had on jewelry. “People want jewelry to be more than just diamonds and gold,” she said. “It’s about the storytelling, the escapism.”

Ms. Lichtenberg said there was one thing designers in this sector must remember: “The more unserious you get, the more you have to be super serious about your production. The craftsmanship needs to be to die for. Otherwise, it’s only a toy.”

More toys
Clockwise from left, the fortune-telling side of the Magic 8 Ball pendant; the front of the pendant; two of the designer Tatiana Van Lancker’s gold and colored-stone robot jewels, which are made to evoke Rosey the Robot, the maid on the 1960s TV show “The Jetsons;” and Ms. Wheeler’s Heart Bracelet.

replicates the original 8 Ball’s fortunetelling functionality and was crafted in Italy with the blessing of Mattel, the toy’s manufacturer — earned the show’s Best in Innovative award. (The judges applauded “its ability to spark joy.”)

When Ms. Lichtenberg decided to remake the Magic 8 Ball, she didn’t even know that Mattel, the maker of Barbie, owned the rights. Instead, she was operating on the same instinct that appears to be motivating some jewelers: chiefly, the desire to create designs that conjure the playfulness of their childhoods.

As a result, a tide of fine jewels inspired by such things as unicorns and the Rubik’s Cube are coming to market.

Camille Zarsky, founder of the Seven, a designer jewelry boutique in Manhattan’s West Village, interpreted the trend as evidence of a collective desire for “lighthearted distractions.”

“People are looking for things that are less serious and more whimsical,” Ms. Zarsky said in a phone interview from Sag Harbor, N.Y., where the Seven had just opened a location, its second.

In 2020, during a pandemic lockdown, Claire Choisine, the creative director of the Paris-based jeweler Boucheron, came to a similar conclusion.

“Two days before our trip with my team in Africa, we had to cancel it,” Ms. Choisine wrote in an email. “Everyone was sad! We went on Pinterest and spent hours looking for inspiration. Through this process, I found pictures of Memphis Design that reminded me of a happy time during my childhood in the ‘80s.”

She was referring to the bright colors, geometric shapes and bold patterns of



the Memphis Design movement, a style associated with a group of Italian architects and designers who dominated the decade with their Pop Art-inspired sensibilities.

The result was Boucheron’s 30-piece More is More collection, introduced in July during Couture Week in Paris, widely praised on social media for its ingenuity and humor. Among the line’s many talking pieces was the Solve Me necklace, essentially, a deconstructed Rubik’s Cube studded with precious stones.

“Like the cubes of the original puzzle, every facet of the piece has a different color,” Ms. Choisine wrote. “The craftsmen set gray spinels and pink sapphires onto little white gold plates before inserting each one into an aluminum cube. Various types of mother-of-pearl were used: white, pink and gray.”

Ms. Choisine echoed many fine jewelers when she cited the pursuit of happiness as the motivating factor in her design process.

“At that time, the most precious thing for me was joy,” she wrote. “I could not take any more constraints, I felt like a rebel, and I wanted my team and I to design whatever made us happy, expressing whatever we wished to express. I

needed colors, playfulness.”

Emily P. Wheeler, a fine jewelry designer based in Los Angeles, embraced the same mind-set. In May, she introduced a Mother’s Day capsule collection of Mommy and Me pieces created in collaboration with Maria Dueñas Jacobs, founder of the children’s jewelry brand Super Smalls.

In Ms. Wheeler’s gem-studded take, she remained faithful to the oversized scale of Super Smalls’s rainbow, glittery designs, but opted for precious materials. For example, Ms. Wheeler reinterpreted a \$36 Super Smalls unicorn pendant made in base metals with imitation stones into a white agate design, with an 18-karat gold mane set with sapphires and rubies, on a necklace of white freshwater pearls.

“I’ve always felt there was something especially glamorous about having effortless style and not taking yourself too seriously,” Ms. Wheeler said.



IN DESIGN

An escalator, but in gold

The founders of Jemma Wynne spent a year ensuring that an articulated design had the fluidity they wanted

BY JESSICA BUMPUS

For Jenny Klatt and Stephanie Wynne Lalin, the founders and designers of the New York-based fine jewelry brand Jemma Wynne, inspiration has always come from their surroundings. And for their latest collection, that turned out to be an escalator.

They didn’t have a “eureka!” moment on one, though. “We thought,” Ms. Lalin said, “that it really reminded us of the beautifully constructed steps of an escalator.”

According to Ms. Klatt, the collection had actually been conceived “years ago,” at least on paper. Ms. Lalin, she said, “has these very large sketchbooks where she’d constantly be thinking of ideas and jotting things down” — which they revisit when they feel the time is right.

The women liked the idea of creating jewelry that was chunky, heavy and textural. And Ms. Lalin, who works on the design side of the business while Ms. Klatt covers operations and sales, kept returning to a zigzag doodle she had drawn.

But it wasn’t until they had a completed bracelet in their hands that it all clicked. “This really does feel like an escalator,” Ms. Lalin said.



Ms. Klatt noted that they “really loved the metaphorical feeling of it, that it’s, you know, propelling you upward.”

Both Ms. Klatt and Ms. Lalin had made jewelry in college, and then met while working at the jeweler Judith Ripka. At the New York-based business, the women worked closely with the in-house jewelry factory and learned about craftsmanship from its goldsmith. “It was the most unbelievable education,” Ms. Lalin said.

In 2007, they decided to start their own self-financed brand, first introducing an open cuff, then an open ring. Over time, the company has become known for its colorful and versatile designs.

There are 30 pieces in the Escalator



Collection, which debuted in June, with prices ranging from \$840 for an unadorned ear cuff to \$28,980 for a 16-inch gold choker adorned with diamonds totaling 0.6 carat. Pieces are made in 18-karat yellow, rose or white gold and most feature either pavé diamonds or diamonds with special cuts such as bullet or shield. One-of-a-kind pieces are being created and the women also said

they plan to extend the line.

Ms. Lalin said that she and Ms. Klatt had an “affinity for finding ideas that we think, when we discuss them, they’re like, ‘Oh, so easy,’” but production turns out to be complicated.

The Escalator necklaces and bracelets, for example, are articulated and it took a year to achieve the fluidity they wanted while still retaining the striking

geometric shape. In comparison, the earrings and rings, which are rigid, took about three months of development.

Ms. Lalin first sketched the designs, then turned to a digital program to work out technical details and even created paper versions to wrap around their wrists to settle on sizes and proportions. They then worked with a model maker to perfect the plans, prototypes were made and ultimately a specialist fabricated the final pieces. (The two women have a staff of eight, including production employees, but commission work from various jewelers, depending on design needs.)

The basic design “has a very quiet luxury feel to it,” said Ms. Lalin, noting their collections typically feature more color.

Marci Hirshleifer-Penn is the global personal shopping director and women’s wear buyer at the Hirshleifers department store in Manhasset, N.Y., which is carrying the line. In an email, she described the Escalator as “a modern extension of the previous collections,” a design that was “elegant and timeless while still being fun and wearable.”

For Ms. Hirshleifer-Penn, “the shape is what really makes it feel like such a modern piece.”

Fancy toys
Above, a unicorn pendant in a white agate design, with an 18-karat gold mane set with sapphires and rubies, from Emily P. Wheeler, a fine jewelry designer based in Los Angeles; and left, the Solve Me necklace, made in the shape of Rubik’s Cubes studded with precious stones, from the Paris-based jeweler Boucheron.

Accomplished
From left, Stephanie Wynne Lalin and Jenny Klatt, creators of the Jemma Wynne Escalator Collection; and a choker, a bracelet and earrings from the collection.