

# MJSA/CUSTOM DESIGN

INSIGHTS INTO DESIGNING AND MARKETING CUSTOMIZED JEWELRY

## TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

**Q:** How do you ignite the creative process, either for yourself or your customer, and get the design ideas flowing?

**Lisa Krikawa** (Krikawa Jewelry Designs, Tucson, Arizona): One of the ways we help customers get inspired is by taking them directly to visit our newly designed website. There we have a variety of categories of rings we've designed. Clients might see a certain metal embellishment or finish, for example, and ask us to do something



similar. They might see our section on Chinese characters, astrological or musical symbols, or tattoo-inspired imagery, and it might spur them to think of a design motif that represents a symbol [that's] important in their lives, which could be totally unrelated to our examples! The idea is to set off a spark, from which a design will grow.

**Greg Stopka** (JewelSmiths, Pleasant Hill and San Ramon, California): In my design area, I showcase designs that will probably never sell;

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# The Taste Test

*How Lee Krombholz jumpstarts the process of discovering a client's design preferences*

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# The Architect's Ring

## Building the perfect engagement ring for a detail-driven client

Designer: Calla Gold, Calla Gold Jewelry

When custom designer Calla Gold first started working with Tomas, it was a daunting task. Here was an architect who had not only built his own house, but a boat too—and he also designed furniture! Now he wanted a three-stone engagement ring for his fiancée that was in every respect engineered by him.

“He was pretty controlling at the beginning,” admits Gold, who operates Calla Gold Jewelry in Santa Barbara, California. “He was on top of every detail.” And at least one of those details would ultimately prove a vexing challenge, as well as the source of an ingenious solution—one that an architect could especially appreciate.

Gold, who travels to her clients' homes and offices to do business rather than operating a storefront, didn't really mind Tomas' involvement. In fact, his strong opinions got them off to a good start.

He had downloaded scads of Google images of engagement rings to illustrate what he wanted—and significantly, what he didn't want. His “likes” weren't difficult

to accommodate, says Gold, as when he said that he wanted a squared-off shank—done!—or that he liked the wheat engraving idea on a certain ring he had seen. He also wanted large diamonds—at least 1.25 carats for the center stone and 0.33 carat for each of the side stones. That, of course, was also not a problem.

In addition, he was open to suggestions. Because his wife-to-be had a very active lifestyle, Tomas thought he wanted a ring made of platinum, because he'd been told in a store that it wouldn't scratch. But Gold explained that even though platinum was very durable, it sometimes showed scratches more because of its malleability, which he found fascinating. So he decided to go with white gold instead.

But Tomas had one strong dislike that she knew right away was going to be a problem. During the exploratory phase of the design process (in which Gold typically sketches ideas by hand), Tomas said he hated the kinds of long prongs used on most three-stone rings, which start at the base of the crown section of the ring and extend to the top of the gemstone. He said the prongs reminded him of unwieldy architectural supports. What he really wanted was a filigree design in the setting that would be light, lacy, and capable of making the three diamonds

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look airborne, instead of trapped in what he perceived to be rigid and separate compartments.

Gold immediately knew that this request would horrify the Los Angeles-based wax carver (and, later, the caster) she uses to create her rings. There's a structural reason for having long prongs on three-stone rings with large diamonds, she told Tomas: To hold the gems securely and anchor them to the strong base of the ring. And she knew that without the longer, thicker prongs, the lighter filigree underneath the diamonds in her design wouldn't be enough support for the stones. Surely, an architect would “get” that point. But Tomas was unyielding—he wanted light and airy.

So Gold decided to challenge herself to find a solution. She set off for her workshop to see how she could make this miracle happen. She stared at her selection of jewelry and looked at how different pieces use different structural strength points. The most interesting to her was a white gold bracelet with stations of flower designs, each of which had little bezel-set diamonds. Between each station was a very fine curv-



The client wanted a filigree design that did not have the long prongs used on most three-stone rings—a request that would impair the ring's structural strength and put the gems' security at risk.



ing line. It looked delicate, even though the top view was about 1.5 mm wide and the side view showed a depth of 3 mm.

Taking the bracelet to her wax carver, she asked him, “Can the filigree design of the ring be 1 to 1.5 mm wide, yet go deeply from one side of the ring to the other? And can that support my three diamonds above it?”

“We’re going to need another element to create more support,” he answered. “This is good, but we need more.”

That’s when Gold had another idea: Integrate gems into the actual filigree, so that their settings could serve as supports. “We played around with bits of wax and made a very ugly version of the ring, [then] tried poking prong settings and bezels into [the filigree section of] our ‘Frankenstein’ wax creation,” recalls Gold, with amusement. “We pulled out the little prong settings because they competed with the filigree look. I liked the bezels, though. If they were fatter with a bit of almost roundness to them, I knew that would look good from a design perspective.

“My wax guy showed me where he thought we’d need the bezels for support: two under the diamonds and two near the base of the gallery, just above the shank. Then I took the monstrosity to my caster. He moved the lower set of bezels up so that they all were on the same row and said, ‘I could cast that. It should work. But don’t blame me if it doesn’t!’”

Then it was back to her wax carver, who also does CAD waxes. He told Gold that he could create a more precise wax in



Gold solved this problem by creating a wide filigree design that added support, and incorporating into it diamond-set bezels to serve as buttresses. For added integrity, the entire crown of the ring was cast as one piece.

CAD, and got to work. “He chased me away several times while working at his computer,” laughs Gold.

The final casting incorporated thick bezels of yellow diamonds into the crown structure, buttressing the diamonds. To ensure integrity, the entire crown of the ring, including the bezels, was cast as one piece.

“I then had the stones set, and we stressed it,” says Gold. “Success! It held solidly!” The final touch was to add the hand engraving of the millgrained edges and the modified wheat design. “After that, the ring’s beauty just leaped out,” she says—to her great relief: “I think I actually lost weight during the project!”

Tomas was impressed—buttresses, no less! This sturdy architectural detail on buildings goes back to ancient Rome and Mesopotamia. And he still got the airy yet integrated look he wanted.

The project illustrated one of Gold’s business advantages: Due to her proximity to the L.A. jewelry district, she can call on a range of skilled engravers, gem setting experts, general polishers, and fine polishers quickly and easily. “I’m the general contractor building a house, who hires all of these specialists to fulfill my needs—except my house is jewelry,” says Gold, jokingly.

It’s an apt metaphor for the designer who managed to satisfy the architect. ♦