

# CARNET

The Exquisite Jewellery  
of MICHELLE ONG



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## FOREWORD

*We* live so far away from beauty.

Today it is practicality, speed, profit, smallness, bigness, these are in control, and they influence, too, the people that we meet, how many, and how we do. Grand achievements abound, we are told, and their makers are the geniuses of our world. But there does remain those for whom a machine, its product, and the very image of it, no matter its convenience, is running with ugliness, and this has no place in their lives, too far from the longest shadow of beauty. Numbers, today's emperor, cannot touch beauty, nor imitate it; beauty is what banishes numbers, stops our calculations, stops us, to carry us, speedless, to its own paradise.

When one meets Madame Ong, when one experiences the objects of such beauty that she creates, this seems both natural and yet impossible; but the proof of her beauties comes, and it is a shock.

Surely Michelangelo was pushed to make beauty by his own ugliness, a need for a different vanity. Madame Ong is not vain, or if she is, it is also the vanity that looks around and within, and from that indescribable place where oneself, the world, and imagination meet, from there come not frescoes nor poems nor dim sum but her jewels, and they, like all great pleasures, are devoured in one bite of the eye to remain unforgettable.

Madame Ong's jewels are mouth-watering. There are Chinese clouds, utterly different from ours, in scrolls of diamonds; unexpected blackness with reds and greens making ferocious, billowing dragons we will remember; diamonds again trickling about a neck and slipping down wrists; geometry, monsters, flora, colour, a free hand making things we have never seen and will keep-see forever.

From where ever it comes, from however far away, Madame Ong's power ignores the rules of machines, of numbers, of today, bringing us beauty so near it is here in our hand.

Joel Rosenthal



## INTRODUCTION

From Castellani and Fabergé in the 19th Century, Lalique and Tiffany during the Art Nouveau years, Suzanne Belperron and Fulco di Verdura in the 1940s and 1950s, all the way to JAR as the emblematic jeweller of the late 20th Century, only a small number of special designers throughout history have focused on “jewels as art”. Motivated by the search for artistic perfection, their common desire is to produce rare jewels, which transcend the value of the materials used. Each piece is one of a kind, strongly reflecting the aesthetic vision of the designer and ... a work of art.

Amongst the few jewellers following this tradition today, Carnet occupies a privileged position as a sophisticated, bold and sensual designer. Based in Hong Kong, it has developed an international following captivated by its creative fusion of Eastern and Western sensitivities. Classical Chinese features such as dragons and clouds are incorporated into Western motifs, while hoops, lace and Art Deco elements are adapted to the Asian style. Materials, such as jade, blend with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and garnets. There are unusual palm tree and peach brooches, as well as exquisite long dangling grape ear-pendants, set with briolette or rose-cut diamonds. There are jade and diamond butterfly brooches and lotus buttons. The traditional jadeite bangle is set with tiny yellow, black or white diamonds. The palette is vast, but the style is unique, the reflection of its creator, Michelle Ong, whose elegance, intelligence and independence of mind are infused into her jewellery.

Carnet was founded in 1985 in Hong Kong by Michelle Ong, who brought her artistic vision, and Avi Nagar, a precious stone dealer who added his entrepreneurial skills and knowledge of gems. The aim was to produce signed limited edition jewels and unique designs on request, while keeping away from any mass production. To maintain complete creative freedom, Ong purposely did not follow any jewellery design training, but honed her knowledge of gemstones while working as an apprentice for a diamond importer. She started first by creating jewels for her own personal use, free of any artistic restriction. From this period of





experimental design, she moved towards the founding of Carnet, which remains today the result of her own creative vision. The name Carnet is a French word, which in this context has a double meaning. It refers to the intimate notebook, which Ong keeps with her at all times, sketching shapes and silhouettes observed from the world she experiences and which are a source of inspiration for her creations. It also derives from the "Carnet de Bal" of the 18th Century, a little notebook in which ladies would write down the list of the noblemen inviting them for a dance.

In 2003, Carnet opened a boutique in Central Hong Kong. In 2005, it participated in a major exhibition on "Diamonds" at the Natural History Museum in London, and the following year it exhibited 100 jewels in the prestigious Burrell Collection in Glasgow. With its reputation growing internationally, Carnet was asked to design four special creations for "The Da Vinci Code" movie, based on the famous novel. It also commissioned American architect Edward Tuttle to conceive a new salon for their jewels in Hong Kong. Throughout this evolution and increased recognition throughout the world, production has remained limited, the manufacturing approach is highly precise and time-consuming still today, and inspiration is the core foundation for any creation.

In recent years, we have seen a considerable shift in the manner in which collectors approach jewellery. Often, it is no longer the intrinsic value of the gems but the design element, which plays a key factor in the appreciation of a jewel. With the development of contemporary art as a major force in the collecting field, a whole new set of buyers has emerged who are interested in jewels as works of art. Alongside only a handful of jewellers internationally, Carnet caters to the educated eye of this new "niche" market. It is this angle, which this latest exhibition at Asia House in London proposes to explore through the jeweller's decorative art creations. By approaching jewellery as an art form, Carnet has developed a contemporary style based on historical references, blended traditional and modern materials, and fused the aesthetics of the East and the West.

François Curriel  
September 2011

François Curriel, President of Christie's in Asia, is also Christie's chief specialist in jewellery, a position he has occupied for the past 20 years.

MICHELLE ONG

As the jewellery editor of British Vogue I work roughly 5,991 thousand miles away from the workshop of Michelle Ong. The journey of a jewel travelling from Hong Kong for a Vogue shoot in London is complicated, there's an eight hour time difference to negotiate, the 14 hour flight, form filling for customs, insurance paper work and security details to be organised. An amateur jewellery eye uninitiated in colour, craftsmanship and couture might wonder why I don't find something closer to home. Why not make my life easier? But I would have to tell them that there is simply no substituting a Carnet jewel.

Anywhere in the world a Carnet jewel stands out as an object of beauty for their design, deft hand of execution and desirability. I've photographed Carnet's Organdie diamond necklace on the long slender neck of the model Lily Cole when only a diamond choker as light and fluid as a hand stitched piece of Burano lace would do. I've organised a still life shoot featuring a Carnet orange pomegranate brooch bursting with ripe ruby seeds and diamond leaves when only that particular succulent precious fruit was extraordinary enough to work alongside the lobster that I had in the studio for the 'Orange Bounty' story. I've had the most elegant pair of multi coloured gem stone earrings flown to New York when only that particular pattern of pastel shades set into blackened gold could make a strong enough impact in moving image for Vogue's first issue on the iPad. And for *The New Sensuality* story I chose a pair of Pear earrings created with two flat grey diamonds surrounded by white stones because Michelle had somehow invested this most invincible stone with a soft tactile quality.

Each jewel is individual but linked with an indefinable unique style like an invisible thread of gold which is the eye of Michelle Ong whose drive is simply to create something beautiful. As I wrote in my book *Fashion for Jewels 100 years of Styles and Icons*, 'Like couturiers cutting their precious cloth Ong fashions diamonds into antique lace-effect fabric which she works into magnificent Belle Époque style chokers, shimmering brown diamonds crochet like collars and slithery slips of diamond ribbon bracelets'.



She tells me that she finds her inspiration in anything in everyday life, it could be a line or a silhouette or the shape of a piece of food that catches her eye. The mundane is transformed by her creative process into trails of tsavorite garnets, rubies or spirals of sapphires each one with a compelling visual identity and feminine edge. Traditional Chinese motifs, clouds blowing across an Asian sky, dancing anemone flowers or precious trapeze like hoops resonate with dynamism and strength whilst others are as light as a puff of smoke. In spite of the fact that I work in the fast paced world of fashion, where things are fleeting, I recognise that Michelle doesn't use any material because it's 'in fashion'. She works as an artist each precious flourish she makes using metal, every splash of colour interpreted by her chosen medium of stones, is carefully chosen to make an artistic contribution to each piece.

She softly breathes a new energy into Nature's organic shapes, life into glittering fire-breathing dragons, and spontaneity into trembling tails of dragon flies and colourful drama into geometric shaped patterns on strong stone bracelets.

Michelle has found new ways to use precious stones. She sets sheer slices of glassy diamonds with a light mirror-like quality; she seeks out colours on the edge such as grey and glistening ginger and creates unusual chic combinations such as black diamonds with deep blue sapphires. Using her own particular brand of magic Michelle turns the hardness of these stones into something light which flows and breathes with a life long beyond the seasons of fashion.

Carol Woolton  
September 2011

Carol Woolton is jewellery editor of British Vogue

## CARNET

An organdie collar spun from diamond light. The wayward curl of a cloud of floating sapphires. The joyful bounce of magic hoops conjured from glinting gems. A leaping dragon flaming in rubies. These are the emotive jewel-images I've carried in my mind's eye since the exquisite jewels of Michelle Ong for Carnet first seeped into my consciousness, a decade or more ago. As a jewellery historian and writer, I am lucky enough to see and handle jewels, virtually all day every day, old and new, classic or cutting-edge, jewels from near and far, all around the globe. So that I felt instinctively that Michelle Ong's creations were bringing a new and audacious expression, a stunning new visual vocabulary to precious jewellery. I knew for sure when I saw Michelle in London, a few years later, wearing, with enviable ease and panache, a pair of monumental, intriguingly mysterious drop earrings, each composed of a huge slice of grey diamond, the soft, glimmering lustre arrestingly new yet aeons old and ageless.

Treading her own inimitable and uncompromising path, with her business partner and gem-dealer Avi Nagar at her side, she has continued to perfect a narrative that effortlessly weaves story and design with breathtaking gemstones, that speaks to women of style across the world, women looking for jewels to capture and reflect their personalities, their lives and dreams. It has been said many times, and it is true, that Carnet jewels fuse East and West, the stylised stillness of Ong's resolutely oriental clouds in European degrade pavé gems, her jade carvings side by side with rose-diamonds, resonating with 18th century French grandeur, but they also push boundaries of concept and craft while respecting the best jewellery traditions. Most of all Carnet jewels are creations of intense femininity, compelling in their contrasts of softness and strength, the fragility of a wilting petal, cloud or lace cuff captured through the invincibility of the diamond, the ephemeral made eternal, and timelessly, eternally elegant.

Vivienne Becker

*Jewellery Historian and*

*Contributing Editor to the FT - How to Spend It*





*Brooch* (TOP)

White and fancy light yellow-brown  
diamond  
White and yellow gold

*Earrings* (ABOVE)

White diamond  
Platinum and white gold

*Brooch* (RIGHT)

Light brown and white diamond  
Rose gold



*Brooch* (OPPOSITE)

White, fancy yellow and brown diamond  
Platinum and yellow gold

*Ring* (TOP LEFT)

Fancy light yellow and white diamond  
White gold

*Ring* (TOP RIGHT)

Fancy intense yellow and white diamond  
Platinum

*Ring* (BOTTOM LEFT)

Fancy intense yellow, fancy yellow and white  
diamond  
Platinum and yellow gold

*Ring* (BOTTOM RIGHT)

White diamond  
Platinum



### *Earrings*

White diamond  
Platinum and white gold

### *Pendant*

Grey diamond tablets, white diamond, amethyst,  
blue and green sapphire, rhodolite, garnet, citrine  
and fire opal  
Platinum, white gold and silver



*C*arnet is the culmination of a partnership between Michelle Ong and Avi Nagar, going back some twenty years. Carnet opened an atelier in Hong Kong in 2003 as a showcase for the jewellery. It is the combination of choice of stones, materials and design that has made the name Carnet the success it is today. Each creation is unique.



*Michelle Ong* was born and lives in Hong Kong, but spent part of her formative years in North America. She combines influences from both the East and the West to produce designs that are a powerful statement of her creative output.



*Avi Nagar* has provided the platform from which Michelle has been able to express her vision, and create and design the jewellery. The partnership has stood by the values of excellence in design, choice of stones and materials, and quality of workmanship from the start.

