

TIME

Style & Design

Ladies First!

The Women Who Are Reinventing the Business of Style

The Global Luxury Survey:

What Does the New European Consumer Want?

Simply Stunning. The jewels of Carnet's Michelle Ong are striking in originality and detail

By Betsy Kroll

"I CAN EASILY FALL IN LOVE WITH STONES," says Hong Kong native Michelle Ong, the designer behind the jewelry line Carnet. It shows. Ong's work, always exquisitely detailed, alternates between intricately configured diamond designs and astounding manipulations of colored stones. There's a jade dragon writhing in a cloud of diamonds and sapphires, an anemone flower made of tsavorites, emeralds and amethysts, and a pair of pearls held together by a swirl of diamonds. "Her distinct creations are considered exceptional not just as precious jewels but as objets d'art," says Vickie Sek, director of jewelry at Christie's Asia. An elaborate titanium and platinum necklace, bedecked with flowers and beads, took nearly four years to make.

Ong, 51, started her career as an apprentice to one of Hong Kong's first diamond importers, a family friend who invited her to learn the trade. "That's how I learned about stones—the properties, the colors," she says. "At first, of course, it was fun, but after a while it wasn't enough for me, so I started to make things for myself. It started as a hobby." After her boss retired, she formed a partnership with Hong Kong-based Israeli gem dealer Avi Nagar, and together they founded Carnet, originally called Dorera, in 1985. Ong feels that not having any design training gives her the freedom to take risks other jewelers may shy away from. "There's no fear. I have no restrictions," she says.

In Carnet's two Hong Kong boutiques (Ong calls the smaller one her "jewel box"), the mostly one-off pieces are interspersed with some watches and a more casual line, both introduced at the prompting of those whom Ong refers to as her "ladies." "They think my jewelry is very difficult to match to watches. They are crazy about watches," she says. Her ladies happen to include high-profile women like opera diva Renée Fleming and Wendi Murdoch, wife of the News Corp. titan. Both are effusive in their praise for Ong: "She brings enormous creativity to her art," says Fleming. "Michelle's designs combine the best elements from Eastern and Western cultures," says Murdoch. "The unique way she puts things together is beautiful."

Last year Carnet expanded into the U.S. with a small space at Bergdorf Goodman. "I went over and I said, 'Why not?'" Ong recalls. "I couldn't resist." For the store's part, Bergdorf's CEO Jim Gold says, "Michelle has helped us raise the bar, and our clients have responded enthusiastically."

Ong herself admits that Carnet is not for everyone. "People who come to me are not first-time buyers," she says. "To buy this kind of jewelry, you need to be a little bit educated, sophisticated, to be interested in work and design and not just flash." And for Ong, it's all part of a grander vision. "I want people to still like to wear my jewelry in a hundred years. It's a big bill to fill, but it is my dream." ■

Sparkle and shine Clockwise from top: white and brown diamond brooch; Carnet's shop at the Prince's Building in Hong Kong's Central district; designer Michelle Ong

