

Contemporary Jewelry with an Old Soul



An Interview with
Martin Katz, Martin Katz, Ltd.

EDITORS' NOTE Renowned for his exquisite taste and an unparalleled eye for transforming stones into artistic creations, Martin Katz founded his eponymous company in 1988. The company, Martin Katz, Ltd (martinkatz.com), quickly gained international prominence with a clientele that includes Forbes 400 business leaders, U.S. Ambassadors, and other individuals of affluence with a collector's spirit. Katz's passion for gems has earned him wide acclaim for designing beautifully crafted, couture-quality pieces inspired by his love of vintage jewelry – contemporary pieces with an “old soul.” Each piece is one-of-a-kind or limited in production, signed, numbered, and made with meticulous attention to detail. His work has been auctioned at Christie's and Sotheby's with the hammer prices being significantly higher than the original price they sold for in his salon. Throughout the years, Katz's creations have adorned A-list celebrities such as Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, Barbra Streisand, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Aniston, Johnny Depp, and Mark Wahlberg. Having been one of the first to lend jewels to the stars on the Red Carpet, he opened doors for the many who do so today. Many of his pieces have adorned the covers of Vogue, W, Town & Country, People, Elle, and InStyle magazines. Katz also designed the Victoria's Secret \$5-million diamond bra in 2009, created jeweled sunglasses for Ray-Ban and a \$1-million perfume bottle for Donna Karan and, most recently, he designed The Jewel Suite, a 5,000-plus square foot, three-story penthouse suite at The New York Palace Hotel. Katz attended Indiana University, where he began selling jewelry on campus and, upon graduation, he moved to Los Angeles and became an associate salesman at the Beverly Hills Laykin et Cie, a high-end jewelry salon. Today, Martin Katz is exclusively sold at his Beverly Hills boutique and at Bergdorf Goodman in New York City.



Martin Katz

make some extra money. I later moved to California, taking a job at a high-end jewelry store, because it was something I thought I knew. I really mastered it over the following seven years, splitting my time between vintage jewelry and fashion production jewelry. During that period, I developed my own taste, appreciation, and understanding of jewelry.

What led you to go out on your own?

My father owned his own business and I originally thought that, after some time in California, I would return to Indiana and go back into the family laundry and dry-cleaning supply business. I didn't really think that I would do my own thing. At the California firm I was with, the owner was getting old and there was no clear line of succession. Some major dealers in New York encouraged me to stay in the industry. They suggested I work for myself and said they would support me by giving me a few pieces to sell.

How did your vision for jewelry evolve and has the business developed as you imagined?

When I started in the jewelry business, it was to sell to sorority girls in college and

Now I have a vintage collection. I sell very few pieces, but 99.9 percent is my own collection that I design. I call it contemporary jewelry with an old soul.

I sold \$2-million worth of jewelry working off the kitchen table in my apartment approaching everyone I knew. In those days, it was about vintage jewelry. As I built a clientele, I started running out of great vintage jewelry. There was a particular style I loved, the great Edwardian and Deco period, and I cherry-picked from that period.

I started hearing from people that they recognized when someone was wearing my jewelry because it reflected my taste. This is when I knew that I had a voice in my taste of vintage. I also realized that I had to start designing my own jewelry or I would eventually run out of pieces to sell.

My design work soon started to dwarf vintage sales and I had too much respect for vintage jewelry to create reproductions. I was always striving to create something that had an old soul so it would work with the vintage pieces I had sold, but that was clearly a new and contemporary piece.

Is your market strictly high-end niche or is it broader than that?

It's high end, although I would love to create more broad-based items price-wise. The problem is that between the cost of metal and the stones I like to work with, it's difficult to produce pieces under \$10,000. We are coming up with some creative things in this regard, but it's not my strong suit.

It's really an upper-scale market starting at \$2,500 for our microband rings. They are the most copied items worldwide and we sell them almost every day.

How did the relationship with the Jewel Suite at The New York Palace Hotel come about?

Tambourine bangle in white gold (left); eight carat oval black opal surrounded by diamonds and amethyst from Martin's New York Collection (above)

I've done luxury collaborations for years. One of the first was in the mid-90s when I did the diamond StarTAC phone from Motorola, which Angela Bassett carried on the red carpet. I followed up with Ray-Ban, who contracted with me to design some jeweled sunglasses, which Celine Dion wore on the red carpet.

A bit over a year ago, one of my publicists contacted me about designing the hotel suite. I spoke their language, and I understood their luxury collaboration better than any of the other jewelers they had spoken with.

While they were deciding on who to partner with on the Jewel Suite, they developed some basic concepts. They showed me those and I told the owners that what had been chosen was not what I would have chosen. Thus, I couldn't represent it. I indicated that if they would be willing to start over, I would be in. They went with it, so I pretty much got a clean slate to work with.

Along the way, is there any time when you can reflect on and appreciate what you have built?

I'm always looking at the next idea. Someone who is creative or entrepreneurial can't ever make that stop. Creativity is my drug. I love the interaction with people.

I know I'm successful when I don't have to worry where my next meal is coming from. But I don't feel I can ever stop. There is always something else to strive for and I don't think that will ever change. I will feel the same way when I'm 80. ●