

MJSA CUSTOM JEWELER



Ahead of the Curve

*Three pieces, two sets of hands,
one award-winning design*

By Ettagale Blauer

When a piece of jewelry is designed, its function is pretty straightforward. Pendants will hang. Earrings might dangle. Bracelets can spin around a wrist. But what happens when a client wants a piece that will do multiple things: a gem-encrusted bauble that can hang from her neck as well as take a spin around her wrist?

This was the challenge posed to Cynthia René Marcusson of [Cynthia René Inc.](#) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. And considering that her attempt satisfied her client and claimed victory in the Custom Design Distinction category of the 2016 MJSA Vision Awards, all would agree that she more than met that challenge with her versatile, dual-purpose jewel centered on the combined concept of a family crest, a mandala, and the traditional Maltese cross design.

Despite the challenges posed, it was just another day at the office for René, so to speak. The client, who lives in southern California, has been working with René to create jewelry heirlooms since 2004.

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The client's desire to create a multi-use, jewelry medallion that could be worn as a pendant as well as on a bracelet, began with choosing a large, rare, yellow danburite. Cynthia Reneé fleshed out the concept inspired by her client's love of crests, mandalas, and the Maltese cross.

During a regular visit to the client's home, Reneé brought along several jewel boxes for the client to peruse. "We always start with the gem," explains Reneé. "She is a collector; the gems are paramount."

The client immediately homed in on a large, 20.52-carat yellow danburite, moved by its beauty and rarity. "As we played around with the gem during my visit to her house, we were moved by the way it played electrically with other jewel-toned gems," says Reneé. The client knew she wanted it to be the focal point of a piece, and immediately thought of a long-held idea she had for a jeweled medallion that could be worn on a cuff and a pendant.

"The client is a city planner by profession and loves multi-use pieces," Reneé explains. "For several years she has been thinking about creating a jeweled medallion that snaps into different bracelet forms and can be worn as a pendant."

Heavily involved in yoga, spirituality, and symbology, the client had only an amorphous idea for the piece. Reneé worked with her on fleshing out the concept, pointing out that her notes highlighted that the client loved the crests on Ralph Lauren blazers. The client noted that she had dreams of yoga mandalas, and that she had loved the Maltese cross. With these three very different ideas in mind, Reneé started tying the images together to form a

working concept.

Before they finalized the design, they needed to select the gems that would accent the danburite. "Gems are always first with us," she says. "Finding a fine and rare collectible gem is much more difficult than creating an idea and jewelry design."

"Working with a client for so long and closely, there was trust for her to have me source accompanying gemstones on one of my gem buying trips," says Reneé. "It took a lot of back-and-forth to find the right gems in the right shapes that all played well together. I sent her iPhone videos and photos, and we created the jewel menagerie."

The client ultimately selected four each of tanzanite (14 ctw), tsavorite (1.04 ctw), and red spinel (2.78 ctw), to represent her family of four encircling a glowing spiritual center.

With the palette of gems selected, Reneé began sketching possible layouts, seeking to create a harmonious and well-balanced arrangement that fulfilled the aesthetic desire for a jewel that evoked a family crest, but with hints of a Maltese cross and mandala. For Reneé, the stones ultimately dictated the design of the medallion. "Frankly, the gems told me the shape it would be," she says. "It was natural it would be symmetrical with a series of points radiating from the sides of the squarish danburite."

After choosing the gems and creating the layout, the next challenge was to design the work to suit the curves of the cuff bracelet as well as the flatter shape of a pendant. From an engineering point of view, these two very different shapes were incompatible. Or so they seemed at first.

A former Vision Award winner, Renéé was used to challenges, especially when working with long-distance clients. To help the process along, she partnered with Mirjam Butz-Brown of [Mirjam Butz & Brown Jewelers](#) in San Diego, with whom she has worked many times.

They had to create a framework for the gems that could be not only suspended from a necklace, but also attached to a cuff



Renéé partnered with Mirjam Butz-Brown to engineer a framework for the gems that could be used as a pendant, but also attach to the cuff bracelet. Wax models were created to determine the right arc for the gem medallion, which would have to curve just enough to fit the lines of the bracelet, and lie relatively flat as a pendant.

bracelet. The mechanism had to be secure but also engineered in such a way that the client could easily move the medallion from the cuff to the cord to suspend as a pendant.

“We sketched various bracelet layouts and engineering concepts as a starting point, eventually inputting the gem dimensions in CAD to accomplish further scaled conceptualization and engineering,” she says.

Her CAD program allowed her to play around with the stone layout, but it didn’t determine the right arc for the gem medallion. For that, they created wax models from the CAD design to see how the elements would work. She admits that it involved a lot of tweaking and adjusting before they had it just right. The framework would have to curve just enough to fit the lines of the bracelet while also being able to lie relatively flat when it was being worn as a pendant.

Once they finally determined the best way to engineer the dual-use medallion, Renéé and Butz-Brown considered various materials for the broad cuff bracelet, including black jade, white Mastodon ivory, and wood. Each was rejected for a specific, practical reason: The jade was too heavy for the client’s small wrist, ivory has a tendency to crack, and wood tends to dry out. Eventually, acrylic was chosen as the material because it was less likely to dry out and crack. It also comes in a range of colors, and the customer decided to have Renéé make her two cuffs: one in black and another in white.

Since the client’s wrist is very small, Renéé was concerned about getting the size and curvature of the bracelet just right. Because acrylic needs to be heated in order to be bent, it wasn’t possible to shape it around the client’s wrist. Instead, she worked with Butz-Brown to create a tool that would allow them to size the bracelet perfectly.

Butz-Brown met with the client and measured her wrist. They contacted a craftsperson to make a wooden dowel in the exact size and shape of the client’s wrist. They used the dowel to measure the length of acrylic they would need for each bracelet. The acrylic comes in large sheets so they used a saw to cut the bracelet forms from them. They could then heat the acrylic and bend it around the dowel to create the shape. But heating it up to bend it posed a whole new set of challenges.

“If it’s too hot, it bubbles,” says Butz-Brown. “If it is too cold, it doesn’t bend. We had to do test fires to get the right tempera-



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ture.” Once the acrylic was heated, Butz-Brown donned asbestos gloves so she could bend the hot acrylic around the dowel bit by bit to avoid overstressing the material. She found it easiest to bend the acrylic in two wide strips to generate the top and bottom of each bracelet. They hand-carved waxes to create the 14k white gold and 18k yellow gold clasps and hinges that would allow the bracelets to open and close.

Once they had the bracelets formed and domed, it was time to work on the gem-set medallion. Based on Reneé’s renderings for the design, Butz-Brown created a singular platinum bezel to contain the danburite, tsavorite, tanzanites, and red spinels. “To create closeness to the danburite, I put the tanzanite trillions into half-bezels,” says Butz-Brown. This way, the visible metal used to secure the stones has been pushed over the edges. “The danburite is set on all four corners,” she adds.

Because the client wanted a two-tone effect, Reneé decided to set the platinum bezel into an 18k yellow gold frame. The goal was to eliminate the need to make separate frames permanently anchored to each of the cuffs, which would have added weight and costs to the project.

They hand-carved the gold, scallop-shaped framework, which they laser welded to the platinum bezel. They then took extensive

measurements of the base so that they could carve out the same shape from each of the bracelets, creating a recessed area for the base to rest in. To be able to secure the gem medallion into the bracelet, Butz-Brown engineered and soldered a bayonet-type locking device to the back of the base and then drilled corresponding holes into the recessed area of each bracelet for the clip and anchor to slip through.

“The clip and anchor had to be secure enough to hold a medallion of this size and weight,” says Reneé. “One of the reasons we decided on platinum over white gold for encasing the central gems was because platinum is so malleable and perfect to use on fragile colored gemstones.”

To allow the client to wear the medallion as a pendant, Reneé and Butz-Brown created a pendant back that can be locked onto the medallion. “Without the separate back, the gemstones would be unprotected and the pendant, due to the clasp mechanism, would tip over,” explains Reneé. The pendant can then be worn with or without a bail.

And with that, after nearly a year of work and lots of trial and error, a new gem-encrusted work of art was born that would allow its owner the ability to wear it multiple ways. Challenge met and exceeded. ♦