



Building

Diamond Bridges

DIAMOND ACCENTS HELP DRIVE BRIDGE BUSINESS

BY LAUREN PARKER

With diamonds gracing virtually every celebrity, it's not surprising that mere mortals want to get in on the action. To that end, more and more bridge manufacturers—specifically those in sterling silver—have come up with ways to incorporate real diamonds into their designs at affordable price points. While the diamonds used might be quite small, retailers can—and do—promote them as “actual diamonds,” and consumers couldn't be happier.

The consumer has recognized sterling silver as a precious metal that is suitable to set diamonds in, as manufacturers and retailers agree. Most approach styling with a true “look of fine,” mixing genuine diamonds with precious gemstones such as rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. Those styles tend to be more conservative, such as tennis bracelets, or pendants in heart or cross shapes. More recently, however, manufacturers have been getting more creative, mixing contemporary silver looks with diamond accents for a different type of customer.

Roman Company recently introduced the Stella Moon line of clean, modern sterling silver jewelry with diamond accents. Inspired by European fine jewelry designs, it features rhodium-plated sterling silver (the best to resemble platinum) with precious gemstone accents such as diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Retail prices range from \$30 to \$150.

Kremenz, a division of Colibri, recently launched its Daring Diamonds line, appealing to younger women to essentially “go for it” and wear diamonds with its “Do You Dare to Wear Diamonds” tagline.

Packaged to look like fine jewelry in Chinese redwood boxes, the styles are contemporary, featuring linear drop earrings, polished and matte finish mixes, and fluid twist shapes. Retailers are \$50 to \$175. This line will be distributed to fine jewelers, at least initially, increasing retail competition for department and specialty stores who sell jewelry at such pricepoints.

Designer Sandra Messinger has been using diamonds in sterling silver for about three years



Kremenz lures women to wear diamonds

now and was recently named one of the “10 New Designers of the Year” for 2002 by the International Jewelry Design Guild. Her sterling silver designs feature “uneven, imperfect surfaces” that look hand-crafted, with diamonds and ruby accents.

In department store bridge departments, sterling silver (or gold vermeil) and diamond jewelry, often with precious gemstone accents, has become an item-driven business. One-day sales, often with a “limited-time only” tagline, drive hundreds of customers into stores, and in turn “blow out” as much merchandise as they can before the item returns to its regular retail price. Carson Pirie Scott is one such retailer. “We do tremendous volume with diamond accent and genuine stone jewelry,” says bridge buyer Diane Yagen. “We've been running such programs for

four years now, and while the business is down four percent this season, mainly due to other variables like the sluggish economy, the diamond accent jewelry has been keeping pace all this time.”

Carson Pirie Scott will hold a “while supplies last” private night and has been coming up with new merchandise to drive customers in. “We can sell 15,000 pieces in one eight-hour period,” says Yagen, referring to store-wide promotions. Merchandise examples are \$29.99 diamond accent bracelet with genuine stones or birthstones, or multiples such as oval stud earrings in five colors for \$19.99. Vermeil is performing better than sterling in this category as it has “higher intrinsic value,” according to Yagen.

Danecraft president Bob Soltys agrees. “We're selling more vermeil than ever before. It used to be 60/40 sterling to 24-karat vermeil in the spring, and that would switch in the fall, but it's been running 50/50 for us. People have been talking about this return to gold for a long time, but it never really happens. Now, it's finally happening.”

Danecraft layers rhodium under the gold so it doesn't tarnish, and is also experiencing a “huge upswing” in vermeil chains.

To target retailers who aggressively pursue diamond promotions, 21st & Stone has boosted its diamond accent offerings with equally aggressive pricing, according to vice president of sales Christine Finlay. “We offer a 71.6-percent initial markup, then 57.5 percent at the sale price. “Stores take \$13.50 and pre-ticket it at \$80, then at 50% off, it's \$39.99 with a sale price of \$29.99. Other pricepoints start at \$8.50 and go \$29.99 at 50% off, then \$19.99 on sale. Vermeil is 18-karat gold over sterling, while silver is platinum plate.”

The Bon-Ton reports that its bridge

Silver and diamonds: star bracelet, Roman, \$24; ring, Sandra Messinger, \$134. **Silver and pearls:** From left, 21st & Stone, \$20; Jane Diaz, \$80. All prices wholesale. For more information, see In This Issue.

department is up double digits compared to last year due to “more aggressive promotions and newness” contributing to its success, according to divisional vice president of jewelry, fashion accessories, and intimate apparel Melinda Shue. For fall, Shue booked CZ sets and promotional tower earrings, and for holiday, she's planning lots of boxed sets and \$19.99 gold earrings.

When it comes to bridge jewelry, designers have been taking different approaches for holiday, resort, and Spring '04. 21st & Stone has taken an aggressive stance on freshwater pearl, as well as pearl mixed with CZ for a “look of real” yet contemporary design. Flat coin pearls and CZ on leather cords will wholesale for \$6 to \$8. Other looks for spring will be cherry quartz mixed with pearl (following this year's strong sell-throughs of cherry quartz), as well as “tonal watercolors” in opal and pearl combinations. For Spring '04, 21st & Stone will add a pearl-and-diamond boxed program, according to Finlay.

M.W. Samara is also betting on pearl with its new Sterling Pearl by Samara line. “We wanted to move away from the whole promotional diamond thing,” says executive vice president Robert Ebert. “This will be a sterling line with touches of pearl, not pearl strandage. I don't think the pearl customer and the sterling customer have truly joined forces yet.” Boma jewelry has opted to reinvent its marcasite line for fall, after the success of its pink shell and mother-of-pearl jewelry for spring. “We're trying to find a new customer for marcasite,” says product designer Sarah Whitmore. “With younger customers looking at vintage styles, we've gone for the vintage trend with a bolder look. It's something we believe in.”

Roman Argento is looking at the revival of the Bali look in all silver. “We've had requests from retailers to keep jewelry all metal because there's been such a glut of stones,” says Grace Ryding, senior merchandiser. “We're working on oxidized, textured looks as well as highly polished mod looks in sleek geometrics with a funky twist.”

Zirconmania goes after a look of real in its sterling and CZ jewelry, featuring heavy chains with gemstone stations as well as pearl-and-metal mixes. For holiday, the company is “doing the bling thing” with CZ-encrusted, diamond-inspired bows as well as initial letters that wholesale for \$15, according to president Jacob Hassidim.

Barse & Co., which has succeeded with colored pearls and semiprecious stones, has offered all-metal, hammered silver styles for fall, and will introduce a new group that features “caged” semiprecious stones such as Botswana agate and onyx. “Semiprecious may have slowed down, but we're not moving away completely,” says marketing director Jenny Shaw Williams. ●