



# THE ARTIST GOLDSMITH

Precious gems, pearls, stones – and the New Zealand landscape – inspire Christine Hafermalz-Wheeler to create unique gold and silver jewellery. Patrick Smith visits her Waiheke Island studio.





“Take this outside and look at it against the sun,” says Christine Hafermalz-Wheeler, handing me a Mexican fire opal the size of a flattened quail’s egg. We step out onto the terrace of her Waiheke Island home and I raise the gem to the light. Sparks of colour flare into life: red, orange, gold, blue, yellow, green – the colours dance with the slightest movement of the gem.

Hafermalz-Wheeler is a goldsmith by trade and an artist by temperament, but gems, pearls and stones are her inspiration, the starting point from which she creates handmade gold and sterling silver jewellery that is shown and sold around the world.

Her opals are from Guadalajara; black and gold pearls come from the Cook Islands and Indonesia; cut and carved stones from master stonecutters in Germany; gold is either alluvial, from the South Island, or recycled from pre-loved jewellery. “I like to melt old things down, things that were valuable to someone,” she says. “Most pieces of jewellery have a story attached.”

Her studio takes up a good part of the purpose-built home overlooking the Hauraki Gulf she shares with her husband, David Wheeler, who’s also her business partner. The room is part gallery, displaying examples of her work, but largely it’s a working space. In one corner is a small hearth for melting and mixing gold alloys; there’s a roller mill for turning the rods of solid gold into wire or ribbon; a heavy workbench is littered with a profusion of tools and instruments; a shelf holds a set of fine old scales and there are books of elemental tables – recipes for creating different colours of gold. And there are slim, velvet-lined cases full of cut stones and gems – tourmaline and agate, golden citrine and lapis, dendrite agate and onyx, opals and pearls, aquamarine, black diamonds and rock crystal.

She lifts out a rectangle of pure crystal, inside which another crystal has grown. It’s a beautiful thing and, like the

other treasures lying in their beds of black velvet, Hafermalz-Wheeler bought it from German stone carvers Bernd and Tom Munsteiner during one of her regular trips to Idar-Oberstein, a town that has been at the centre of the gemstone industry for hundreds of years.

“I bought it because it talked to me,” she says. “I need stimulation, a spark of originality. The challenge then is for me to develop it. Sometimes I will work the stones quite minimally, at other times I will make it quite baroque – it depends on their character.”

We move around the studio. Every piece of jewellery has a story to tell. Here’s a necklace of golden pearls interspersed with ceramic beads from the nose cone of the Space Shuttle, one of only two such necklaces in the world. An 18-carat gold and diamond brooch, called “My Heart Beats”, has an East German cap-badge as its centrepiece and contains fragments of the Berlin Wall that Hafermalz-Wheeler herself chiselled from the hated symbol of the Cold War. An ornate necklace, “Waka”, containing a 99ct Munsteiner-cut aquamarine shaped like a canoe, three blue diamonds for the three stars of Orion’s Belt and three small seashells, tells the story of the artist’s journey from Germany to New Zealand via England.

“Christine doesn’t draw anything before she starts a piece,” her husband tells me later. “It’s an organic process and it makes me think of an actor understanding every aspect of the character they’re playing.”

Unlike most modern-day jewellers, Hafermalz-Wheeler creates her pieces entirely from scratch – mixing gold alloys, forging metals, setting stones and using traditional techniques such as mouth-blown soldering to fuse the metals. Each work is unique and can take several days to complete. “A bracelet with complex movements and clasps can take up to two weeks” she says

Hafermalz-Wheeler was born in Erfurt, in East Germany. Her parents escaped with her to the West when she was

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Avaiki black pearl ring in 18ct gold with antique-cut diamonds; Christine Hafermalz-Wheeler at her workbench; golden pearls, from Indonesia with New Zealand jade carved by Donn Salt surrounded by coloured diamonds set in 18ct gold; Dom Pedro aquamarine set with macle diamond, labradorite, tourmaline and rock crystal in 18ct white gold. Above: Double ring with pearl, moonstone and tourmaline in 18ct white and yellow gold.



Above, left to right: Forged 18ct gold bangle, with 3ct heart-shaped diamond; fire opal pendant with black pearl, set in sterling silver with 18ct gold elements; double ring in 18ct yellow gold, Spessartine garnet and diamonds. Below, left to right: "Colour of Freedom" necklace with Mexican opals and sea-snail opercula; creating 18ct gold – at a temperature of 1,080°C – gold, silver and copper granules are melted together.

four and she grew up in Stuttgart. She learned about working with metal as a young girl playing in her father's plumbing workshop. By the age of 12 she knew she wanted to be a goldsmith and at 14 she apprenticed herself to a master craftsman. Four years later, after earning her ticket and being elected to Germany's esteemed Association of Professional Artists, she opened her own workshop and gallery, Goldschmiede Christin, in the centre of Stuttgart, which she ran for 17 years.

During that time she met her future husband, an Englishman who was running a language school in the town.

"I was running a studio with seven employees and David asked me if I needed help," she laughs. "That was 31 years ago." The loving partnership, with David handling most of the day-to-day running of the business, allowed her to concentrate on her artistry and the gallery flourished.

In 1988 she closed the gallery and the couple moved to the UK, where Hafermalz-Wheeler continued to work on crafting gold jewellery from a studio in Sussex. But during a 1991 family holiday in New Zealand with their two children they fell in love with the country's natural beauty. They returned to England, settled their affairs and flew to Auckland, living and working in Titirangi before moving to Waiheke and building their dream house, Citrine, on land at Parkpoint. The New Zealand landscape, she says, continues to inspire her work.

Over the years Hafermalz-Wheeler has been elected to prestigious goldsmithing societies and has shown her work at galleries and exhibitions in Germany, England, the US,

Australia and, of course, New Zealand, where her pieces have appeared at the Auckland Museum. For five years her work was shown at SOFA (Sculpture, Objects and Functional Art) in New York and Chicago and for a decade she was represented by the renowned Aaron Faber Gallery on Fifth Avenue, New York.

Each year Hafermalz-Wheeler creates at least one new collection, although she increasingly works on commissions, sometimes creating pieces around precious jewels (one recent work involved a 6ct emerald) or giving new life to old treasures. The couple travel for a few weeks a year, visiting selected clients and seeking out jewels, precious metals, shells and stones to stimulate the artist's imagination.

Today, she says, her most popular pieces – "my signature dish" – are her double rings, which fit over two fingers (and feel surprisingly comfortable to wear). "I would suggest she's the best exponent of these in the world," says David, "she understands how the rings sits on the hand."

Over her 40-year career, Hafermalz-Wheeler has gathered a loyal following – people who may own "20, 30, 40 pieces and although they are now elderly are still collecting". One German family has amassed more than 100 of her works since 1972 and the daughter adds to the collection each year.

"The pieces are timeless and when you see them 40 years later you think, 'OK, I made that', but I can never put a time period on it," she says.

It's a long way from Fifth Avenue to Waiheke Island, but it seems distance and place are unimportant in the world of rare and precious things. [www.theartistgoldsmith.com](http://www.theartistgoldsmith.com) 

