

BAVARIAN RHAPSODY

In the first of two features looking at jewellery businesses that have remained in the same family over several generations, ANNABEL DAVIDSON meets the Hemmerles, Munich-based magicians whose unique design sensibility and elegantly adventurous use of unconventional materials set them apart



PHOTOGRAPHS BY FLORIAN JAENICKE

In any other jeweller's workshop, a small stack of wood would have some mundane carpentry purpose. At Munich jewellery house Hemmerle, however, a certain alchemy takes place, transforming the most unexpected materials into some of the world's most boldly innovative jewellery. In the hands of a mastercraftsman, these short lengths of blush rosewood and pale olive wood will be carved, sanded and polished into perfect interrupted loops and finished with two large brown and white diamonds or a uniform sprinkling of spinel. The result is a bracelet intensely understated and indescribably beautiful.

Very few jewellers these days do what Hemmerle does. While almost all contemporary jewellery is derivative of something that came before it, inspired by a Victorian ring or an Art Deco cuff, what this jewellery house does is wholly original, innovative and technically groundbreaking. Diamonds are set in iron. An enormous milky-green moonstone breaks up a thick cuff in sandblasted white gold. No two pieces are the same, and none will ever be recreated. Yet once you get to know the brand, you'll never mistake a Hemmerle piece for anything else. There's something about the use of proportion, colour and texture that makes a pair of giddily coloured and beaded sapphire earrings as distinctly Hemmerle as an almost-austere iron and diamond ring.

This is a fourth-generation family business, not the work of just one insanely talented artist. They have a single, elegant store in Munich, which the family first opened 109 years ago. Stefan Hemmerle's grandfather and great-uncle were appointed as official purveyors of medals by the Bavarian court. In 1995 Stefan set a diamond in a ring of textured iron for a wealthy client, an art collector who loved jewellery but loathed its usual flashiness. This visionary step was the first on the road to what Hemmerle is today, a jewellery brand with a look so distinct it could pass as exquisite, wearable modern art.

At Stefan's side, running the business with him, is his wife Sylveli, his son Christian and Christian's Egyptian-born wife Yasmin. The family works in harmony, each member having a role in the design of every piece. Christian and Yasmin live opposite the workshop and come in together every morning to speak with the craftsmen and women, view a special colour of gold created to precisely match a certain stone, or marvel at a clutch of egg-like brown conch pearls. Despite the distinction of each and every piece, the team never starts out with a finished design in mind. Instead, they start with a rare or unusual gem, or a piece of mottled, lime-green, ancient jade, and design around it. "We try to give the gem the best home," explains Christian. "You just feel it in your bones when it's right." Hence their constant innovation in creating new metal colours and textures to harmonise with the materials.

Case in point: on a bench sits a strange sort of seed pod, something Stefan picked up while wandering through a park. It occurred to him that its smooth scales would be the perfect home for a certain brown diamond he had been hoarding. A ring has been created in a warm, brown-tinged gold, its surface textured to mimic the seed pod. Inside, the brown diamond sits perfectly at home. And so another Hemmerle masterpiece is born. □

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF HEMMERLE (CRAFTSMEN, EARRINGS, RING)



WOODEN IT BE LOVELY?

Clockwise from top left: a pair of jade and garnet earrings; enamelling materials; a craftsman at work on a poppy-design brooch; Sylveli, Stefan, Yasmin and Christian Hemmerle; several varieties of wood in storage in the basement of the Hemmerle workshop; a pavé diamond, gold and wood Harmony bangle; craftsmen in the Hemmerle workshop in the 1950s. Opposite: father, son and safe, in the Munich boutique.

