

## Style

# The ultimate stoner experience



*Lucie Muir with Giampaolo Della Croce, high jewellery director at Bulgari © Rick Pushinsky*

APRIL 22, 2016 by: **Lucie Muir**

In a retail climate that places a premium on unique bespoke pieces, brands must now outdo each other in creating innovative “experiential” interactions. Today, clients can learn about top notes from a leading perfumer or take a lesson in shoe care at one of Mayfair’s finest cobblers. But I’m going to partake in one of the most exclusive in-store experiences on offer: a fine jewellery masterclass at Bulgari’s lavish New Bond Street store in London.

The workshops, run twice yearly, are aimed at loyal and longstanding customers. Bulgari’s UK managing director Vincent Reynes is especially keen for the Peter Marino-designed store to become a destination not just for

shopping but for exchange — a place where things happen: “to fully immerse our customer in our creative process and make dreams come true for many”. Sadly, I will not be able to keep the bespoke piece that we design. But for Bulgari clientele, creations will be produced, in the months thereafter, at the house’s workshops in Italy.

[Bulgari \(http://www.ft.com/topics/organisations/Bulgari\\_SpA\)](http://www.ft.com/topics/organisations/Bulgari_SpA), the Rome-based house founded by Sotirio Bulgari in 1884, is famed for its coloured gemstones and exuberant designs. In the 1960s, its store on Via Condotti became a destination (often via a secret entrance) for the film stars of the day: Monica Vitti, Gina Lollobrigida and [Elizabeth Taylor \(http://next.ft.com/content/9237a442-9278-11e3-8018-00144feab7de\)](http://next.ft.com/content/9237a442-9278-11e3-8018-00144feab7de) were all clients. Today the house is led by creative director Lucia Silvestri, though my class is guided by Giampaolo Della Croce, Bulgari’s high jewellery senior director. Immaculately dressed in a chalk-stripe suit and violet tie, the charismatic jeweller has been a gem enthusiast since childhood, when he would go in search of rocks with his grandfather in the mountains near Milan. Today, he works with Silvestri and the rest of the Rome design team, updating them on the latest gem trends as well as liaising directly with global clients.

The jewellery designs at Bulgari are built around the gems Silvestri sources on her buying trips, often accompanied by Della Croce. Together they travel the world in search of the most dazzling varieties. In addition to brightness, transparency, cut and colour,

Della Croce seeks out stones that stir the emotions. He's especially seduced by the sapphires of Sri Lanka: "The royal blue shade is difficult to find, whereas Sri Lankan sapphires have that beautiful cornflower blue colour." To illustrate his point, he shows me Bulgari's Blue Iridescence necklace, featuring sapphires, pink spinels and 24.75 carats of round brilliant-cut diamonds set on rose gold. He carefully lays "his baby" on the table.

Blue Iridescence is the first of several surprises Della Croce pulls from a large leather case. Next he brings out three envelopes containing batches of amethysts, emeralds and mandarin garnets. The amethysts are gently tipped into the palm of my hand and I'm prompted to "feel the personality of the stone". The retail value of this cluster alone is enough to make my palm sweat. He then suggests that I listen to the gentle click-clack as they rub together — something that still delights him even after 30 years in the job. The sound reminds me of playing with glassy marbles as a child.

Then I hold a clutch of tiny Colombian emeralds. Zambian emeralds, I'm told, are generally more transparent, Colombian combine the precise blend of blue and yellow needed to form that perfect green. They feel as light as birdseed, which is not quite the cackling Bond villain moment I was expecting.



*One of Bulgari's bespoke designs © Rick Pushinsky*

Many claim gemstones have a healing power. Della Croce believes they have a calming effect, which is why we tend to play with a gemstone ring or earring when nervous. There are also superstitions surrounding stones. Rubies are said to change with the health of the wearer, while agate “cures a fever”. In Italy, opals are widely thought to bring bad luck, which perhaps explains why chairman Paolo Bulgari won’t even look at them, and why there are so few opal pieces in the Bulgari archives.

Della Croce likes stones with inclusions — characteristic lines or dots deep within the surface that add personality to the finished pieces. As for colour, he prefers a stone to have one voice, though I’m encouraged to look deeper and list four or five different nuances.

The masterclass also touches on the cut and set of gems, which is demonstrated in another priceless bracelet, designed with rubellites, tourmalines and amethyst. For a moment, it twinkles on my wrist. Two years in the making, its carefully engineered hinges move effortlessly. I find myself studying their intricate workings.

He tips the amethysts into my hand.  
The retail value of this cluster alone  
is enough to make my palm sweat

Finally, I am  
given the  
chance to create  
my own piece.

Using  
aquamarines,

sapphires and amethysts, I am shown how to place colour and shape combinations on a white wax board. The stones imprint into the soft surface as I place them. I'm hugely relieved that these priceless gems will not be set in stone as the result of my novice handiwork. (I later discover it would take Bulgari's team of 16 goldsmiths and 12 master goldsmiths up to two years to craft a floral necklace like this. The price is a carefully guarded secret.)

Creating one-of-a-kind pieces is nothing new to Bulgari. Its bespoke service goes back to Sotirio Bulgari's day. The house's founder would craft jewels *à la mode* on request. In the days when diamonds and pearls were the norm, Bulgari would inject a pop of colour with cabochon gemstones and jade.

Today customers come with more specific ideas. Take the client who asked Bulgari to create a rose gold and

diamond leather choker for his Doberman. “We made something simply wonderful, very creative. He was so impressed, he changed his mind and gave it to his wife instead,” laughs Della Croce.

*Photographs: Rick Pushinsky*

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*[Inner value of the stones used is very important / From Luca Alfonsi \(http://next.ft.com/content/7d1c4638-0c85-11e6-bof1-61f222853ff3\)](http://next.ft.com/content/7d1c4638-0c85-11e6-bof1-61f222853ff3)*

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