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On the cutting edge

Make a personal connection with hand engraving

By Jacquie De Almeida

The desire to know where we come from is just as strong as knowing where we're going.

Online ancestry websites and genealogy databases entice with the possibility of connecting with the past, whether through building a family tree, searching historical records, or out of just plain curiosity.

Plug in a name and a few details into one of those websites and chances are some interesting tidbits may pop up about your lineage, including a family crest or coat of arms. It's an interest some say is spilling over into jewellery design.

Family ties

The trend of hand engraving a family crest, coat of arms, or even a town insignia appears to be on the upswing, in part due to the popularity of tracing one's roots. It is also another way to personalize a piece of jewellery and, as a result, strengthening the retailer/consumer relationship. A well-served customer—particularly on a piece with such deep-rooted meaning—is a return customer.

"Most of us are immigrants or born from immigrant parents, usually from European countries with thousands of years of history behind them," notes Voytek Jaskowiak, owner of Gresham Jewellers in Mississauga, Ont. "Even small towns have crests. People like to have those symbols on jewellery, especially men."



A dragonfly rests on lily pads in this 19-karat white gold ring with yellow gold bezel and yellow diamond. Hand engraved by The Coast Handworks Co.

A hand-engraved white gold wedding ring by Mirko Engraving Ltd.



A sterling silver watch case hand-engraved by Alpine Custom Jewellers and Repair.

Most men aren't interested that much in jewellery, but rings with crests are popular."

Strengthening the bond with the past is not simply for an older crowd, Jaskowiak notes. Younger generations also take pride in family history and the symbols associated with it.

Master engraver Miroslaw Kruszynski of Mirko Engraving Ltd., in Toronto says customized hand engraving on a piece of jewellery is a reflection of the client's memories, making it that much more special.

"It's an absolutely unique design and one-of-a-kind in the world," Kruszynski says. "The piece becomes a family heirloom. Hand engraving is a very personal and sentimental aspect that can be added to jewellery. More and more people want to build and understand their genealogical tree and it definitely has a big influence on our trade."

With the use of carbide-tipped pneumatic tools as opposed to old-style push tools, hand engraving today is quicker, more precise, and provides a mirror finish to cuts. In the hands of a master, the results can be extraordinary detail on an almost microscopic level.

Accuracy, depth of cut, and longevity are some of the more tangible selling features of hand engraving, notes master engraver Warren Smith, owner of The Coast Handworks Co., in Armstrong, B.C. However, he says it's the human touch that usually wins clients over. "Hand engraving offers 'life' to a piece, imparting a human connection to the [jewellery]," Smith

explains. "The customer wants this and is only looking for you to say it, as it fulfils their desire to make this connection."

Timeless appeal

Custom designing bridal jewellery is highly personalized and one of the mainstays of hand engraving. Marianne Lessard-Coutu, owner of Lessard Coutu Custom Jewellers in St. Catharines, Ont., says the growth in popularity of hand engraving on bridal on the outside of the band is on the rise, especially in conjunction with pavé-set diamonds to create a vintage esthetic.

"Engraving is not a fad," says Lessard-Coutu. "It's a very old technique and it's always in demand. It just happens to be in demand these days because of the antique, ornate designs that are very much in style for bridal jewellery."

Master engraver Jim Zimmerman says he's also noticed this trend, but adds engraving on the shank helps hide scratches resulting from normal wear-and-tear on the metal, particularly in the case of platinum.

"A ring with a polished surface can get scratched and tends to show its age very quickly," notes Zimmerman, owner of Alpine Custom Jewellers and Repair, a trade shop in Zurich, Ont. "If it's engraved, it becomes timeless because you can't tell when it was made. It adds to the value of the ring and its desirability."

Hand engraving inside wedding bands is also making a comeback. Depending on the font used and the number of letters or numbers, consumers can expect to pay about \$100, as opposed