

Jewellery

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A master's secrets unveiled

Achieving good engraving

By Miroslaw Kruszynski

Just as a painting increases in value when an artist signs his name to it, so too does a piece of jewellery as a master engraver handcrafts its surface. When that happens, the ring, pendant, or watch becomes a family treasure—an heirloom.

With an apparent decrease in the number of skilled hand engravers, handcrafting jewellery seems to be a dying art. As a result, fewer examples exist with which to compare good and bad engraving, arising in instances where jewellers may shortchange customers on quality simply because they don't know the difference. This may be due to the fact training and education in this specialized form of jewellery design is difficult to come by.

There are certain telltale signs that distinguish between good and bad engraving, between work done by the professional's hand and that done by an amateur. The following guidelines and tips are important to keep in mind when hand engraving a piece of jewellery.

Practicing precision

One of the main methods used to determine an engraver's skill is to examine the legibility and precision of his or her design. A highly legible engraving job should be obvious to the naked eye, even to the inexperienced viewer—distinct shapes, forms, and line work should be unmistakable.



Photos courtesy Mirko Engraving

The top ring illustrates the precise work of a master engraver.




Platinum is soft and easily scratched. Deep cuts help to hide minor scratches and produce a clear design.

“Fewer examples exist with which to compare good and bad engraving, arising in instances where jewellers may shortchange customers on quality simply because they don't know the difference.”

While the work of a less skilled or amateur engraver may be sloppy due to a lack of control with engraving tools, a master's work is precise—there is a clear distinction between where one design ends and the next one begins. The work is not rushed and there are distinct, decisive, and strong lines and/or patterns with a definite purpose and direction.

Very few engravers know of or pay attention to high-shine cuts, which is one of the secrets of high-quality engraving. Using well-polished engraving tools with diamond powder can attain this effect. More specifically, a sharpening system must be used to properly prepare tools, followed by hand polishing using fine emery sandpaper. Next, they should be polished on a piece of hard, smooth leather on which diamond powder has been spread.

This prep work is particularly important when working with platinum, which is extremely soft and easily scratched. A deep and clear engraved design distracts from these minor scratches and ensures the engraving is clearly visible. To achieve sharp and highly defined mirror-like



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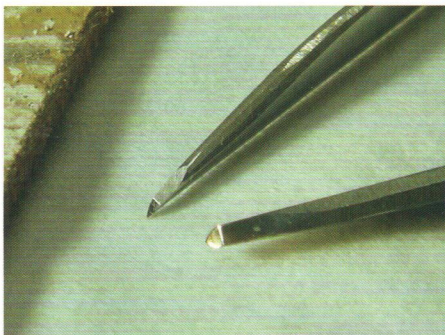
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A step-by-step guide to engraving

1.

To achieve precise cuts, the faces of engraving tools must be polished to a mirror-like surface.



2.

The engraver cuts two deep grooves near the bevelled edges of this 14-karat white gold wedding band.



3.

China white water-based paint is used to trace the design's main lines. Next, pencil marks are drawn, indicating where cuts are to be made.



4.

A sharp scraper is used on the surface to prevent pencil lines from being accidentally erased during engraving.

5.

The initial cuts of the leaf design must begin from the ring's centre to the outside in one smooth cut.



6.

A 45- to 55-degree cut along the same lines allows the motif cut and three-dimensional effect to come through.

7.

Using a square graver at a 45- to 55-degree angle, an arched cut is made from the outside of the bevelled edge to the ring's centre to achieve the leaf's tip.



8.

The veins of the leaf are created using a fine onglette graver.

9.

After polishing the surface, the engraver applies number 9 milligrain to complete the design.





The author with Grand Masters Program instructor Ken Hunt at a reception at Emporia State University last fall.

grooves, it is essential to polish your tools every few cuts. These tips also apply to other metals, such as gold, silver, and stainless steel. It is important to keep in mind the optimum angle of the tools is dependent on the metal's hardness.*

A high-quality design is symmetrical and proportionate from every angle. The photo on the opposite page shows irregular and inconsistent line work in the ring on the bottom, which makes for a sloppy appearance. Even in freehand design (*i.e.* one not intended to be symmetrical, but with a more organic design), there is a sense of proportion and artistic quality. A good hand engraver is not only skilled technically, but has a definite artistic sensitivity, displaying attention to the elements and principles of design such as balance, proportion, space, etc. The engraver's artistic touch adds great value to his work, as awareness of these design aspects make his engraving a work of art.

The depth of cuts is crucial, not only for visual appeal and good design, but to ensure the design lasts. Compared to laser-crafted designs that are usually shallow, smoothen with wear, and disappear quickly, deep cuts remain for decades. While some laser engraving may last longer than others, they eventually lose their design appeal.

The human touch

While there is a lot of machine-engraved jewellery on the market—which tends to cost substantially less than handcrafted engraving—it's important to remember machines are limited in their ability to capture the same artistic quality you would expect from a person. They are also restricted in the intricacy of their designs and how many they can produce. In comparison, a human being can create any design, regardless of its sophistication, with an endless number and variety of possibilities.

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Some engraving cannot be fixed as too much material has already been removed. The ring on the right shows the precision of a master engraver's work.

Although very accurate and precise in creating geometric shapes and designs, machines cannot produce the fluent, curved lines of a hand-engraved piece. Also, machine engraving can be easily copied and reproduced, losing the artistry of a professional engraver. The same cannot be said of hand-engraved jewellery—it is never exactly the same, even when attempting to create a copy. In short, artistry and uniqueness are evident in handcrafted pieces.

Another consideration to be taken into account when identifying handcrafted jewellery is the fact the piece may be a copy. Even in the case where the original is of the highest quality, the copy itself may appear distorted when produced using a rubber mould.

While rubber moulds are a viable option for mass production of less expensive metals (e.g. silver), quality may be lacking. This process tends to tone down shiny grooves and cuts, causing them to appear rough, unclean, and with a low lustre. The result is a design that is no longer as clear and precise as the original. Often, these copies are then recut in an attempt to fix problem areas. However, this can seldom be achieved since material has already been removed, leaving very little to work with. More importantly, rubber moulds change the original design, causing the proportions to look distorted or undersized. This is not to say problems with all copies cannot be fixed—this depends on how much material is left and is determined on a case-by-case basis. However, in this author's experience, the results will likely be less than perfect.

While machine engraving or work done by less skilled engravers is much cheaper and widely available, it lacks the same artistic and invaluable quality a professional brings. Rather, you run the risk of shortchanging your business and/or losing the value of your purchase. However, with these thoughts in mind, you will be better able to pick and/or produce a timeless work of art engraved by a master's hand. ✧

* For more information on cutting different metals, visit Firearms Engravers Guild of America (FEGA) at www.fega.com.

Miroslaw Kruszynski owns Mirko Engraving in Toronto. He is a master engraver with more than 25 years of experience and has trained under some of the world's most esteemed hand engravers. Kruszynski successfully completed the grand masters program at the GRS Training Center in Emporia, Kan., last October. He can be contacted via e-mail at unique@mirkoengraving.ca for more information.

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