



Tenthio Fine Jewelry's "Flutura Pendant" in palladium with pink tourmaline and diamonds on an 18-inch cable chain; suggested retail price is \$550. (212) 937-5290 or Tenthio.com

Sasha Primak's "Argyle Collection" link bracelet in palladium and 18-karat gold with diamonds; suggested retail price is \$7,720. (212) 398-0287 or SashaPrimak.com



Dennis deJonghe's entry in the Business/Day Wear category of the 2009 American Gem Trade Association Spectrum Awards was a palladium pendant featuring a freshwater pearl accented with 0.27 carats of diamonds; suggested retail price is \$2,720. (518) 587-6422

TREND WATCH

A 2009 prediction: Designers will drive palladium

BY LORRAINE DEPASQUE
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NEW YORK—It's purely a matter of time: Palladium fashion jewelry will be the next designer darling. Despite reluctance from jewelers who fear consumers are too unfamiliar with the 95-percent pure metal, the consensus (even from retailers) is that throughout this year, designers will drive the category beyond bridal and men's, where it has slowly been gaining converts over the past several years.

One clear yet unexpected sign of the trend emerged at the 2009 American Gem Trade Association (AGTA) Spectrum Awards.

"We had a 55 percent increase over last year in entries using palladium," says Adam Graham, marketing manager of the AGTA, which sponsors the awards.

For a 25-year-old competition that recognizes artistic excellence from some of the nation's best jewelry designers and lapidary artists, that's a significant statistic.

"It definitely indicates that palladium is gaining more and more acceptance in the designer world," Graham says.

All in all, acceptance might be putting it mildly. Some, including Tenthio, Sasha Primak and Michael Sugarman, seem to be embracing the platinum group

metal with gusto. All three are developing entire palladium collections on top of their usual high-karat gold and platinum lines. At the summer trade shows, retailers will see these and many more fashion palladium pieces. Those planning to adopt the metal are some of the most recognized names in the design world, including such innovators and award winners as Robert Lee Morris, Paul Morelli, Zoltan David, Alishan, Michael Bondanza and Barry Kronen.

Of course, the uncertain economy and anemic retail environment have played a big part in nudging designers to take advantage of the relatively reasonable price of this noble white metal.

It's no wonder, really, for anyone doing the math. At press time, palladium was selling at \$183 an ounce, compared to gold at \$805 and platinum at \$840.

That said, it needs to be noted that for more than a year now, other factors have been fueling favor for palladium as a precious metal option for items such as pendants, earrings and bracelets, particularly when designs are large in scale. For one, somewhat recent changes in technology and metallurgy now allow refiners to alloy palladium with exotic metals. Also, the Palladium Alliance International (PAI) has been marketing and promoting the metal and gearing up for this year, when it will make an aggressive consumer

push. Sometime this spring, for example, a consumer Web site for palladium jewelry will launch, directing site visitors to retailers who offer palladium pieces.

STILL UNKNOWN ENTITY IN U.S.

Although PAI launched Luxury Palladium.com (primarily for the trade) in mid-2006, retailers, by and large, remain unfamiliar with the metal.

"Some stores don't know anything about it, so it's not sold in a lot of shops yet," says Sofia Elliot, designer and founder of New York-based Tenthio, which has offered a 30-piece palladium collection for two years. "But I've seen that once it's in the store, the customer will like the piece first, then they ask what it's made of. That's why it's important that designers are now pushing palladium to this next fashion level."

Elliot also mentions that over the past year, major brands such as Fendi, Salvatore Ferragamo and Gucci have been using pure palladium hardware on their accessories.

"Before that, they were just using palladium plating on their handbags and belts," she says.

Maybe this increased general awareness is one reason why Tenthio's palladium

A PRIMER ON PALLADIUM

Facts on palladium to help you introduce the metal to customers.

» Palladium is a precious metal and one of only four noble metals: gold, platinum, sterling silver and palladium.

» It's part of "the platinum family." There are six Platinum Group Metals (PGMs): platinum, palladium, rhodium, iridium, osmium and ruthenium. As a PGM, palladium shares many common traits with platinum.

» It's a comparatively affordable precious metal, especially given the higher platinum and gold prices in recent years.

» It's durable. Palladium is actually 12.6 percent harder than platinum, offering great resistance to wear.

» It's light in weight. Some 40 percent lighter than platinum due to its lower density, palladium is a great option for earrings, especially.

» It's identifiable by the marking "Pd." Just as "K" indicates karat gold, "Pt" or "Plat" are the symbols for platinum, and sterling silver is stamped "925," the "Pd" symbol marks palladium's authenticity.

» It's naturally white. Palladium's white color is almost identical to that of platinum. It doesn't tarnish, yellow or become dull, and requires no plating to make it extra white.

» It's rare. Mined in only a few regions worldwide, palladium is as rare as platinum and many times rarer than gold.

» It's hypoallergenic and doesn't contain any possible skin-irritating metals such as cobalt, zinc or nickel (which is in some karat golds and causes an allergic reaction in 10 percent of the population).

» It has 95 percent purity. In North America and Europe, the current standard for palladium jewelry is to use a 950 alloy, so the finished piece has a 95 percent purity.

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STYLEFILE: MATTE METTALICS — ANYTHING BUT DULL

jewelry sells well in the Thai Privilege Spa in New York's trendy SoHo neighborhood. The spa caters to an affluent and sophisticated clientele, says Jess Thidadon, marketing and operation executive of the franchised spa, which also has locations in China, India and Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"Ours is a gallery-like environment and I carry the jewelry because our target customer group is the same as the Tenthio customer," she says. "For me, though, it's not so much about palladium jewelry being a luxury product as it is about palladium making it unique and a metal that appeals to the customer who wants unique."

So far, most of the spa's customers know what palladium is, perhaps, Thidadon says, "because most of them travel abroad, and it's more known there."

Joe Del Mauro, sales manager of Sasha Primak, agrees that consumers overseas understand the metal better, especially in Europe.

"It doesn't scare them, and the Eastern Europeans, particularly, have done extremely well with our palladium jewelry," Del Mauro says.

Until a short time ago, Sasha Primak was a luxury brand working only in high-karat gold and platinum. But last June, the established New York-based firm premiered two palladium collections, a fashion line for

women and a line for men.

"We now look at palladium as a metal option for a customer who wants an option," says Igor Shersher, general manager of Sasha Primak. Like Thidadon, he emphasizes that there is no such thing as a palladium customer.

"At Sasha Primak, we do luxury lines, so our palladium is also a luxury line," he says.

The company's palladium jewelry for women ranges from \$500 to \$3,000 at retail, while the men's jewelry price points range from \$400 to \$2,000.

Again and again, the concept of "palladium as an option" comes up in conversation. Last month, Sasha Primak launched an e-commerce Web site that offers customers who want to create custom designs online the choice of having any piece done in palladium.

As for Sugarman-Frantz Designs in Santa Fe, N.M., Christie Frantz says this year's company plans also allow for the option of having any piece to be made in palladium.

"I think jewelers actually have started educating customers about palladium,

but it's partially to those customers who want custom design," she says.

Since he started his design firm in 1976, Michael Sugarman, Frantz's husband, business partner and fellow designer, has been creating contemporary pieces in platinum and high-karat gold. Yet, going forward, some of his work will also be in palladium.

"It's a beautiful metal and so much prettier than 18-karat white gold," Frantz says. "It has all of the virtues and none of the drawbacks."

Among the virtues? Frantz refers to qualities including palladium's natural whiteness, hardness and durability, 95-percent purity, hypoallergenic quality, lightness in weight, lower price per ounce relative to gold and platinum, high malleability, great color when polished, lack of brittleness and lower density than white gold.

Its status as one of the six platinum group metals, and also as one of the four noble metals (palladium shares that exclusive station with gold, platinum and

Near left: Palladium earrings from the "Michael Sugarman Collection" for Sugarman-Frantz Designs feature 0.21 carats total weight of diamonds; suggested retail price is \$1,550. (800) 444-5517 or SugarmanDesigns.com

Far left: Tenthio Fine Jewelry's "Raindrops" pendant in palladium and 18-karat gold with Paraiba tourmalines and diamonds; suggested retail price is \$1,470. (212) 937-5290 or Tenthio.com

sterling silver) are important to Frantz as well.

Indeed, its drawbacks are few, but, as Steve Kaufman, owner of Ladyfingers Jewelry, a high-end designer retail shop in Carmel, Calif., says, the precious metal's biggest disadvantage is that the public knows very little about it.

"I haven't bought any palladium fashion jewelry, but mostly because I haven't seen much of it," Kaufman says. "So far, we haven't been exposed to it in any big way from the designers."

However, if early 2009 predictions about palladium come to pass, that situation is soon to change. And Kaufman's reaction to that? "The timing for it is probably excellent," he says. ♦



Lorraine DePasque is a freelance writer who specializes in fine jewelry and gems.

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