

STORIES OF GEMS

OR SIX WALKS WITH KARINA MARTUS

By Daiva Budrienė

Photographs by Gianluca De Girolamo and from Karina Martus's personal archive

Karina Martus, Jeweller

Fine jewellery — genuine, traditional jewellery.

That is what is written in italic lettering on a sign in the entrance hall of a bourgeois house. It tells you which floor and which room to go to. Karina's office and workshop are right in the heart of London — at Piccadilly Circus.

First Walk

Waterstones — Six Floors of Stories

Sometimes I think her eyes are sad. And that they somehow dictate the tone of her gaze, which is compassionate, understanding, encouraging and friendly. Sometimes there is some kind of longing hidden in those eyes, something that cannot quite be put into words.

They are like sapphires — although perhaps a little deeper in colour. Sapphires, incidentally, are her favourite stones.

Karina probably wouldn't agree with my description. But she wouldn't argue either. Is that politeness innate, or did she acquire it here in London? I'll have to ask her. That extreme politeness in conversation. To tell the truth, I like it.

We walk along Piccadilly to Waterstones, London's largest six-storey bookshop. I am still a newcomer to the bustle of this world, this world capital, whereas Karina has been here for 28 years.

How many passionate hearts and fiery minds have dreamed of conquering London? Some have conquered it. Others have adapted. Others are still searching for themselves. And some may never find themselves.

Karina is in her element. She believes that the world, the universe or fate always brings you to the place where you are supposed to be. Perhaps you dream of the stages of the world's greatest theatres, the cockpit of an aeroplane, the throne of a saviour of humanity, or a job as a collector of stars — but you are where you are meant to be.

On the hand of a woman browsing an interior-design book on the fourth floor is a massive ring. It looks luxurious, and I wonder what Karina might say about it.

Karina looks at the woman, we step aside, and my companion laughs:

As soon as I see a client, I can tell what piece of jewellery they are going to order.

A person's clothes; hairstyle, jewellery and behaviour communicate information about who they are. I am interested in psychology, so I have developed archetypes of my clients.

A woman comes in to order a piece of jewellery, and I already know even which stone she will choose.

Friendly, generous, easy-going, cheerful people will go for large pieces of jewellery. Those who appreciate antiques and Art Nouveau will order a ring with an emerald. This means a rectangular stone setting with cut-off corners, rather like an antique mirror whose every edge has been faceted or decoratively cut to create a bevel.

People who like to move through life with fashion will definitely want jewellery in the style of Cartier or Tiffany — something immediately recognisable. You can't sell them an original piece.

People who promote a natural lifestyle will ask for a piece made from amber, shell or an unusual stone they have found themselves. Such people even like earthy colours — brown, sand, ocean blue...

Those who embody classic elegance adore traditional jewellery: tiny diamonds, a pearl on a chain as thin as a hair. It is important to them not to attract attention.

Clients whose clothes, shoes, accessories and handbags are carefully coordinated will choose sets: earrings and a pendant, or a ring.

Artists won't want simply a ring or a bracelet. They will want a piece of jewellery with a deeper meaning, something that seems to say from a distance that what is pinned to the lapel is not a brooch, but a work of art.

Second Walk

The Queen's Shop

We go to the Queen's shop. It says Fortnum & Mason on the front, and everyone who lives in London knows that food for the Queen is still bought there.

The shop is only a few steps from Buckingham Palace, so even carrying something over by hand when Her Majesty suddenly wants it would not be difficult.

But that is just my playful fantasy — imagining that the attendants immediately take the Queen her tea or chocolate...

The shop is luxurious. And expensive.

Gold, rhodium, platinum, palladium and silver. These metals are resistant to corrosion and oxidation in damp air. They are durable. They don't break easily. They are difficult and expensive to extract.

Only precious stones are set into them — diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds. Jewellery like this can pass from one generation to another. These pieces are unique and valuable. And they are given on special occasions, says Karina.

Did you know that gold can come in different colours?

For example, white gold is man-made. It can contain 10 percent nickel, 10 percent palladium and 5 percent zinc. In England, adding nickel is prohibited because it can cause allergies. Palladium is usually used instead, which is why white gold is so expensive.

In 18-carat yellow gold, gold makes up the majority — 75 percent — with 12.5 percent copper and 12.5 percent silver.

Want darker gold? Then 15 percent copper is added.

How do you get red gold? It contains 25 percent copper.

Rose gold contains 22.5 percent copper and 5 percent silver.

I also like green gold. Alongside copper and silver, it contains 4 percent cadmium.

Platinum is the purest.

And black gold is made by coating gold with liquid black rhodium.

Special equipment is needed to make beautiful jewellery.

Jewellery is expensive not simply because the metals and stones are expensive. The instruments, knowledge, experience and skills all cost money too.

The more unique the piece, the more demanding and precise handwork it requires. Every hole is cut by hand with a jeweller's saw, and that is evidence of the craftsmanship involved.

And there can be hundreds of such holes in a single brooch where the stones will be set.

I'm making a rose at the moment. I've cut 346 holes. That means 346 different stones will be set into it.

What is the difference between jewellery and costume jewellery?

Costume jewellery is made from brass or copper and merely coated with silver, rhodium or gold. The stones are fake. It is often described as 'gold vermeil'.

When people see the word 'gold' in a description of costume jewellery, they think they have been lucky enough to buy a genuine gold piece cheaply.

They don't realise that the coating will wear off and the piece will lose its colour.

Some jewellery is simply high-end costume jewellery, but it isn't valuable. I don't think a grandmother will pass it down to her granddaughter.

Many people are allergic to this kind of costume jewellery — their ears, necks or fingers become green or inflamed.

Precious metal is pure.

Costume jewellery is disposable; once it breaks, it cannot be repaired. Jewellery, on the other hand, passes from generation to generation and becomes a family treasure.

In my opinion, costume jewellery is a waste of money.

Third Walk

Side Streets and Dead Ends

We simply wander through little streets and alleyways.

Every major street in central London is like a river: it has tributaries — little side streets and dead ends...

They appear around a corner like something from a theatre stage. You pull back the curtain and suddenly find a cosy courtyard, a café or a shop where you never expected one to be.

All the streets of central London conceal little secret lanes. You don't know where to turn, and you will never discover them all.

Karina says that her favourite stones depend on her mood. Each colour can indicate what kind of energy you are lacking.

I like rubies and opals. Black opal, or Mexican fire opal, has an extraordinary colour.

I like beryls — blue and yellow ones. At the moment I'm fascinated by mint and Paraíba tourmalines; their colour is unique.

But my favourite is the blue sapphire. It gives me peace of mind. It is believed that this gemstone has healing powers. It is also the stone of wisdom; it helps ward off depression and negative thoughts.

If you are interested in chakras, sapphire corresponds to the vibrations of the third eye.

It is mined in Australia, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, China and America. Sapphire is very hard — only diamond is harder. Rubies belong to the same family.

Rubies, by contrast, give you energy.

I learned a rather painful lesson connected with buying sapphires and rubies, and it cost me dearly.

I was at a jewellery exhibition in Basel, Switzerland. I was planning to buy a stone because I had an order for a ruby ring.

Late in the evening, in one of the exhibition halls, I saw a ruby that seemed divine. It sparkled and beckoned like a fire. It was illuminated by numerous lamps.

I actually gasped at how rich and extraordinary it looked. I was so delighted to have found it. I bought it without even negotiating the price.

That evening I looked at it again in my hotel room and it still radiated light.

The next morning, wanting to admire my purchase again, I opened the box. I thought I was going to have a fit.

The stone didn't sparkle at all. It looked like plastic — dead.

And it really was dead, because it only sparkled under the halogen lights.

The seller had simply deceived me.

So I learned my lesson: buy rubies in the morning and sell them in the evening. With sapphires, do the opposite.

The price of sapphires depends on their cut and colour. The most expensive cut is the emerald cut, because it requires a great deal of raw material.

Fourth Walk

Somerset House

Today we are meeting at Somerset House, London's centre for creativity and art.

It is one of the most beautiful places in central London. Many famous and emerging artists have established their studios here. New ideas and young businesses are constantly developing.

The studio of the Italian photographer Gianluca De Girolamo is also located here. He photographs all of Karina's work.

The metal chairs in the courtyard remind me of the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. I sink into one of them and put my feet up on another. I'm not the only one.

Today Karina is photographing a dragon ring.

My pieces are unique, created for a particular person.

Sometimes clients want to remain anonymous, so I can't even put the piece on my website.

When I first meet a client, I talk about colours and shapes. I ask why they want this particular stone or another one.

I try to explore the whole personality.

The creative process takes an enormous amount of energy.

Sometimes I don't sleep at night. I think about it constantly and, for a while, I live entirely with that piece of jewellery.

I don't answer the phone. I am alone with myself, looking for inspiration in museums and art books.

When I was creating the dragon ring, I researched what different dragons look like, how a fairy-tale dragon differs from a Chinese or Japanese one, and how they differ anatomically.

Creating the design and form is a long process.

And when I go to present the jewellery, I get nervous. I feel like an actress who now has to perform a particular scene sincerely and convincingly.

I dress up, put on perfume and make myself look smart. After all, I am presenting my baby.

I've been a jeweller for 33 years, yet I get nervous every single time.

It matters enormously to me whether the client will like it, whether they will love the piece.

It is very hard to part with some of them. They are extremely precious to me, almost as though they are a part of me.

Before giving a piece to the client, I take it out and look at it, as though encoding good thoughts and wishes into it for the person who will wear it.

I let it go as if I were marrying off my own child.

People sense what I have put into the jewellery. They send me photographs. I love reading about how good they feel wearing those pieces.

Fifth Walk

St James's Park

In St James's Park, we photograph ourselves beside enormous sculptures — amusing hares, male and female, with slightly greenish sides, but very impressive.

It is the height of summer, so beneath the tall, shady trees is the only place where you can really catch your breath.

London has many such green islands where, it seems, you cannot even hear the city speaking.

It is beside these hares that we remember childhood and the choices we make.

Incidentally, Karina's father was one of Klaipėda's most famous jewellers, Grigorijus Martus, so it is hardly surprising that she followed this path. Her son Norman is also continuing the family tradition, designing jewellery.

But it wasn't all that simple, says Karina.

I studied at the Klaipėda Conservatory, and I might have become a good choreographer.

After an injury to my leg, I fell out with my teacher. She wanted to get as much out of me as possible because she genuinely believed I had the ability to dance — that's what she told me.

When I got home, I announced that I would never dance again.

My parents were worried, but they didn't pressure me.

Then my father gradually began to weave his web. And I got caught in it.

From a very young age I was reserved and quiet. I drew a lot and liked making things with my hands, but I didn't dare show them to other people.

Most of my friends didn't know I had a creative streak.

I constantly imagined that I was an actress. I would rehearse what were probably my future roles in front of the mirror.

On Saturdays I would bake cakes for my parents, knit, and want to create something that would please other people.

I loved silk, beautiful and artistic things. I could sense them and recognise them.

And even then I knew that I had to work, work, work. More and more, so that I could find my own form of work, so that at least something in my life would be perfect.

I was mysterious. I watched people.

As a child I liked disappearing into the snow. I would lie down and look at the sky. I would walk until late in the evening.

I would fall into the snow and watch the clouds.

I felt so good being by myself.

Once, my parents couldn't find me and even called the police.

The image has stayed with me ever since: I am lying in the snow, nobody can see me, and I feel so good being there.

I think that looking at the clouds and stars opened up her imagination and creativity.

And creative thinking is essential for a jeweller.

An idea is not enough. You have to know how to realise it. You have to work out how to make what you have imagined. You have to understand the limits of experience and possibility.

Clients cannot imagine how much work goes into their jewellery.

Things don't always work the first time. Sometimes a piece has to be remade several times.

Nobody sees that. And nobody counts the hours.

When they buy a piece of jewellery you have created, they are buying not only expensive metal and precious stones, but also your soul.

All the creative suffering, the passion.

A jeweller must have passion and imagination, so that when they see a stone they already know what can be made from it.

Of course, I acquired a great deal of knowledge while studying in London at London Guildhall University — everything from design, jewellery, drawing, engraving, stone setting, diamonds and gemology to jewellery techniques, understanding stones and art history.

I also studied psychology for a year. It helps me enormously now when I deal with clients.

Sixth Walk

A Club Party near St Paul's Cathedral

Every party held by the High Profile Club has its own task and theme.

This time everyone has to dress in white.

So what am I supposed to do if my favourite colour is black?

All right, I'll wear an almost-white skirt — with black and grey squares.

This club is well known as a monthly meeting place for immigrant entrepreneurs from all over the world who live in London. They come together to chat and share business ideas and contacts.

All Karina's jewellery has a story.

For example, she created an apple when she was single and didn't have a partner. Sitting in cafés, she used to watch couples in love.

At the centre of the apple are the lips of two people, joined in a kiss...

And the ring with the red eye resembles a collar!

Karina created that ring while remembering her childhood, the snow and the fur coat that all the children had back then — identical ones.

So that she could easily find her coat in the school cloakroom, her father had sewn a red button onto the collar to fasten it...

My friend Sara asked me to create something from her mother's jewellery.

There were diamonds, rubies and gold.

Sara didn't know what she wanted.

I had decided to make a brooch reflecting the history of the family. I thought perhaps a feather?

When I called again to discuss the project, Sara told me she had been diagnosed with cancer and that she didn't care about anything anymore.

I realised I didn't have much time. I left my friend alone, hoping that she would get better.

Later I called again and suggested creating a butterfly.

It seemed to me that the life of a butterfly is similar to human life — in its fragility.

In some cultures, the butterfly represents the human spirit leaving its earthly home.

I could see that Sara was becoming weaker.

I managed to make the butterfly. I went to the hospice to give it to her. We both cried and, in our own way, we were both happy.

She immediately put the butterfly around her neck.

Before she died, she expressed the wish that everyone who came to say goodbye to her should have a butterfly symbol somewhere in their clothing.

At the funeral, Sara's daughter wore the butterfly.

It meant so much to me...

When I scatter stones across the table, they begin to speak to me.

Many famous people own my jewellery, but if I listed their names I would simply be boasting and would violate their privacy.

Precious stones don't like loud words. They know their own value.

Just like my work.

And I wouldn't want to single out any of my clients — a clerk, a shop assistant, a politician or a star from the world of music.

For each of them, when I create a piece of jewellery, I put into it everything that fills my heart at that particular moment.

Several years ago, a stone dealer brought me a greenish-blue sapphire. I had never seen anything like it.

It captivated me immediately.

We agreed that I would think about it overnight, and if the stone kept me awake, I would buy it.

That sapphire stayed before my eyes. Some kind of magical force drew me towards it.

The next day I bought it.

When I designed the ring, the design simply flowed onto the paper. My emotions rose like waves.

I gave it the Latin name Magnum Desiderium — endless desire.

Even now I call that stone Magnum Desiderium.

It means a great work of art, because nature did a perfect job when it created it.