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jewellery

Jeweller Barbara Heath's hands aren't exactly rough, but they're worn, and she couldn't be happier.

"Jewellers get quite proud of their hands," she says. "I was recently overseas and met a woman who was a pretty famous costume jewellery designer and she said, 'Look at my hands, I still make all the master patterns myself'.

"If your hands are really clean, you're probably not sitting at the bench."

While diamonds are a girl's best friend to those wearing them, they are a gruelling, stubborn, pain in the thumb to those crafting them.

Barbara *(pictured)* likes jewels as much as anyone, probably more than most, but she also recognises them as the time-consuming, sweat-inducing challenges they are.

"You need to have good hand-eye skills," says Barbara, 49, of the essential talents of a jeweller. "Over time you gain those skills. The materials are beautiful and it's a lovely field to work in, but it's dirty and messy and your hands are stuffed. You need the manicure."

Barbara is a jeweller to the lost. Generally, her clientele are people uninspired by stock in the commercial jewellery chains. They come to Barbara for a little flair. They come for that little something that nobody else in the world has — a piece of jewellery as much from their own hearts as the jeweller's.

"A lot of people enjoy being part of the process," says Barbara, who started an apprenticeship in Melbourne straight out of high school with a skilled Hungarian jeweller.

"I find every commission is half me and half the other person. I get them to sit down and talk about, often, what they don't want. You get to gauge what the parameters are, what you can work in."

And with Barbara's work, the parameters are broad. Her shapes are inherently unique. A bracelet might simply go around the wrist, but Barbara makes it kink and fold and twist and excite along the way. Unexpected colours are mixed with unexpected settings.

A particularly creative local captain of industry once asked Barbara to make for his partner a ring that featured a re-creation of the Ryoanji Garden, Kyoto's enchanting, spiritual garden made of 15 rocks set into a sea of raked sand.

The result was an 18ct gold ring with detailed, carved silver inlay symbolically representing the garden.

In a cool downstairs section of a Wilston Queenslander, Barbara and her passionate team of jewellers work away on new, handmade jewellery commissions.

The workshop is alive with colour, from the glass cabinet full of precious pink, blue, yellow and green stones to the silver sheen of white gold to the purple flame of a welder.

A vault in the corner holds the extremely rare and unusual gem stones that Barbara and her husband Malcolm Enright have travelled the globe searching for.

The jewellers have their heads down in their individual work spaces labouring over new pieces. Where one might have expected precise, patient manoeuvring with machines, there are instead are rough, forceful hands, scraping and sanding.

"Jewellery is archaic," says Barbara. "It's always a new take on an ancient theme.

"Jewellery making hasn't changed for centuries. We do have a little bit of help — we can use high-speed rotary brushes and we can speed up the finishing of things — but it always comes down to hand finishing. Something that's been hand-finished always looks way better than something that's been mass made.

"We can't compete with super machine precision, but when there's something that's been laboured over and there's been a lot of energy put into it, it really shows. If you make something with passion it will show in the end result."

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