

Holding a place and a window in time

BY SHARON QUILL

WHEN IT COMES TO SOURCING BEADS, CANBERRA BASED JEWELLERY DESIGNER MAUREEN WARNER LEAVES NO STONE UNTURNED – AND EACH FIND COMES WITH ITS OWN FASCINATING HISTORY. FOR HER LATEST EXHIBITION, MAUREEN CREATED 280 PIECES FEATURING VINTAGE BEADS AND SHE IS MAKING STRIKING STATEMENTS WITH SIMPLE, CLASSIC DESIGNS.



"I KNOW IT SEEMS LIKE A LOT but it is a year's worth of work and some of these pieces are earrings which don't take a lot of hours – except of course for the ones which didn't work out the first time!"

"I like to feature one or two types of bead and complement them with silver, gold or brass. I believe, in the case of vintage items, that the piece will be more valuable and more collectible when it is itself a collection. I prefer simple rather than intricate styling so that the beads themselves take centre stage."

A few of the pieces taking centre stage in her exhibition include a necklace featuring vintage brass filigree. This intricate piece is almost 7cm in diameter and set with a 1940s glass stone. Another is a set made with Japanese textured glass pearl and then there is the set featuring an original hand carved cinnabar bead, an ancient Chinese lacquerware technique that is now often reproduced with stamped plastic; it is complemented with 1920s French faceted beads.

Maureen's creative streak didn't begin with jewellery however. Back in the '80s, she was selling 'Art to Wear' clothing to



local galleries, boutiques, and at craft fairs; and jewellery making, despite being a perfect fit for the collection, wasn't even considered. That was until she took a course in silk knotting in order to restring some of her personal jewellery.

"That one class has stood me in good stead. I still use the techniques. I string all my necklaces with French wire and use crimp covers to complete with a professional finish."

"Around the same time I did the course, my husband was working in Nigeria and Ghana and brought back lots of very interesting old beads – Venetian millefiori, old carnelian, chevrons, wedding cakes, clay spindle whorls and sand cast bronze beads to name a few."

Twenty years on, Maureen has an extensive collection of vintage beads dating as far back as the 1800s. She works exclusively with vintage and antique buttons and beads, and prefers the natural light of her kitchen table to create.

As well as making the inventory for her annual exhibitions, she receives a lot of requests to repair broken jewellery. It is something she says she is very happy to do

as she sees a lot of interesting beads and designs that way.

She buys her beads exclusively online. She often buys through Australian and overseas vintage bead stores. Her favourite Australian stores are www.polymerclay.com.au and www.sunsetcrystals.com.au

She also keeps an eye on Ebay, but the vast majority of her buying is through personal contacts of bead and button collectors. Although she doesn't belong to any online forums she says her network of contacts could be called an unofficial forum.

"Bead and button collectors are very generous people and are happy to share information and new finds. Many of these people are now my friends. One of these friends estimates she has over half a million vintage buttons."

Maureen says she is captivated by vintage beads not only because of their beauty, intricacy and quality of the workmanship but also because of the stories behind the beads. Her bead stories are as varied as her collection and her passion has led her to the most extraordinary people and places.

A few years ago, thanks to one of her sources, Maureen's collection grew

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exponentially when she heard about some uncirculated vintage beads. The beads were kept in warehouses in the old jewellery district of New York, an area once considered the jewellery capital of the world.

"These beads ended up in the dark for a number of reasons. In some instances it was a family studio that had stopped operating, or an enterprise which went out of business for financial reasons, and then there was the change in direction the industry took in the 1960s when the flower children preferred love beads, ceramics and African trade beads to classic styles. Jewellers and costume jewellery companies simply had to store their inventory. The Miriam Haskell Company is one famous costume jewellery company which stored a large inventory. Coro is another."

"I buy from collectors, the children of collectors and long time jewellery designers who have hoarded beautiful beads and components for years and are now willing to share them.

One lady I buy from goes into those rat infested warehouse basements of New York wearing a caver's torch on her head and big gloves so as to sort through crumbling crates

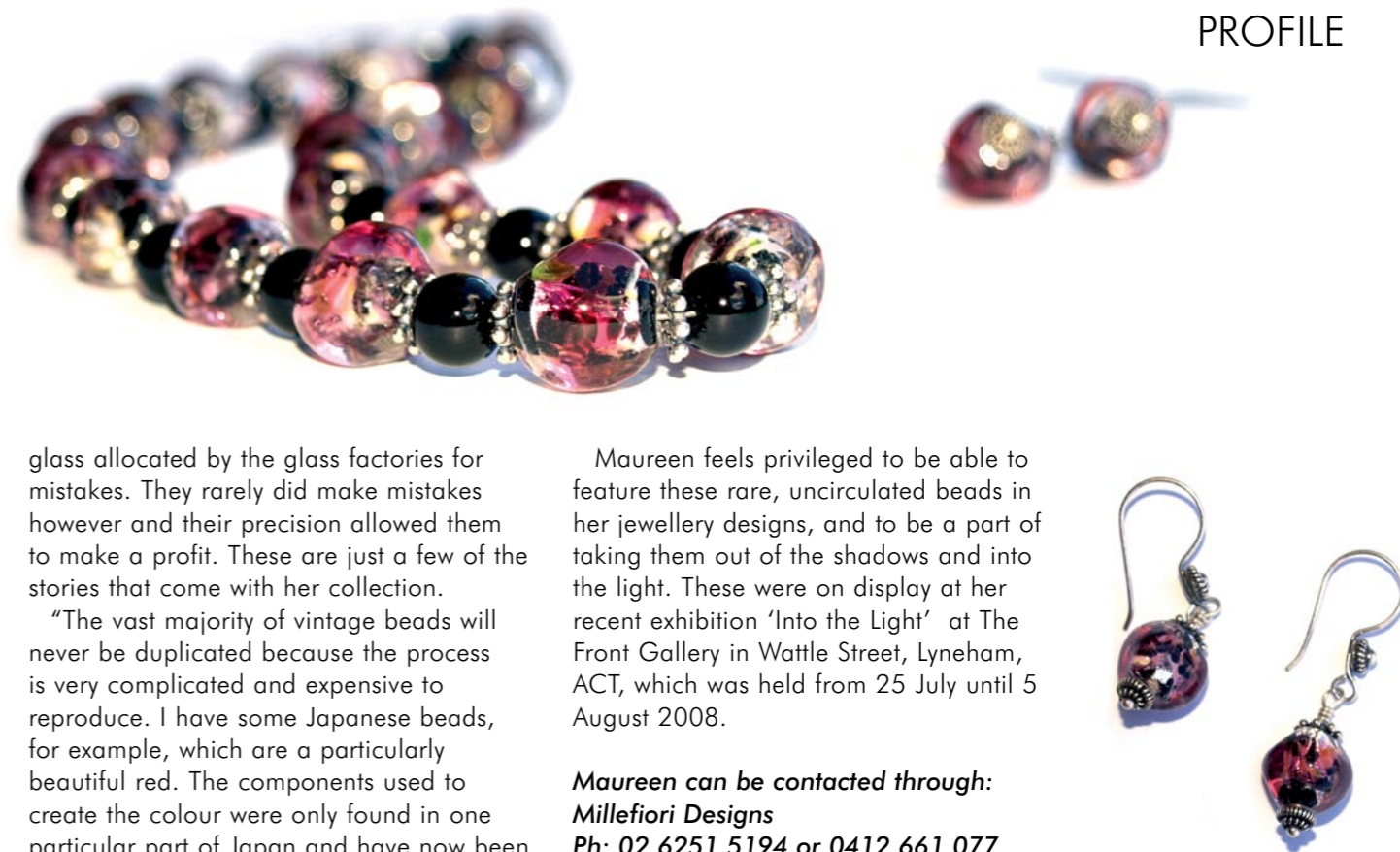
for bead treasures. She pays for them by weight! Another person I buy from found a huge inventory of beads in the basement of his parents' home."

At the time Maureen heard about the finds in the old New York jewellery district, she also heard about beads kept in store rooms in Venice, the Czech Republic, the Ukraine and Germany. These beads too had extraordinary histories, some that dated back more than a century, others that were stored due to the political situation of the country, and even beads linked with European espionage.

"Beads have been part of history since the earliest times. They were traded along the Silk Road, in Africa and the Americas. When you hold one in your hand you are holding a place and a window in time."

"In the past, most bead makers operated from small studios or from homes, and were often organised into collectives for selling purposes. In Czechoslovakia, for example, the makers lived together in bead villages. Their techniques were closely guarded secrets and a great deal of bead espionage went on. The Czech bead runners who imported beads into the United States were reputed to be Russian agents and, in some cases, double agents."

Maureen also has beads made by farm workers in occupied Japan after World War II, and beads originally sold on the quiet by Bohemian bead makers who used the excess



glass allocated by the glass factories for mistakes. They rarely did make mistakes however and their precision allowed them to make a profit. These are just a few of the stories that come with her collection.

"The vast majority of vintage beads will never be duplicated because the process is very complicated and expensive to reproduce. I have some Japanese beads, for example, which are a particularly beautiful red. The components used to create the colour were only found in one particular part of Japan and have now been mined out."

Maureen feels privileged to be able to feature these rare, uncirculated beads in her jewellery designs, and to be a part of taking them out of the shadows and into the light. These were on display at her recent exhibition 'Into the Light' at The Front Gallery in Wattle Street, Lyneham, ACT, which was held from 25 July until 5 August 2008.

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