

DECADENT INDULGENCES

BY AMY FLURRY

THE GEM MASTER

Tiffany & Co.'s John Loring Guides the Legendary Jeweler Ever Forward

To meet John Loring for high tea at The Ritz-Carlton dining room is a true test of social etiquette.

A tall gentleman in a slender gray suit with a natural air of warm formality, his gestures are as perfect and assured as you would expect from the ambassador of Tiffany & Co.

Since signing on as design director of the iconic American brand in 1979, Loring has led its global expansion, particularly in enlisting art royalty to design jewelry: He asked longtime friend Paloma Picasso to design a collection the year after he joined Tiffany and welcomed architect Frank Gehry to the family almost 30 years later.

Only the third design director in the company's history, Loring was the first to ask for and be given permission to explore the company's archives, where he unlocked a treasure trove of once-obscure designs that ignited a past-as-present ethos that made Tiffany synonymous with timeless American craftsmanship—perhaps his largest contribution to the company.

Loring's education began in a one-room schoolhouse on an Arizona ranch. At just 16 he entered Yale University, and upon graduation moved to Paris, where for four years he studied painting, art and sculpture at the École des Beaux-Arts. His first job was in retail for Yves Saint Laurent, and by the time he was 25 he owned and operated the fifth YSL boutique, in Venice. He flourished as a connoisseur of style and décor, serving as a contributor to and later New York bureau chief of *Architectural Digest* before succeeding influential tastemaker Van Day Truex in his current position at Tiffany.

Now in his late 60s, Loring shows no sign of slowing down. He has recently shepherded into print another lavishly illustrated monograph, *Tiffany Colored Gems*, his 21st for the company on the subject of style. The book traces the legendary history of Tiffany's forays into the world of colored stones from the mid-19th century to the present, featuring archival photographs and illustrations, as well as many of the large-scale and intensely colorful designs of Paloma Picasso and Jean Schlumberger.

Both in print and in person, Loring is an enchanting storyteller. On a recent afternoon, he held forth on everything from the democratization of jewelry to his love of the Buckhead Diner.

ATLANTA PEACH: What distinguishes Tiffany from other jewelry-design houses?

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John Loring has served as Tiffany & Co.'s design director since 1979, drawing heartily on the house's storied past to build a rock-solid foundation for the future, which is lovingly illustrated in his new book, *Tiffany Colored Gems*, left.

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JOHN LORING: We have a huge advantage simply by being an American company. American design is built from basics. Tiffany didn't start with 2,000 years of design vocabulary or with an extraordinarily sophisticated and complex heritage; therefore, we don't lose our way and fall into unnecessary sophistications. Take Elsa Peretti's heart, for example. It is the oldest female symbol in the world, and no one did anything but trivialize it. Elsa looked at it and made it sensual, curvaceous and beautiful. She did the same with the teardrop. Basics fall, like rain, on everyone, and therefore you have a world audience.

How does Tiffany maintain and protect its status as a

leader of design?

We have some of the most advanced jewelry design in the world, but we have been accused of being conservative. But if the horse is winning, you keep running the horse. Edward C. Moore, for example, designed for Tiffany the 'Japanese' flatware pattern in 1871, and it is still a bestseller today, so we're not going to retire that racehorse. We move forward relentlessly but with a steady pace, continuing to conserve what is important to conserve.

Would you say great design is simply a self-portrait of the designer?

Yes. There has to be a lot being fed in for something to

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come out, and if you don't have a well-nourished imagination, you're not going to be a good designer. You must be conscious of who you are and what you are doing to avoid being sidetracked by this thing I call 'reality intake.' This is what compels you to pick your path through the obstacle course of visual pollution of modern life.

Does today's insatiable demand for celebrity affect Tiffany & Co.?

I understand that we live in a time and culture that is celeb-mad, but you can't design around celebrity; that's just not what we do. Tiffany is a temple of the decorative arts. At times, however, it has done a great deal for us and can be a positive force. Audrey Hepburn, for example, was a wonderful example for women all over the world, and we were very fortunate that she came into our lives in 1965. I think Sarah Jessica Parker's character in *Sex and the City* could be interpreted as the reincarnation of the modern Holly Golightly. She's intelligent, funny, absolutely first-class and talented (pictures of Parker in some of these lavish 20th-century confections are found in Loring's *Tiffany Pearls*, a pictorial history of the most classic of gems).

So where's the problem?

Audrey Hepburn maintained that there has to be an aesthetic distance for celebrity to flourish. In order to keep a position as something special you needn't become too familiar. It's a more graceful approach that seems to be missing, at times, these days.



John Loring has made friends with some of the world's most fashionable personalities, including, clockwise from top left: Jacqueline Onassis; A friend with Loring and Paloma Picasso; Diana Vreeland; Peggy Guggenheim.



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What lasting impression do you think you'll leave on Tiffany and the world of design?

I subscribe to the philosophy that you won't get work

done if you're always looking back. I don't want to fall into sentimentality and nostalgia. But I've been regularly exploring the archives for over 20 years and, I suppose, I'm most proud of giving these great, forgotten designers to the American decorative arts.

What is your favorite gemstone?

The Black Prince's Ruby. I'm half American and half

English, and one of the most dashing people in English history was the Black Prince. The stone dates back to the 14th century, but I wouldn't have been that fascinated with it, one of the oldest crown jewels, if not for its adventures. It's the most traveled stone with unbelievable experiences, and that makes it kind of magic.

What is the biggest mistake designers make?

One of our favorite criticisms in the office is that things are OD, or 'over-designed.' There is a lot of OD in this world [laughing]. If you send too many messages at once it will never be successful. In design, you usually can't stop too soon. The simple straightforward message is the one people are going to understand.

When does jewelry come alive for you?

The moment one puts it on and wears it. Jewels need to be in motion.

You have a very tight schedule while you're in Atlanta, but what are you going to make time for?

Lunch at the Buckhead Diner. The food is delicious, with the regional flavor and soul-food overtones. I lived in Paris for half of my life, so great French food in Atlanta I do not need. But you cannot be unhappy at the Buckhead Diner. The décor, the service—it's delightful. I even got a T-shirt! ☺



Tiffany jewels showcased in John Loring's new book, *Tiffany Colored Gems*, include a Vinge necklace of oval amethysts, cabochon emeralds and diamonds (left), designed in 1960 by John Schlumberger, and Jean Schlumberger's Daisy ring (right) with an indicolite and yellow diamonds, originally designed in 1956.