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Trunk show's treasures have world on a string

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No one could have blamed Nicole Noelle Sherman for not taking another step, much less 158 of them, down the side of Gianicolo Hill.

From the vantage of the top-floor apartment of Villa Chiaraviglia she could see the ornate domes, bell towers and architectural masterpieces of resplendent Rome. With a conscious effort she turned away from the untiring view, walked across the stone floor and ventured beyond the massive front door to find other beautiful things.

The Albemarle County jewelry designer followed the steps down to the narrow, cobbled streets, weaving through the Trastevere neighborhood. Her destination was an ancient marketplace, where everything from spring flowers and vegetables to fat links of spicy sausage were displayed postcard perfect.

Also arranged on vendor tables were African trade beads, antique carnelian from Afghanistan and vibrant glass beads from Venice and Iran. These were the things Sherman would hold up to the light, inspect and often buy.

The search and discovery did not end in the Eternal City. She found red orbs of fuchsia jade in a gem shop in Switzerland, polished agates in Portugal and pieces of honey-hued reconstituted amber in Paris.

Sherman conducted her hunter-gatherer forays this past spring while accompanying her husband, William H. “Bill” Sherman, on his sabbatical in Europe. While the University of Virginia associate professor of architecture focused on Old World structural designs, his wife was on the lookout for eye-catching adornments to be used in making her distinctive jewelry.

“Basically, what we did was follow spring through Europe,” Sherman said recently as she enjoyed a cup of tea. “We were in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland and later visited Berlin and Copenhagen as well.

“I couldn’t help but go to the markets, little antique shops and artisan studios. So I collected a bunch of things along the way, and when I got home I started creating jewelry with them.

“Of course, travel is always a good time to get new inspiration and ideas. And I like my creations to have a history and story behind them, so they’re more than a pretty piece of jewelry.”

Visitors to the Nicole Noelle Trunk Show today and Saturday at Les Yeux du Monde will have the opportunity to see Sherman’s latest works, “Sabbatical Travels.” Those attending the opening reception from 5 to 8 p.m. this evening will get a 20 percent discount.

In little more than a decade, Sherman has earned a reputation for creating jewelry with a flair. When she and her husband moved to the Charlottesville area in 1993 she had been planning on going to law school, but the birth of her daughter led to another career path.

“There has always been this conflict in me between the intellectual and doing something creative,” said the mother of two. “When I had my daughter, I decided I was going to stay home more.

“When I started to feel a need to do something creative I started making jewelry. Fairly quickly I knew I wanted it to be more than a hobby. When Lyn [Bolen Warren] opened Les Yeux du Monde, I brought in my jewelry.

“The art was going up and the jewelry just fit. So for eight years I’ve had my own little space for my jewelry and it has been wonderful.”

In addition to Les Yeux du Monde, Sherman’s jewelry is sold in art galleries in Nantucket, Mass., and Portsmouth, N.H., and soon will be available in Charleston, S.C.

She can’t pin down exactly what it was that prompted her to start making jewelry, but she said she was lucky to have inherited a vivid imagination and a creative eye for design.

“I actually started with hardware — nuts, bolts, springs, all sorts of things like that,” Sherman said. “I started with that idea because it sounded like fun, and I wanted to do something different.

“I call it ‘softhardware’ and I combine actual hardware with gems and pearls in unusual ways. The first piece of jewelry I made is still one of my most favorite. It’s a very simple bracelet with stainless steel hex nuts and peacock freshwater pearls on a sterling silver chain.

“The hex nuts sparkle and glisten, because they’re naturally faceted and the pearls, of course, have a

nice luster. It's easy to wear and it feels good."

Sherman is the author of the how-to books "Making Designer Jewelry with Hardware, Gems and Beads" and "Making Designer Freshwater Pearls Jewelry." Some of her recent softhardware work uses items such as gears and faces from old watches and small squares cut from computer motherboards to create interesting visual effects.

Sherman's Nicole Noelle line offers jewelry in more contemporary styles and incorporates gold, cultured pearls and gemstones. These pieces can fetch \$3,500, but she offers a wide assortment of other one-of-a-kind pieces in lower price ranges.

Earrings are priced from \$45 to \$145. Bracelets start around \$125, and necklaces at \$150. Sherman also does commission work and has made jewelry for brides and entire wedding parties.

The designer's signature pieces are jangle bracelets fashioned from items such as abalone, polished agates, crystals and kynite discs. Whether the sparkle was found in Rome or Harlan B. Foster's Hardware Store in New England, nearly everything Sherman makes is unique.

"Making one-of-a-kind jewelry is much more interesting for me, because I don't want to create the same thing over and over," Sherman said. "And I think a good piece of jewelry should be unique and special to whomever is buying or wearing it.

"I think more and more people want something that's handcrafted, unusual and they won't find again. When I do these trunk shows some people are tentative and don't want to touch a piece or pick it up.

"But I'm like, 'Please, put it on,' because I try to make beautiful things that feel good to wear and feel good on the skin. I love seeing the reactions when people do put something on, and it makes them feel good and even more special."

The opening reception for Nicole Noelle Trunk Show at Les Yeux du Monde will be from 5 to 8 p.m. today. The 20 percent discount only applies today.

Show hours are 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.

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