

HEIRLOOMS REIMAGINED



Treasured jewels can get new life just by changing the setting.

RESETTING AND REUSING GEMSTONES IS A WONDERFUL WAY TO KEEP A CONNECTION TO FAMILY

When you inherit heirloom jewelry, you also inherit its story and a connection to the family member who passed it on. But a brilliant emerald solitaire may look dated, and a delicate diamond necklace might not reflect your personal style. Thus, these treasures stay buried in a drawer or locked in a safe and not celebrated as they should be. Fortunately, a redesign, update, or restoration can breathe new life into these sentimental heirlooms.

"Updating heirloom jewelry has been happening for thousands of years," says Stephen Silver of Stephen Silver Jewelry in Redwood City, Calif. He has been working with rare, fine, and commercial estate jewelry for four decades, updating and reworking pieces for clients, which he says is highly individual and case by case.

"The beauty of jewelry is that it's so flexible," Silver explains. "It's the most recycled product in the world."

Honoring each heirloom piece she works with, Abby Sparks of Sparks Jewelry in Denver has converted earrings



to rings, rings to necklaces, and removed gemstones from a setting, only to reuse them differently. "The story of your mother or grandmother or aunt is still there," Sparks says. "We've just included you in it." She explains how jewels in two different rings or those from a variety of pieces that complement one another can often be combined into one new statement piece. "There are endless combinations," she says.

Resetting and reusing gemstones is a popular option when reimagining heirlooms, but some jewelry can be tweaked and keep its original purpose. Heirs may want to convert an outdated necklace to a fashionable one, for instance.

Matthew Thomas, co-founder of London-based Gatsby Jewellery, says brooches and delicate cocktail watches don't sell, and are often refashioned. "Fashions have moved on and left these items behind," he says. He and his team at Gatsby search for different methods to make these gems relevant.

Thomas recalls a brooch designed by one of the premier jewelers of the early 20th century. It was converted into a ring. "Rather than leaving something to collect dust in a jewelry box, or, heaven forbid, destroying it for its gold content, the piece is being worn and enjoyed," he says.

At times, saving a stunning gemstone is the primary goal. Silver had a client remove a 4.5-carat diamond from an Art Deco setting only to reset the diamond and place the original mounting in a safe deposit box. To refashion a piece, introducing other materials that aren't part of the original is another viable option. For example, Silver set an Edwardian brooch on a leather cuff, creating a fresh, unexpected design.

Sparks says to be careful when taking a piece to a jeweler, however, and to be sure the stones are in good condition so they don't become damaged. Softer stones, like opals or pearls, are better left in their original settings. "Because it is such an important heirloom, we always thoroughly inspect a client's piece before agreeing to repurpose it," she says. "There are very few things that we hold on to in life, and jewelry is one of them." ■



Opposite page: Abby Sparks Jewelry; this page (from top): Abby Sparks Jewelry; Stephen Silver Jewelry

Top: An heirloom ring transformation by Abby Sparks Jewelry. Bottom: A brooch becomes a leather cuff by Stephen Silver Jewelry.