

JEWELRY

## How Stephen Webster built a brand by avoiding “safe jewelry”

April 5, 2019



*Stephen Webster has focused on artistic jewelry throughout his career. Image credit: Stephen Webster*

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK British jeweler Stephen Webster has built a brand based on breaking preconceived notions of jewelry design and retail, while keeping craft at the heart of his operations.

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Mr. Webster set out to make pieces that were not conservative, looking to create jewelry that was artistic rather than expected. During a keynote at Initiatives in Art and Culture's Gold Conference on April 4, Mr. Webster recalled his professional biography, sharing how his brand came to be and his attitudes toward retail.

"My inspiration [started to become] a bit different, it was a bit more like tattoo-style imagery, and I really loved to kind of just introduce something like that into this fine jewelry," Mr. Webster said.

"It was an important time for me as a designer, because I was really starting to bring things that I enjoyed into what I was good at, which was being a jeweler," he said. "So it was starting to cross over into my personal life."

### Success story

Mr. Webster began his jewelry career working with what he calls "fool's gold" at art school, crafting using a metal that resembled high-quality materials but was not precious. After studying the technical skills of jewelry making in the educational environment, he moved on to an apprentice job, which solely revolved around producing chains.

While this was his first opportunity to work with gold, he was bored with the monotony, and exited the apprenticeship early for a role at John Donald, where he completed his training. His mentor was part of a class of British jewelers that were making more artistic and unexpected designs.

After graduating, Mr. Webster tried to strike out on his own, but he quipped that his only customer was his aunt. He then moved on to a job at a shop making illusion setting diamond rings.

Again frustrated with making pieces that did not thrill him, he then took his experience and moved to Canada to take a job at a ski resort. Here, he built pieces out of gemstones, taking inspiration from the "beautiful and juicy" stones to create bolder jewelry.

Later, the owner of the shop moved to California, and Mr. Webster followed.

In the 1980s and 90s, Mr. Webster's designs found a following among celebrities, including Elizabeth Taylor and Madonna. His fans have ranged from socialite Tory Burch to Ozzy Osbourne.

The jewelry then gained selling space in stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, and Mr. Webster needed to expand his operation to meet up with demand.

Along the way, there have been surprising hits, including a crab-shaped ring and a "Rock Star" ring that was intended to be ironic but took off with stars including David Beckham.



*Stephen Webster's Jewels Verne collection. Image credit: Stephen Webster*

Throughout the years, Mr. Webster transitioned into making entire collections. These often have off-beat themes, such as one based on the seven deadly sins and a selection named "Murder She Wrote," depicting lethal women.

Mr. Webster's retail presence similarly breaks boundaries, with boutiques that do not resemble the typical jewelry store.

Touches such as neon signs from Mr. Webster's friend artist Tracey Emin help to create environments that are more unexpected for the category.

The jewelry brand is currently hosting a pop-up in Bergdorf Goodman, complete with free margaritas on Fridays. Only three weeks into the temporary store, the brand has already reached its budget goal.



*Stephen Webster at the Bergdorf Goodman pop-up. Image credit: Stephen Webster*

## Mining awareness

About a decade ago, Mr. Webster became more aware of the stories behind gold sourcing.

Wanting to have a better understanding of the mining process, he traveled to Peru to visit a mine through the NGO Solidaridad.

Whereas clients used to not care as much about fair trade and sustainable sourcing, they are now looking more into the companies that they buy from.

Luxury brands need to become more vocal and transparent about their sustainability efforts to meet consumer expectations, particularly as younger generations become greater forces in the business.

During panel discussions at Positive Luxury's Positive Week, executives from several high-end brands, including Mr. Webster, reiterated that sustainable practices will be non-negotiable for the up-and-coming Gen Z consumer. The sooner luxury companies, from the hospitality to retail sectors, start actively engaging with more environmentally-conscious affluents, the better for their businesses overall ([see story](#)).

Other brands are working closely with mining facilities, giving back to the people who make jewelry production possible.

Diamond group De Beers is working to extend the life of one of the world's most valuable diamond mines, as part of its joint venture with the Government of the Republic of Botswana.

The Debswana Diamond Company, the name of the joint venture, is launching what it is calling the Cut-9 project to save the Jwaneng Mine. The project is said to prolong the life of the mine until the year 2035 ([see story](#)).

"This is the thing with gems there's good and bad stories always," Mr. Webster said. "Mining is a tough business, there's no question, but it doesn't mean that it has to be unsafe and that the people aren't paid properly."