

Chic Report

JEWELRY DESIGNER CARA BROWN REALLY SHOULD HAVE BEEN A PIRATE

written by The Daily Front Row | March 6, 2019



Between searching for ways to distinguish her high school uniform and growing up surrounded by the trade tools of an interior-designing mother, Cara Brown developed a keen eye and a constant yearning to create beautiful objects that bring the new and the old together. The Daily caught up with Brown to get the inside scoop on her personal history and what informs her unique designs.

After graduating from Vanderbilt, you got your start making Christmas ornaments out of beads and vintage jewelry, which grew into a major business. How did that happen?

With each of my brands, I have reached out to the consumer who appreciates bespoke or one of a kind pieces that have a legacy – the consumer who appreciates the “story” behind a piece. With Hattie’s Crowns, the Christmas ornaments were sold in boutiques around Fort Worth and Dallas, including Neiman’s, which bought 200 for their top 20 stores around the country. As many designers understand, it was a moment, and those don’t always cross your path, but sometimes they do.

What were the best lessons or takeaways you learned from the experience?

Hattie’s Crowns was a great introduction to the world and ways of retail. My partner and I went from doing something we loved and being creative to understanding the importance of sales and scalable production. Though it was a “tug-of-war” at times, our hobby had to “grow up.”

What inspired your foray into jewelry?

With our children growing up, I had been considering a new project. That summer after returning from our travels, I pulled out some vintage pieces and a renewed inspiration came over me to bring together the old and the new – to restore an older piece within a current design. It only made sense that I do it in the form of a necklace because I have always been a necklace “junkie”. My husband has given me other pieces of jewelry that I wear daily and never take off so the pieces that have a high turnover for me are my necklaces. Today, my line only includes necklaces – a look that my buyer can wear alone as a statement piece or layered with their fine jewelry.

Do you remember the first piece of jewelry that really spoke to you?

The moment when I realized that jewelry was important was during the formative years of high school. I attended a small private school and wore a uniform so the way to distinguish myself from others was through accessories. Jewelry became a way of self-expression and from that time I have always loved one-of-a-kind pieces ... different from anything anyone else could find.

Tell us a little bit about your studio.

Alongside my bins and baskets full of beads and found objects, my studio walls are jammed with eclectic art. From landscapes to human forms to metallic sculptures to my window overlooking a ravine, I am surrounded by old and new, and colors that are always changing. When I sit down to design, I warn my family to “steer clear.” I spread everything out and coordinate designs for 50 or so necklaces at a time. I go on buying streaks and then beading streaks... one big cycle.

What’s the story behind your horse brass pieces?

Where do you source them?

The horse brasses are one of my two lines and it really was my husband who pushed me to make the first necklace. We were at a market — I had already been using antique belt buckles for my centerpieces, but he was immediately drawn to the horse brass aesthetic, and then the story — their history is great. The horse brasses are the necklaces to which most of my customers are drawn. I now have a dealer who sources older brasses in London so that each horse brass is authentic and is sure to have a heritage.

And what are the criteria for the pieces in your “found objects” collection?

A “found object” is just that... an “aha” moment that can happen anywhere. From old sculptures, handmade pendants, belt buckles, watch fobs... I know instantly when I have come across a piece for my collection.



Will you share any of your secrets for sourcing vintage jewelry?

As to the secret of sourcing my jewelry, I always have said I should have been a pirate because I am always looking for the hidden treasure. I love scouring flea markets and antique malls locally and in my travels. I never tire of the hunt because of the thrill of finding just the right piece.

Where are your pieces sold at the moment? Do you have any plans to expand internationally?

My start was at Barneys on Madison Avenue and it was a total honor to be considered an “Emerging Designer” for their flagship store. From there, Saks Fifth Avenue placed me in their stores and I try to add a boutique with each town I visit for my trunk shows. I currently sell up and down the East Coast as well as my hometown of Fort Worth and on the Island of Turks and Caicos.

What is your favorite way to style your necklaces?

Hmmm... they are designed to be a bit endless in their possibilities, from short to long, layered or alone, with clothing from the Gap or for a Gala. I love that each necklace almost calls out for the appropriate outfit — for the thick fisherman knit sweater in the winter to the cover-up in the summer to a black velvet top and plaid gown for the Christmas Ball, the necklaces themselves almost have a say in it all...



What are your plans for the brand in 2019?

Exciting question ... as a designer, there is only so much you can control, and timing is not one of them. Thankfully, the time has come for one-of-a-kind, handmade, pieces with a story. There has always been a community of buyers and sellers who love and appreciate the look, but now, every store is looking, wanting, needing unique pieces that attract the shopper and help them stand out. As for the brand ... steady as she goes, because her time has come.