

# Gems of the sea

**J**ewelry designer Donna Chambers is in the business of shaping heirlooms.

"I'm a perfectionist," she says. "I want to make jewelry classics, some that will be heirlooms someday.

To Chambers the "classic" gem is the pearl. "Pearls are the oldest gemstones known to man. They are natural and nearly everyone likes them," she says.

Working with pearls of all shapes, sizes and colors, Chambers designs and creates necklaces, pins, earrings and bracelets in her small White Plains workshop. She also incorporates into her jewelry other underwater materials, such as the shells used in cameos and mother-of-pearl.

Chambers attributes some of her interest in substances from the sea to the fact that her astrological sign is Pisces, the 12th sign of the zodiac, which includes all classes of fish.

In recent months, she says, she has begun to work with other gems such as pale amethyst, aventurine, onyx, lapis, coral and rose quartz, most of them combined with pearls.

Many of Chambers' pieces feature a large central mabe pearl. Small freshwater pearls, strung on gold, are used as drops or as clusters surrounding the center pearl.

Mabe pearls are made by experts inserting differently shaped grains of sand at the bottom of the oyster shell thus creating oval, round, square, pear or heart-shaped varieties of the gemstone. Within a two- or three-year period the thick and shiny pearl is formed. Used principally for clasps and earrings, the mabe pearl is larger than the cultured pearl. The depth of color and shine determines cost.

Hammered silver and onyx necklaces, coordinated with matching earrings, have recently been added to Chambers' jewelry collection. The latest, and most unusual, additions to her line of jewelry are pieces made with a combination of pearls strung on 14-karat gold wire, cascading from old mother-of-pearl gambling chips from China. Most of the chips have delicately etched designs.

These chips, Chambers says, are difficult to find. She looks for them when she displays her work at jewelry trade shows across the country. The finished pieces retail from about \$350 to \$1,000, depending on the chip and the number and style of pearls used.

Chambers, 38, grew up in Ossining and now



Donna Chambers displays some of her jewelry designs.

lives in Elmsford. She graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. While looking for her career niche she started working with abalone shells and gray pearls. She began her jewelry career in 1976 repairing jewelry in department stores. Prior to that she was a Seventh Avenue fashion designer.

Her growing business in Westchester, established in 1987, is virtually a family affair. The pieces, all made by hand, are assembled by Chambers' sister, Gail Redd, and brother, David, also Elmsford residents. The fourth artisan is Gilberto McFarlane of Peekskill. Virgilio Thomas rounds out the staff.

The "Donna Chambers" line is carried by all Bloomingdale's stores. Other retailers carrying the jewelry are Fortunoff's and Saks Fifth Avenue as well as a number of specialty shops throughout the country and in the Virgin Islands. Pearl earrings in Chambers' collection cost from \$140 to \$1,200; necklaces, \$600 to \$2,000.

Pieces of her jewelry have been shown at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Boston Museum of Art.

— Sydney Stanton

'I want to make jewelry classics.'