



# GOLD STANDARD

Elizabeth Locke, well known for her neoclassical  
handmade jewelry, creates beautiful objects  
that also benefit equine research

By Terri Darr McLean



Positano link  
and turquoise  
necklace

PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
ELIZABETH LOCKE JEWELS



The clashing and clanging of hammer against metal echo throughout two studios in Bangkok, Thailand, where for nearly 30 years a group of goldsmiths have used centuries-old techniques to bring Elizabeth Locke's visions to life.

Those techniques — from pounding an ingot of 19-karat gold by hand to using foot power to solder tiny gold droplets together — captured Locke's attention while she was researching a story in the Thai capital for *Town and Country* magazine in the 1980s. Their finished pieces, though ordinary in design, captured her imagination.

"They did beautiful work, but the finished product wasn't very attractive," she said. "I thought that's just a waste, a waste of talent."

Propelled by what she now calls her life-altering experience, Locke returned home to Virginia and enrolled in gemology school to learn about stones. Then, using her husband's frequent flyer miles and

\$20,000 borrowed from her father-in-law, she traveled back to Bangkok to work with the goldsmiths to design her own line of jewelry.

Elizabeth Locke Jewels was born, and today the designer is widely known for her distinctive hand-hammered 19-karat gold pieces. Her devotees include some in the Lexington area who discovered her jewelry through an annual trunk show to benefit the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation.

### A love of 'beautiful things'

While Locke's passion for creating jewelry was newfound, her appreciation of "beautiful things" traces back to the age of 11 when her father, an English professor, first took her to Europe and introduced her to classical antiquities.

"Every summer, when he didn't have to teach, we would go traveling," Locke said. "And he loved to go to Italy and Greece and was always walking us around the Greek temples' remains and ruins. I think it must have rubbed off on me."

Locke, who lived and studied in Italy for a time,





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Gold necklaces with equine pendants, bracelets, and earrings



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also discovered a fascination with jewelry of the Etruscans, Greeks, and Romans, a fascination she now draws on for her own neoclassical designs. The search for a bit of history to incorporate into the designs — including 19th-century micro-mosaics, miniature paintings, antique porcelain buttons, 18th-century Chinese gambling counters, and ancient coins — takes Locke on a “continual treasure hunt” around the world.

“I’m always looking everywhere I go,” she said. “You can find things in really extraordinary places.”

### One-of-a-kind vision

The vision behind Locke’s jewelry is all hers, based on a design process that runs counter to more traditional jewelry design.

“I can buy what I want to buy ... and then I can design a setting for it,” she said. “Most jewelry you see for sale is the wax-casting method. When you do that, it means you have to buy stones



Venetian glass earrings

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SKIP DICKSTEIN

Grayson chairman Dell Hancock, who first brought Locke to the Bluegrass for a trunk show, appreciates the versatility of Locke's jewelry.

that are going to fit in the cast itself. I don't have any limitations, and that's a huge luxury. That's why we have so many one-of-a-kind pieces."

Some stones or historical pieces that Locke acquires might sit around for 10 to 15 years before she decides what to do with them, she said.

"I'm attracted to beautiful things or things I think are interesting," she said. "I either like it or I don't like it. It speaks to me or it doesn't speak

to me ... I just have to hope when I make the finished jewelry that it speaks to somebody so they'll buy it."

Only after Locke has created the design for a piece does she turn it over to the 35 Thai goldsmiths with whom she now works exclusively.

"I basically hand them a little ingot of gold and a hammer and they smack it into shape," she said. "It's very primitive.

"It's incredibly labor intensive, the



Left, green tourmaline and blue sapphire ring;  
blue sapphire and pink tourmaline ring



gold standard

Akoya pearls  
and an ancient  
Greek coin  
pendant; gold  
dome, diamond,  
and silver pearl  
stud earrings;  
aquamarine  
and turquoise  
rings

work they do,” Locke added. “But that’s what makes it look the way that it looks. It doesn’t look like other jewelry for sale. It has a definite look. You can like it or not like it, but you’ll probably recognize it when you see it.”

Aside from the hand-hammered look, her pieces often boast brightly colored stones “with lots of vibrancy,” as well as chunky styling. Her granulated jewelry, which includes the hoops, bangles, and rings recognizable by their tiny gold dots, are among her most popular designs.

“This is not jewelry you buy to be trendy. This is jewelry made for the long haul,” she said.



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—ELIZABETH LOCKE

### Beauty with a purpose

Locke’s jewelry is also jewelry that is seemingly made for the horse-racing set, as horsemawoman Dell Hancock discovered several years ago when she invited the designer to do a trunk show for a few family members and friends at the Hancock family’s Claiborne Farm in Paris. It

was such a success that she made the event a yearly tradition.

“I just love her work,” Hancock said. “You can have on a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt and put on a pair of Elizabeth’s earrings and you feel just fine. Or if I have to run over and do something, you can put on a simple pair of earrings and all of



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a sudden you don't look so grubby anymore. Or you can go to the races or just wear them anywhere. They're just so incredibly, beautifully chic."

During one of the trunk shows at Claiborne, Locke proposed to Hancock that they turn the event into a philanthropic one.

"She said, 'You know, Dell, I'd really like to do something for a charity that you like.' And I said, 'Let's do Grayson,' " Hancock recalled.

Grayson is the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Lexington that funds veterinary research aimed at the advancement of all breeds of horses. Hancock is chair of the board.

Hancock and Locke decided to move the trunk show from Claiborne to Saratoga Race Course in New York in 2006. Then, after recognizing that many of the people who shopped the show were from Lexington, they decided to move it back to Kentucky four years ago.

"I said, 'Let's try Keeneland' ... and they were so nice and said, 'Sure, you can have it at the library,' " Hancock said.

This year's trunk show is Sept. 14-15 at the Keeneland Library.

Locke donates 20 percent of the trunk show's proceeds to Grayson. Since 2006 that has amounted to \$220,000

"This is a great example of sort of the unusual and innovative ways people can support equine research," said Ed Bowen, president of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation. "We are so appreciative. She has this wonderful talent, and she has this really open heart to be able to see there is a way she can help horses."

As a former horsewoman herself, Locke said she is happy to participate in a project that is so beneficial to horses.

"It's been a wonderful collaboration," she said. **KM**

## MAKING HORSE HEALTH A PRIORITY

The Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation has been funding equine research since the original Grayson Foundation was founded in 1940. It later merged with The Jockey Club's research foundation to create the current organization.

GJCRF supports research at universities in North America and beyond rather than carries out the research itself. Since 1983, the group has provided more than \$24.8 million to fund 346 projects.

"We have an elaborate system of a 32-person advisory committee, and they really pore over the projects that come to us. Through a very thorough process, we judge the best ones and recommend those to our board of directors," said Ed Bowen, president of the foundation.

The foundation's work has resulted in numerous research milestones, including

- The first vaccine for equine influenza
- Defining the nature of wobbler syndrome
- Development of a vaccine for equine viral arteritis
- Facilitation of improvements in protecting soundness and repairing injuries
- Enhanced understanding of basic aspects of equine infectious anemia, the disease for which Coggins tests became mandatory

Additionally, its research projects have addressed such subjects as

- Mare reproductive loss syndrome
- Use of serum markers to detect impending injury to bone and joint
- Improved immunities through DNA vaccination
- Solving the laminitis puzzle

"I feel horses give so much to us, and by giving to Grayson we're giving something back to them," said Dell Hancock, chair of the board. "If we don't have healthy horses, we have nothing — it doesn't matter if we're riding show jumpers or racehorses or whatever you're involved in."