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ALL CHANGE

Digital Developments – Adapting to Change

Color Trends – Looking Forward

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— INDUSTRY INSIGHTS —

ADAPTING TO THE COVID CRISIS

ELKE BERR

It's no secret that the Covid pandemic has affected everyone all around the world, and in different ways. To get an idea of how one industry figure in Switzerland confronted this crisis, we spoke with Elke Berr, a recognized expert in the gemstone field and accomplished jewelry designer.

By Marie Chabrol



The crystal-clear laughter echoed through the phone—it was good to hear that her energy level and optimism were still evident even during these unprecedented times. Elke Berr's tone turned serious, however, as she described how she was able to muster the stamina and find the resources necessary to face this crisis, which began for her in March 2020.

"I can't say that these last 18 months have been easy," comments the gem expert and designer, who co-founded Berr & Partner with her husband in 1986, followed by the launch in 2003 of her eponymous jewelry company. She came to the gem industry as a teenager, and by the time she was 17, she was already deep in the mines in Sri Lanka to buy her first stones. "I learned very early on that our work has to be irreproachable, that we use unfailing discretion to carve out a place in this industry and maintain it."

How then, did she maintain her place during Covid? "We had long-planned events in Kazakhstan and then in Palm Beach, Florida where we were going to showcase my latest pieces and meet our customers. We had worked very long months preparing for these special events but suddenly we found ourselves stranded in Switzerland. For the frequent traveler that I am, it was very hard."

With travel then out of the question, how did Elke interact with her customers? "In Switzerland, we were luckier than most, because the country did not completely close in on itself as did

some other nations. I was thus able to keep my team safe and working because they could telecommute," she explains. "We also were able to get some short-term work, as well as a loan to increase our cash flow and tide us over. Still, the impact of the pandemic was extremely strong."

Since Berr's workshops could stay open, this meant that the new collection would be ready for the Fall. Also, she maintained personal contact with her clients during this period, and so was able to produce custom and one-off pieces that account for nearly 60% of production.

Because of her established network and our long-term loyal customers, the designer was able to have some pieces ready for Cannes, which went ahead despite the pandemic.

"A bright spot for us at Cannes was that some pieces were worn by actress Frédérique Bel on the Red Carpet, and were on display at the Croisette," she smiles.

While many companies increased their social media and embraced other online promotion during the lockdown, Berr was more cautious. "These are great tools, and I have seen interesting experiences," she muses, "but I'm not necessarily comfortable with this type of thing myself. Having said that, however, we are beginning to expand our online presence. I want to take my time to ensure that it is a good fit for us. It's important to have the brand message be coherent in all ways."

In one of the first steps on her digital journey, Elke Berr

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Opposite page, left to right:

One of Berr's creations is this 18K white gold ring set with a remarkable 10.17-ct spinel, accented with diamonds, orange and yellow sapphires.

Elke Berr in her studio, where she designs her jewels and inspects the many colored gemstones she uses in her creations and in those of her custom pieces.

Paraiba is one of her favorite gems and is the featured stone in this ring set accented by rubies, tsavorite garnets and diamonds.



Elke Berr started in the gem business as a teenager. Here, she is in Mogok in Myanmar to purchase some of the nation's beautiful gems in 1997.

Elke Berr examines sapphires on one of her many buying trips to Sri Lanka.



Berr spends a lot of time choosing just the right gemstones, for both her own collections and the many custom pieces she creates.

joined the Gembridge initiative and was recently appointed as its ambassador for Switzerland. "This platform won me over with its goals and very strict framework. Quality and high standards, along with trust, are necessary in the gem business. I was also convinced by the principles of traceability.

My experience of getting stones as close as possible to the extraction source is reinforced by the necessity of providing clear information to the buyer. Transparency makes all the difference in a period such as we are all going through."

Berr goes on to add, "the current era has demonstrated that everyone must be adaptable and flexible when it comes to digital sales; understandably, customers are more focused on making their purchases with trusted third parties whose reputation and ethics are well established."

On a more personal level, Berr notes that the demands on spirituality have increased, not just for her but for many of her colleagues. "During these traumatic times, I have been looking more inward, to be more in tune with my emotions," she comments. "Although our lives were turned upside down because of the pandemic, we are all still looking for stability."

She concludes that "showing humility and imagination seem to be the most important things when it comes to adapting to this crisis."

Images are courtesy of Berr and Partner. ♦