

PEARLS OF WISDOM

HOW A SYNCHRONICITY OF LIFE EVENTS
LED CHRISTOPHER WALLING TO JEWELRY DESIGN

by Wendy Sy

Inspiration for jewelry designs often comes to Christopher Walling in dreams and meditation. “It’s intuitive. It’s spiritual,” he says in his Fifth Avenue salon, which he set up using the principles of feng shui. Surrounded by coffee-table books and auction catalogs that he’s been featured in over the past three decades, Walling has become known in society circles for his signature use of pearls.

As we know, pearls are synonymous with the word “classic.” So, as a designer, how does one break free from creating what’s been done before? That’s the question Walling had in mind when he pioneered the use of inlaying precious and often vividly colored stones with pearls. The distinct juxtaposition of these materials isn’t quite like anything else on the market.

Many of his earrings are mismatched on purpose. There’s a pair with one-half featuring a Tahitian pearl and turquoise, while the other has a Mississippi River natural pearl and lightning ridge opal, both set in 18k white and yellow gold. It’s Walling’s discerning eye for unconventional styles that have attracted a notable client list, including Elizabeth Taylor, Maya Angelou, São Schlumberger, Lily Auchincloss and Brooke Hayward.

“A very significant part of the increased sophistication of the American customer and American fashion is the awareness of subtlety. Many women are actively involved in business these days and are not about to wear something so obviously valuable into the office,” Walling says in the Nova program *Mystique of the Pearl*, one of two PBS documentaries in which he’s featured in. On the contrary, “There’s nothing more subtle than a pearl.” Though it aired in 1999, the thought is more relevant now than ever. Pearls, he notes, complement every skin tone. Nature delivers them perfect; there’s no cutting or polishing needed.

Walling has exhibited in museums and private art foundations worldwide, from

Honolulu to Istanbul. Before moving to New York in 1968, he spent his childhood in Paris, Geneva, Beirut and West Africa, due to his father’s career with the United Nations. It was the latter locale that influenced his love affair for color. “The fabrics of African women’s clothes and the way they wore turbans is an elegance not to be believed,” says Walling, who descended from a notable line of activists, public servants and philanthropists. Living in West Africa in itself was an adventure of sorts: “I was there for two years and had three experiences with the deadliest snakes in the world! If I never see a snake as long as I live, it’ll be too soon.”

“A very significant part of the increased sophistication of American fashion is the awareness of subtlety, and there’s nothing more subtle than a pearl.”

—Christopher Walling



Positive Negative earrings with various pearls, set in 18K white and yellow gold.

On a table in the center of the salon, there’s the “Zen” collection, comprised primarily of black and white jewels. They pay homage to his mother, a heroine of WWII. “Unfortunately, she was captured by the Germans, tortured in three prisons and thrown into the Ravensbrück concentration camp,” says Walling. At the age of four, he remembers his mother at her best, dancing in a Dior “New Look” white cotton piqué dress with a black collar. “It was my first understanding of how black and white complement each other,” he recalls.



Necklace with two strands of carved turquoise and Chinese freshwater pearls with a ridged signature clasp in 18K yellow gold

Although the designer did not go to art school, he studied political science and has been exposed to jewelry since birth. “Because of my mother’s experience in the concentration camp, she wasn’t supposed to be able to have children and was surprised it appeared that I was going to happen. My father spent the entire 24 hours with her in the delivery room in Paris. When he saw that she was safely asleep, he went out to an antique dealer and bought a small suitcase filled with jewelry. He came back [and] laid the pieces around her so she would wake up to the present.”

What resonates with Walling to this day is his father’s love and out-of-the-box mind-set. Like pearls, there’s no limit to what you can create as long as you keep that creative spirit alive. ♦

MATTHEW KLEIN