

On the Money

An antique coin collection gets the glam touch

By Tiffany Figueiredo

Melissa Braniff inherited a love of jewelry from her mother and grandmother, trying on their “good stuff” as a child and developing her own appreciation and taste for sparkly, pretty trinkets as an adult, but this Fort Worth native never imagined she’d be designing her own line.

“I was raised by a mother who would buy herself a piece of jewelry before she’d buy a new car,” laughs Braniff, who now lives in Houston. “I come by my obsession-slash-problem with jewelry honestly. I’ve loved it all since I was itty-bitty.”

Still, it wasn’t until this Paschal High School and University of Texas graduate began collecting ancient coins that the idea of making jewelry dawned on her.

“My favorite classes in college were ancient history and Greek mythology,” she says. “I had a radio, television and film degree and was selling air time for a radio station in Houston and not loving it. Whenever I had free time, I found myself reading books about ancient Rome and Greece. I couldn’t get enough of the history.”

Braniff says she was particularly interested in the Roman triumphs held in honor of Caesar’s military successes. For each of these public celebrations, coins depicting historical or mythological figures were hand-struck and thrown into the streets like Mardi Gras beads. About three years ago, Braniff began buying the coins from collectors.

“The idea of just holding them and wondering about the history of where they’d been and all the hands that had touched them over thousands of years fascinated me,” she says. “They aren’t all pretty, but the ones with the gods and goddesses are, and those are the ones I started looking for. I collected so many that my husband finally asked, ‘What are you going to do with all these?’ The moment he asked the question, I knew I’d make them into jewelry.”

With no experience in design or jewelry making, Braniff sought out artisans and picked their brains about the craft. She found a silversmith who understood her vision, and a year ago the two



“Mother Wolf nursing Romulus and Remus,” bronze coin earrings set in 14-karat gold with rubies and white diamonds, \$4,495



“Aeternitas, Goddess of Eternity,” bronze coin necklace with sterling silver chain and cubic zirconia stones, \$1,399

created the first pieces, which she sold at Houston retailer Marnie Rocks. She also tried selling them on etsy.com, the Web site for all things handmade, but found that her price points were too high.

The substantial pieces, which include necklaces, earrings, bracelets and rings, are handcrafted. Braniff’s carefully selected silver or bronze coins are embellished with precious metals along with gemstones such as pearls, rubies, diamonds and sapphires.

Despite its luxe setting, the rugged coin remains the star.

“Each one is unique, because each coin was originally hand-struck,” says Braniff. “I try to honor the beauty of the artifact.”



“The Virgin Mary” bronze coin set in a sterling silver cuff, \$1,350

Photos by Cristin Miller



DETAILS, DETAILS

Melissa Braniff’s one-of-a-kind pieces, which range from \$950 to \$7,200, are available through her Web site, www.melissabraniffdesigns.com. She also takes custom requests.