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# DEPARTURES

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## An Eye for Invisible Setting

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the Stuff of Dreams

Rome's Rebirth

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the Aging Clock

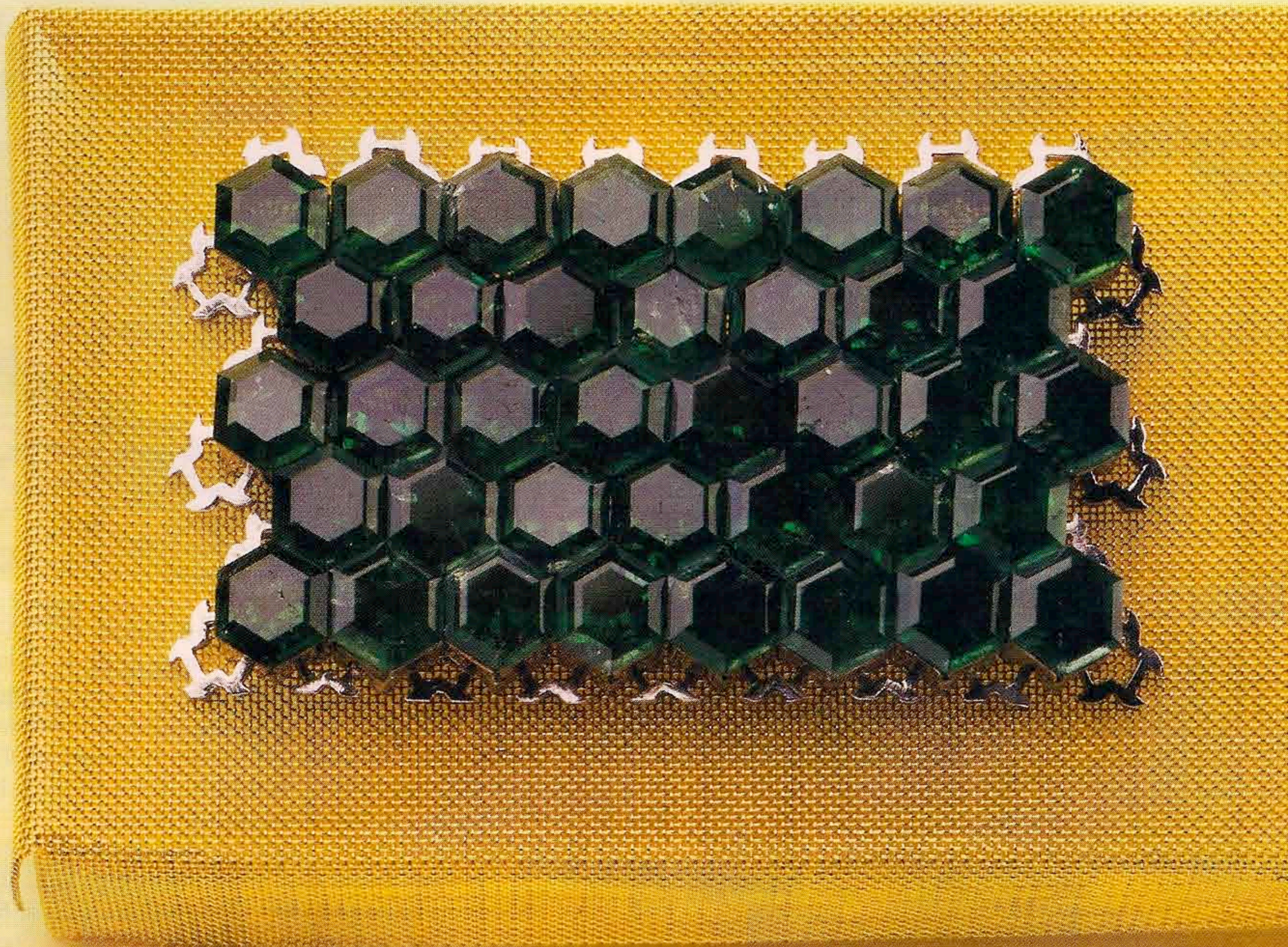
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# Sleight of Hand

A hymn to the art of invisible setting, the apex of jewelry craftsmanship.  
By Aimee Lee Ball Photographs by Robert Tardio



Invisible setting is the art of mounting precious stones, painstakingly grooved to slide onto tiny tracks of platinum or gold, so that no metal is visible from the front of the piece. This section of a bracelet set with emeralds by Robert Bruce Bielka (above), a work in progress, exemplifies the technique; the parts at left are the elements of the bracelet's articulating system. Bielka, whose construction method is covered by an international patent, places each gemstone in its own individual setting (the crown-shape piece, top left), then joins it by connectors (the star-shaped pieces, near left) to each adjacent stone. The individual sections are then locked into place by a ring (far left). The result: a flexible mesh of continuous color and pattern that flows onto the wrist. The finished piece will be composed of 270 emeralds (rarely used in invisible settings because of their fragility) and 119 diamonds and will contain more than 1,300 individual parts. Bielka, Inc.: 800-848-3904; 212-980-6841. Opposite: These invisibly-set ear clips, by Alfredo Aletto of Aletto Brothers in Boca Raton, Florida, are fashioned with 340 perfectly matched ruby gemstones (approximately 80 carats) and 19 diamonds (4.55 carats). Aletto's signature: the small diamonds on the backs of his pieces, which disguise each screw of the structure. The effect, says Aletto, is to "go beyond the jewelry's surface value." \$175,000. Aletto Brothers: 561-338-4144.



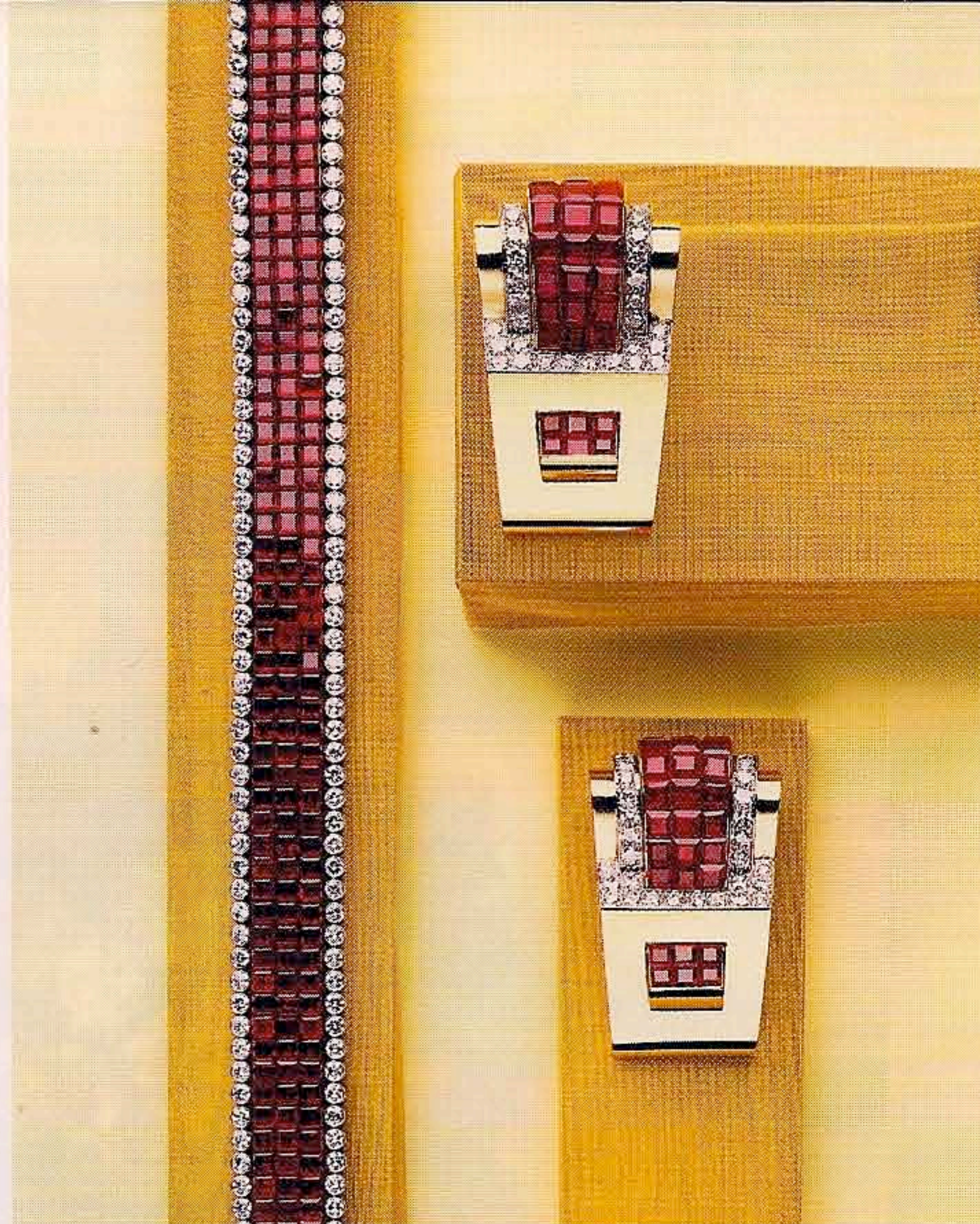
**F**ive times a year, a Brinks truck pulls up to a nondescript building about a block away from the beach in Boca Raton, Florida. The address is a jewelry store, but there is virtually no sign of commerce: no window display, no walk-in traffic, no customers at all. Even in this affluent enclave of retired sunbirds with deep pockets in their Pulitzer pants, the five fabulous baubles that constitute the total annual harvest of the Aletto Brothers are destined for a more exclusive cognoscenti: the New York auction gallery of Sotheby's.

Master jeweler Alfredo Aletto is one of a handful of men (and, conspicuously, no women) trained in the intricate, laborious, and uniquely skilled technique of invisible setting: Precious stones, perfectly matched in color, are painstakingly grooved and slid onto tiny tracks of platinum or gold so that no metal is visible from the front of the piece, creating a seemingly seamless carapace of brilliant ruby or sapphire. (Emeralds are seldom used because of their fragility. Until recently, diamonds were literally too hard to groove, a problem resolved by modern technology. Nevertheless, the magical "upholstery" of gems appears more miraculous in color.) Viewed from the underside, a piece of invisibly-set jewelry looks like a honeycomb or hairnet; held up to the light, the sapphires and rubies in their setting call to mind the artistry of mosaics and stained-glass windows.

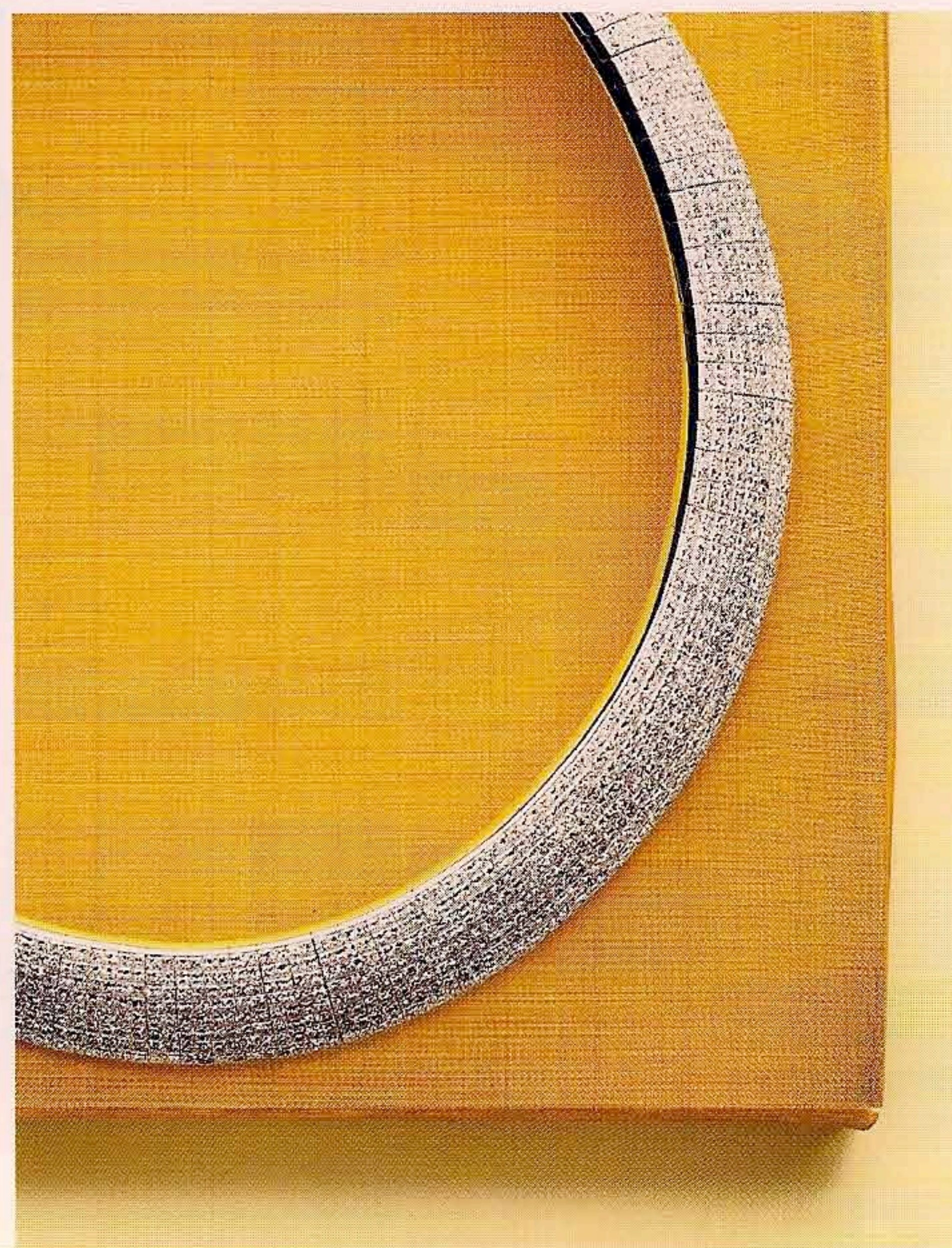
"I think classic is the right word to use for invisibly-set pieces," states David Bennett, vice chairman and international director of jewelry for Sotheby's in Europe. "When you think of 20th-century jewelry, this is one of the high points. It's extremely time-consuming, extremely expensive. To get that large undulating surface, which seems to be formed entirely of ruby or sapphire, is extraordinary." The technique rewrites a basic tenet of Jewelry Design 101. "The normal way of doing things is to make the mount fit the stone," explains Bennett. "With invisible setting, the stone is cut to fit the mount."

Although technique varies among designers, it can generally be said that invisible setting requires the use of a special-alloy wheel and fine diamond powder, as well as some sort of lubrication. "The stones must always be cut at a certain angle," says Israel Itzkowitz, chief executive officer of the Los Angeles-based firm Ambar Diamonds Inc., which lays claim to being the first company to set diamonds invisibly. "The material in the wheel mixed with the fine diamond powder keeps the sharpness to cut at that angle."

The provenance of invisible setting is ambiguous: There is much obfuscation and little magnanimity about innovation in the high-stakes microcosm of jewelers. "It's Byzantine," asserts Anthony Lent, chair of the Jewelry Design Department at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. "The industry is secretive, and there's no getting around it." Techniques and resources are protected with almost military vigilance, and the concept of healthy competition is anathema. "It's a tightly knit trade," concurs New York artist Daniel Brush. "It's a business of extraordinary design, art, and glamour. The romance and the 'family' of it—all are very private. Twenty years ago in Paris, I was allowed to watch over the shoul-



Van Cleef & Arpels, who wrote the book on invisibly-set jewelry, has been producing to-die-for pieces of the genre for over 60 years. This one-of-a-kind, invisibly-set bracelet (above left) features 177 rubies (36.47 carats) and 188 round-cut diamonds (6.98 carats) set in platinum. \$225,000. Van Cleef & Arpels: 800-822-5797. Beside it are a pair of ca. 1940 ruby and diamond dress clips by Boucheron, mounted in 18-karat rose gold. \$100,000. (There's also a matching cuff bracelet. \$200,000 for the set.) Fred Leighton, 773 Madison Avenue; 212-288-1872. To celebrate the year 2000, Ambar Diamonds Inc. created the Second Millennium necklace (below), set with (what else?) 2,000 Quadrillion diamonds (86.36 carats) in 18-karat yellow gold. \$280,000. Mayor's Jewelers: 877-762-9677.



der of a man who was then about eighty years old and was told that he had invented invisible setting, but who knows?"

What is known is that several early 20th-century French patents describe techniques for setting bijoux without the traditional prongs or "claws" that hold stones in place. The first, in July 1929, was filed by Jacques-Albert Algier, a name that has faded into oblivion. Subsequent patents reveal more familiar names: Cartier, in March 1933, and Van Cleef & Arpels, in December of that year. Each *brevet d'invention* is exact to the minute about the date it was recorded, and each goes to somewhat contorted lengths to depict the technique without resorting to the same words used in earlier documents. "I don't know if Cartier knew about Algier's patent," says Eric Nussbaum, curator of the Art of Cartier Collection in Geneva. "But I showed the papers to a friend who is a lawyer with the European Court of Patents in Munich. He said that it would be absolutely impossible to deposit three such similar patents today. The rules are much more severe."

Van Cleef & Arpels coined the term *serti mystérieux* to describe the technique and soon became so closely identified with "mysterious setting" that the firm is often credited with the conception. "It's a bit of a gray area," concedes Shawn Sullivan, chief operating officer of VCA in the United States. "We didn't invent it, but we perfected it"—a justifiable bit of hubris supported by the French government, through the Institut National de La Propriété Industrielle in Paris.

Which does not really explain why Cartier permitted an arch-rival to develop a virtual monopoly on invisible setting. "Cartier was the first to have it and the first to drop it," says New York gem dealer and de facto historian Ralph Esmerian. "Perhaps it was not the image the firm wanted. From a practical point of view, as soon as you've cut grooves into a stone you've eliminated it from any other purpose for its entire lifetime. Those stones have had it—you cannot reset them—and jewelers love to recycle things." This theory becomes less compelling when considering that each stone used for invisible setting is no more than a fraction of a carat, almost insignificant to jewelers accustomed to dealing with major rocks. The real value is in the workmanship, so why would anyone dismantle a chef-d'oeuvre?

Nussbaum maintains that the grooving requisite to invisible setting isn't necessarily what a jeweler wants to do to a gem. "So much of the stone must be cut off to bring it into these lines that hold it from underneath," he says. "There is a great loss of precious material—a gift of nature—and it doesn't add to the brilliance of the stones. Even though you cannot imagine how all the stones are fixed together, you get reflections and not so much fire. It's a surface effect."

There were certainly other historical factors in Cartier's apparent ennui, or lack of aggressive competition. "Cartier was pursuing other venues—clocks, Egyptian revival, royal commissions," points out one industry insider. And Esmerian adds one more facet to the mystery. "It had a great deal to do with the fact that Van Cleef & Arpels was coming into its own," he states. "By the forties and fifties, it had overtaken the spotlight that belonged to Cartier as a leading designer in Western jewelry, primarily because of its establishment in New York. Things were very quiet in Paris during

World War II, which gave New York firms the chance to take over in terms of design and production."

The *grandes mains*, or master hands, who did invisible setting for Van Cleef & Arpels originally came from the renowned French workshop of Alfred Langlois. Since 1936, Langlois has been part of VCA, and though the company's workshop, quartered above its salon on Place Vendôme, was managed by Alfred's daughter Odette until her death several years ago, only eight or 10 of its 28 jewelers are qualified to do *serti mystérieux*. Under concentrated beams of light they scrutinize diminutive gemstones, delicate lattices of gold, almost microscopic screws, in a beehive of activity that seems unrelated to the elegant and pristine store downstairs. The team includes four designers, constantly referencing the archives of vintage drawings behind their desks, and a chain-smoking Cambodian lapidary named Monsieur Wuong, who mixes diamond powder with olive oil on the wheel that shapes the stones. The underpinning of tiny tracks is always hand-made rather than cast—it's the difference between the little black dress from a designer's haute couture line and one sold in a boutique, according to Eric Arpels, the charming young scion of the family business. "People try to use computerized machines like for the space shuttle," he says. "For mysterious setting, forget it. The value of the product is the quality of the guy upstairs who makes it."

And the exclusivity is in the limited output of those "guys." The curving contours of each petal and leaf in a flower brooch look to the exacting standards of Mother Nature as a prototype. A sapphire bracelet, supple as a blue ribbon, may require 300 stones. A ruby-and-diamond necklace, created to commemorate the millennium, represents 2,000 hours of work. Even the least complicated designs are labor-intensive. "If today you would order a pair of very simple earrings in mysterious setting, I would say delivery in eight months," declares Arpels. The composite of tiny stones in invisible setting demands another kind of appreciation than a single large gemstone. "There is always going to be a difference between a twelve-carat Burma ruby and a little *calibré*-cut ruby," says Sotheby's vice chairman John D. Block, director of international jewels for North and South America. "The value of the big stone is as a unique item of nature. With invisible setting, the value is in what man can do with a group of stones. It's like comparing a fabulous natural landscape with a Hudson River School painting."

Once you're introduced to invisible setting, everything else can look like costume jewelry, a point appreciated by some of the century's grandest *grandes dames*. For Christmas of 1936, Wallis Simpson didn't need mistletoe: Her present from King Edward VIII (a fellow with a basic understanding of crown jewels) was a brooch designed as two *feuilles de houx*, or holly leaves, one with diamonds and the other with invisibly-set rubies, which she occasionally wore in her hair. The following spring—before the modern pre-nup—the abdicated monarch, now the Duke of Windsor, gave his bride a trinket known as "the marriage contract bracelet," to wear with a pale-blue silk crepe wedding dress by Mainbocher: The wide band of diamonds had a large clasp of invisibly set, cushion-shaped sapphires. The inscription on the

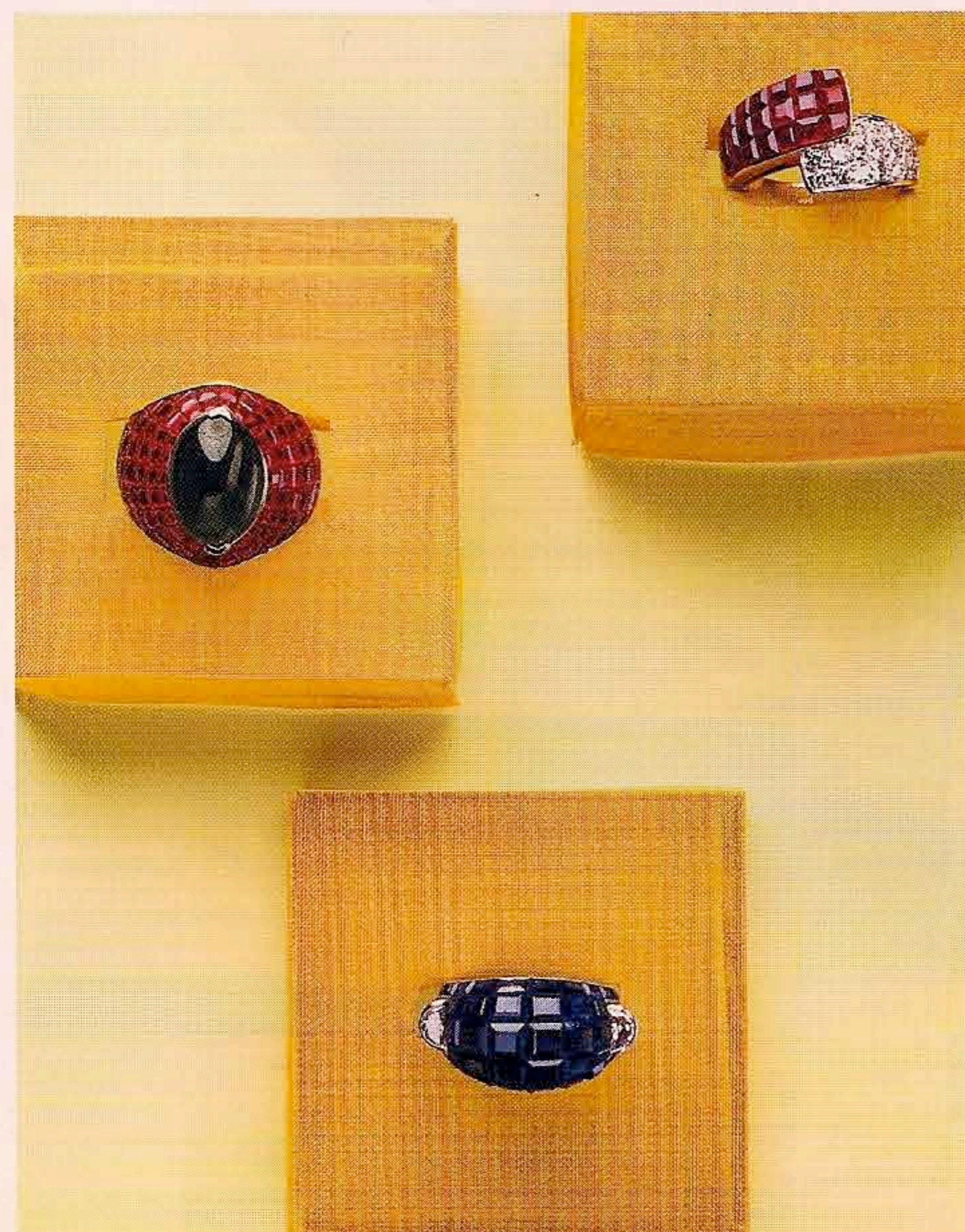
Robert Bruce Bielka's slithery, invisibly-set bracelet (right; privately owned) is composed of more than 1,700 parts: among them, 298 sapphires (about 70 carats) and 186 diamonds (15 carats) in its border and clasp. It is the first invisibly-set bracelet made with gemstones set on the diagonal. Jewelry designed upon commission. Opposite top: From New York estate jeweler Demner, a double-leaf brooch of rubies (approximately 30 carats) and diamonds (about 8.5 carats) set in 18-karat yellow gold. \$45,000. Demner, 740 Madison Avenue; 212-794-3786. Bottom: A signature Van Cleef & Arpels setting, a charming leaf brooch fashioned of 281 invisibly-set sapphires (64.27 carats) and 20 baguette-cut diamonds (1.06 carats). \$125,000.







From estate jeweler Camilla Dietz Bergeron, Ltd., a flower brooch of rubies (71.96 carats) and diamonds (5.11 carats) set in 18-karat yellow gold and platinum. \$36,500. By appointment: 212-794-9100. Cash/check only. Below: a trio of invisibly-set rings. In the upper right corner, a band by Van Cleef & Arpels fashioned with 21 rubies (2.93 carats) and 22 round diamonds set in 18-karat gold. \$28,000. An Italian designer, Sabbadini, takes center stage with its ruby ring featuring a cabochon emerald mounted in 18-karat gold. \$27,000. 212-688-4012. Bottom: Rounding out the selection is a dome-shaped ring of invisibly-set sapphires (about 16 carats) flanked by diamonds set in platinum. This estate piece (French, ca. 1930s) is unsigned. \$19,800. Primavera Gallery, 808 Madison Avenue; 212-288-1569.



piece read: "For our Contract 18-V-37." Both items were sold at Sotheby's 1987 Jewels of the Duchess of Windsor auction, each for just over \$1 million.

Last year, Christie's sold the invisibly-set Argentine flag brooch made by Van Cleef & Arpels for Eva Perón. A popular TV hostess flew from Buenos Aires to New York for the auction. Though cheered on by the crowd, she lost to an anonymous collector on the phone, who purchased the jewel for \$992,500. No one knows if Andy Warhol wore the invisibly-set earrings and ring in his jewelry collection sold posthumously by Sotheby's. "I'm the wrong person to ask," says Block with a twinkle, "but I imagine he tried them on now and then. They'd look great at a cocktail party."

A couple of other legendary French maisons (Boucheron and Chaumet) dabbled in invisible setting. Even some Americans got into the act, notably Verdura, one of the last bespoke jewelers in New York, whose invisibly-set brooch of rubies and diamonds, designed as a cluster of sweet peas for socialite Betsey Cushing Whitney, was sold last year at Sotheby's for \$167,500. One of the few modern practitioners is New York jewelry designer Robert Bruce Bielka, a certified master bench jeweler who first became enchanted with invisible setting in the mid-1970s. At that time he was working at Cartier for \$5 an hour and taking his tools home on the subway to perfect his technique. "Nobody knew how

to cut the stones, and there was no discussion of grooving," says Bielka. "There are so many variables, from the grit of the diamond powder to the speed of the wheel. I practiced on cheap quartz and pale emeralds with black spots."

Recently somebody or bodies recognized the potential for producing this singular jewelry in greater quantity: Pieces are now made in Thailand—invisibly-set, yes, perhaps even with quality gemstones like "pigeon's-blood" rubies (the most desirable), but of a subtly inferior workmanship. Sometimes the Asians use glue. "Although I personally dislike copies, the jewelry is made by human beings, so it can be made by other human beings," says David Bennett. "The difference is in how well finished the mount is, how well achieved the design is, and how well matched the stones are." As Alfredo Aletto sniffs, "You can buy cashmere and have someone ruin the suit, or you can buy polyester and have an artist make it—which is going to look better?"

No one really took on the undisputed hegemony of Van Cleef & Arpels until the upstart Aletto, a fourth-generation Neapolitan jeweler who works exclusively on invisible setting. In 1991, he successfully defended his right to use the term "invisibly-set," a stalwart David against the Goliath of Van Cleef & Arpels. There is certainly no more passionate advocate of the craft. "He's eating, sleeping, dreaming invisible setting," says a friend in the jewelry business. "He won't even talk about women anymore." Strong words from a fellow Italian.

Aletto is skilled in all phases of the process (designing, lapidary work, and setting) and is quite contemptuous of the Southeast Asian invisibly-set pieces. (continued on page 222)





Designed by Fulco di Verdura for Betsey Cushing Whitney in 1968, this invisibly-set ruby and diamond bow brooch mounted in platinum epitomizes the art taken to its highest level. The setting was all the more difficult because of the rounded shape of the piece. \$175,000. Verdura, New York, 212-758-3388; Palm Beach, 561-832-2662.

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## Where To Buy



PAGE 164 Oxxford Clothes' two-button Duke of Oxxford blazer in dupioni silk: At CUFFS CLOTHING CO. Cleveland; 440-247-2828. Cotton dress shirt: At BARNEYS NEW YORK

New York; 212-826-8900 • SAKS FIFTH AVENUE select stores; 212-753-4000. Woven silk tie: At BARNEYS NEW YORK select stores • OXXFORD CLOTHES New York; 212-593-0204. Hand-rolled Belgium linen



pocket square: At ROBERT TALBOTT nationwide; 800-747-8778 • BERGDORF GOODMAN MEN New York; 800-218-4918 • NEIMAN MARCUS select stores; 800-937-9146.

PAGE 165 One hundred percent linen, three-button blazer: At POLO RALPH LAUREN New York; 800-756-7656. Pima cotton jersey turtleneck: At POLO RALPH LAUREN select stores • SAKS FIFTH AVENUE New York.



Classic gabardine trousers: At POLO RALPH LAUREN select stores • SAKS FIFTH AVENUE New York. Crocodile belt: At POLO RALPH LAUREN select stores • SAKS

FIFTH AVENUE New York.

PAGE 166 Two-button, notch-lapel 15 Millmil 15 blazer (the fabric produced from Australian superfine merino wool), cotton dress shirt, woven silk tie, and high-performance, pleated



wool trousers, all from Ermenegildo Zegna's Napoli collection: At ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA select stores; 888-880-3462.

PAGE 167 Six-button, double-breasted, 100 percent superfine cashmere blazer, linen dress shirt, and 100 percent cotton trousers: At LORO PIANA New York; 212-980-7961.

Silk ascot: At ROBERT TALBOTT nationwide • BERGDORF GOODMAN MEN New York • NEIMAN MARCUS select stores.

## Sleight of Hand

(continued from page 186)

"It's fine for those who don't understand the beauty and the technique involved," he states. He starts with a pencil drawing inspired by reference works like the *Book of Glorious Flowers*, then makes a soft-wax model, followed by a silver silhouette of the design; a frame of either gold or platinum is formed around the silhouette. The tracks for the stones are then placed within the frame—a thing of beauty in its own right. Spacing between the tracks is determined by the size of the gemstones. When inspecting sapphires and rubies on buying trips, he is as fussy as Julia Child selecting a flounder. "If a sapphire doesn't have the right color, it looks black at night," Aletto declares peremptorily.

Back at his bench in Florida, Aletto examines each stone and "blocks" it into a basic shape preparatory to grooving. Just like the chairs that Goldilocks tried, some gemstones can be too hard, some too soft, and there is a huge amount of carnage. "I'm not the boss," he says. "The stone is the boss. To cut one stone it could take fifteen minutes, an hour, or all day. If you overcut underneath, the stone will have a frost. The slightest movement in the metal, which you cannot even measure, won't hold the stone. If the stone is too small by a hair, it won't work." Such problems are minimized by wearing magnifying eyeglasses that bear the endorsement "selected by NASA for manned space flight."

Each piece is given his distinctive finishing touch of a small diamond to mask every tiny screw in the structure; then it is lovingly housed in a maroon leather box inlaid with alabaster suede for delivery to Sotheby's or a private customer. (Aletto's latest creation is an American flag brooch, which is scheduled for auction at Sotheby's in October.) The price of a pair of ear clips (\$50,000–\$175,000) or a brooch (\$150,000–\$300,000) includes the weight of the raw material, much of which ends up as dust on the cutting-room floor. When he retires, Aletto jokes, he'll lord final dominion over the stones to which he's devoted his life: He'll take all of those broken, discarded pieces and pave his driveway with the world's most expensive gravel. ■

AIMEE LEE BALL WROTE ABOUT THE ELECTRONICALLY AUTOMATED HOME IN THE LAST ISSUE OF *DEPARTURES*.