

Christopher Walling's jewels are a badge of honor among artful women

BY AMY FINE COLLINS



If the eighties were the glitz decade, the nineties, we are told, will be an era of quiet good taste. The signs are already with us. In Manhattan, upscale restaurants are slashing their prices or closing; fashion is becoming less ornate; our brashiest billionaires have been humbled. Following last summer's theft of \$40,000 worth of Georgette Mosbacher's jewels by an Uzi-toting maniac, the *New York Times* reported, from the nouvelle society front, "... women made an effort to dress down in public. ... Who dared risk being photographed ... wearing an extra diamond?"

For women whose sense of style does not depend on an extra diamond, Christopher Walling has lately become the jeweler of choice. "I wear very little jewelry," says his client the art dealer Virginia Zabriske, "—just Chris's and my Timex." Carolyn Alexander, of the Brooke Alexander gallery, says, "Before I saw Christopher's work I never really wore jewelry."

It is no coincidence that Walling's most ardent patrons are members of the art world. For both him and his customers, design takes precedence over mineralogy. Laila Twigg-Smith, a collector who with her husband founded the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu, compares purchasing Walling's work to acquiring art: "They're both propelled by the same instincts." Especially since his trademark stone is the nearly extinct baroque pearl, there is a similar investment potential. (Ten

years ago he was able to sell a Tahitian natural-color black-pearl necklace for \$5,000; today, the minimum price has doubled.) But Walling did not choose the baroque pearl for its scarcity. Whether knuckle-size and strung as a necklace, floating around a 165-carat citrine in a brooch, or wrapped in a trellis of rubies and diamonds, baroque pearls appeal to him for their "chameleonesque" qualities: "They pick up surrounding colors—of a woman's complexion or her clothes. They can look either glamorous or tailored, but never flashy." Reflecting the same spirit, Walling's favorite diamond shape, which he likes to use in rings, is the distinctly understated, and underused, rose cut, or antique cushion.

Walling's "unostentatious" (to quote Alex Katz's wife, Ada) approach to jewelry making can perhaps be accounted for by his unusual family background: "They gave me intellectual and social standards to live up to"—an imperative to "do something with my life." His great-great grandfather William H. English, an Indiana robber baron, ran for vice-president in 1880. His grandfather William English Walling was a "millionaire socialist," who cofounded the NAACP and secretly met in Amsterdam in 1936 with anti-Nazi activists in an attempt to halt Hitler. His grandmother the



Left: "Paisley" earrings. Above, clockwise: Two-strand black-pearl necklace and earrings; X pearl earrings; gold necklace, earrings; necklace of gem-studded gray pearls.

socialist Anna Strunsky kept up a correspondence with Jack London, which was published as a book in 1903. His father was involved with the United Nations in its early days. Then there is the legacy of his French mother, a Resistance fighter, who was in a concentration camp for a year.

Naturally, Walling, a tall, lean man of forty-one, with a dark thicket of hair and a

friendly, chatty manner, studied political science, until he finally woke up to the fact that a career in the family tradition was not his true calling: "Everyone but me always understood that I would be a jewelry designer." The signs were there from the time he was eight, when a National Geographic book, *Everyday Life in Ancient Times*, sparked a fascination with archaeolo-

gy. "I read about buried treasure and wanted to excavate it. So I started making my own treasures. I chose jewelry because it seemed to be what lasted. My first efforts were Minoan-style necklaces fashioned from copper telephone wire." He also used to show guests his mother's jewelry—mostly nineteenth-century French pieces.

Yet it was his father who, in a practical sense, set his feet on the jewelry-making path: "Because he had learned about it in boarding school, he had the knowledge and the tools." His family also had an artsy streak. After studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, his father had a late-life second career as an architect. Arshile Gorky was a family friend, and when Christopher was thirteen, he acquired a Mary Frank plaster bas-relief of a nude. While Walling lived in West Africa during his father's UN years, his parents collected tribal masks. But his father "stripped off the masks' feathers, stones, and shells" to make them consistent with his taste for pure, streamlined form. As a young adult, Walling found himself irresistibly drawn to minimalist art, whose influence can be seen in his fundamental shapes and uniform colorations. He names Dan Flavin, Robert Wilson, James Turrell, and Joel Shapiro among his artist heroes. (Shapiro has returned the homage by trading art for earrings, rings, and a necklace for his daughter and wife.) Among old masters, Walling

admires Sassetta.

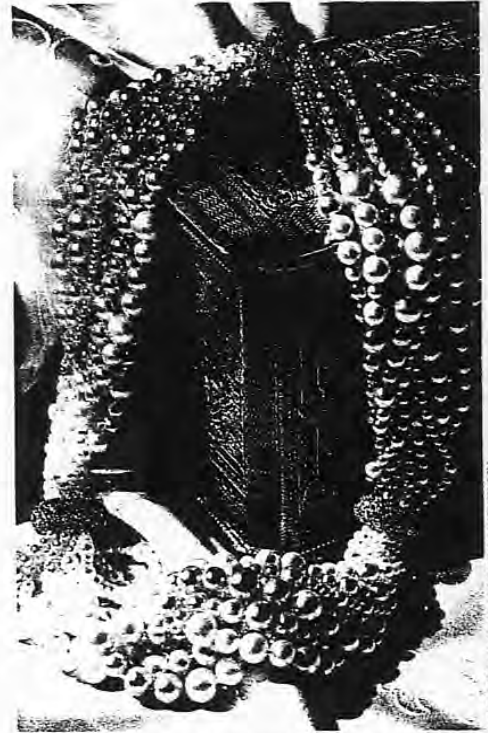
Walling's sensibility reminds the art dealer Holly Solomon of Sol LeWitt: "He keeps working on the same thing over and over." However, Walling says he never repeats the really important pieces: "Repeating is not usually possible, because of the stones' scarcity. I make a limited edition of three to five pieces only if stones are available." What prompted Solomon's observation are Walling's signature design, the X-shaped Biwa-pearl earrings, the simplest of which cost \$2,000 to \$3,000. Laila Twigg-Smith bought hers—the first of many Walling acquisitions—right off Solomon's ears. The sugary-toned, free-form Xes, which Walling rims in gold, are cultured in the mollusk, once an X-shaped nucleus has been implanted. "Some of the earliest cultured pearls," he reminds us, "were Buddha-shaped, grown by placing miniature statuettes in the oysters." The X was a "baroque form that was out there, but no one else took advantage of it." On further reflection, he adds, "Perhaps I was attracted to them because the X sign is Russian and Greek for the start of my name. My father always called me 'Xtopher.'" The X appeals to him aesthetically as well as linguistically: "As a shape, it is surprisingly complimentary to the face. Like all baroque pearls, the Xes are irregular—as is the face." While symmetrical shapes can call unwanted attention to physiognomic im-

perfections, lumpier, more organic forms harmonize with any subtle asymmetries. "They sort of climb right up the earlobe," Walling explains.

Lily Auchincloss, a Museum of Modern Art board member, probably launched the demand for the X earrings. "Lily turns heads wherever she goes," says Walling admiringly. "A number of women at the museum have them now," says Auchincloss, "and I wear mine almost every day. But I was first on board."

House & Garden's editor-in-chief, Nancy Novogrod, is another elegant woman often spotted in the simple but flattering Xes. (She also owns a strand of the black Tahitian and of the white South Seas pearls, which are the second-most-desired Walling pieces, and matching black and white rings.) "The Xes have become almost a badge, as if you're a member of a club," she reflects. "I met Christophe de Menil because of them. She stopped me in my daughter's nursery school to admire them. And when I went to visit one of my best friends recently in Pennsylvania, there was her mother wearing Christopher's earrings." Perhaps Liz Taylor is the most celebrated owner of the X pearls; they were a gift from her daughter Liza Todd.

Walling has expanded his X repertoire to include pavé-diamond versions, which convert to dress clips (up to \$26,000), pearl ones with chrome tourmaline accents (about \$6,000—he is a fan of semiprecious stones because he likes their edible-looking, Jell-O-like shades), and still others crisscrossed in pavé. For a touch more drama, customers



Eleven-strand pearl necklace with diamond doughnuts.

NECKLACE: COURTESY TWIGG-SMITH COLLECTION



An assortment of Xes (earrings and bracelet) and a necklace.

can add black Tahitian-pearl drops, attached to the X by means of a barely visible mechanism. Walling is not thrilled when these designs of his are compared to those of others. "It's unfortunate," he says, "not only that prestigious stores may encourage their name designers to imitate the work of independent designers like me, but that they cut corners on production and the results look cheap." Design is getting more and more uniform, he laments. "The best foreign cars now look like Dodges. Jewelers all imitate one another. Women require a sense of security to wear something individual."

At Fifth Avenue's great jewelry stores, Walling estimates, the customer is also paying a great deal extra for the cachet of the brand names. And no one is paying very close attention to what works best on a customer. He cites his favorite jeweler, the late French designer Suzanne Belperron, who "found it unfathomable that someone would buy a dress off the rack if she could afford couture. She spent days with a client to find out what her life was like, what

her wrists and neck were like." He also admires Joel Rosenthal, of J.A.R., in Paris, who "doesn't hesitate to tell a client that the colors she's wearing are all wrong or that he won't make her a gold chain."

People who come to Walling, he says, have to trust his eye: "I've been looking at jewelry constantly since I was a child. I even dream about it." Consequently, a fair-haired client like Carolyn Alexander will end up with a necklace in pinkish rhodochrosite or aquamarine earrings bound in gold, while Ada Katz will walk away with a two-strand gray Biwa-pearl necklace to play up her dark beauty. (Walling traded the necklace for a cutout, stand-up portrait of himself by her husband, Alex.) "The jewelry obviously works on me," Alexander remarks, "because people *always* comment. He really understands a woman's style." Walling laughs, "At times I've practically had to bludgeon people into telling them they look good."

Walling believes his finest work results when he is given carte blanche: "Two of the best pieces I ever made were for Asher Edelman [the arbitrator]. For his first commission he brought a check and simply said, 'Make something beautiful.'" Of course, a client must be willing to wait three to six months for her gorgeous little gewgaw. He cautions impatient patrons, "It's like making love; one doesn't want it to end too soon." He also risks producing works on speculation, for his own pleasure. "It's probably a bad habit," he admits.

Currently, the most magnificent item he has in stock is a pair of "paisley" earrings wrought from two Venezuelan abalone pearls, iridescent as spilled oil and surrounded by a zigzag of baguette diamonds and pavé emeralds, so finely set they almost seem embroidered. Surprisingly, these earrings were inspired by the solid-color aesthetic of minimalism and the German baroque masterpieces of Johann Melchior Dinglinger, who worked for Augustus the Strong, perhaps history's most

lavish patron of the jeweler's art. "The idea for the emerald settings came from the channel-set and pavé-emerald 'scales' on the dragon in Dinglinger's cup depicting Hercules and the Nemean lion." Other temptations in inventory include a necklace combining diamonds, plump carved emeralds and sapphires, and ringed black pearls—as sleek as ball bearings and about to become unavailable. (The pearls' rings, which resemble the circular grooves on wheel-thrown pottery, were considered flaws, and growers recently learned how to prevent them.) Equally sumptuous is a gray Tahitian-pearl necklace, studded with tsavorites and diamonds, which looks like a string of celestial globes. If these creations seem otherworldly, maybe it is because ideas come to Walling "in flashes while meditating." Images of jewelry appear to him in his dreams as well, though "translating them into realistic, three-dimensional objects can be difficult."

Walling's latest project is a new showroom, at 608 Fifth Avenue, which functions like a theater for his wares. Modeled on Lincoln Kirstein's house, it features gilt ceilings, walls draped in coppery fabric, Empire furniture, and sculptures of hands and heads resting on fluted columns. Here, one at a time, his inventions are displayed to clients. This marks quite a departure from his previous setup, which involved his ushering customers into the bathroom to admire themselves in the medicine-chest mirror. Walling expects further changes in the near future. "Because of the diminishing supply of freshwater baroque pearls, I'll be working more with precious metals." His pearl-adorned followers will have no problem making the transition with him. "I just don't have an eye for anyone else's jewelry," says Carolyn Alexander, and Laila Twigg-Smith agrees: "We've all gotten spoiled by Christopher." □

☛ Amy Collins wrote about Jean Schlumberger for the July 1990 issue of *Connoisseur*.