5 WOMEN LAPIDARY ARTISTS
SHARE CAREER PATHS AND INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

Sonia Esther Soltani, GIA AJP

They talk about their lapidary styles, their most challenging rough and what they learned, and the challenges and opportunities for the cutting and carving industry.

NAOMI SARNA, OWNER, NAOMI SARNA DESIGNS, NEW YORK (SOON OREGON)

Naomi Sarna, owner of Naomi Sarna Designs.

Sarna's Mossy River jade pendant with white diamonds, black spinel, and 18-karat gold.

GemGuide: When and how did you become a lapidary artist?

Naomi Sarna: About 20 years ago. I took a few lessons with Stephen Kotlowski. Learning about ideal angles and light/color return was foundational for my art. Lew Wackler taught me about polishing at about the same time. I found the flat faceting planes not very exciting, so I started carving, applying the fundamentals of ideal angles.

GG: How would you describe your lapidary style?

NS: There are almost no straight lines on my pieces. My style is guided by my interest in art, such as Art Nouveau and Abstract Expressionism. Bernd Munsteiner taught that the so-called imperfections in gemstones were objects of beauty; I see them as guides to creating my carvings.

GG: Can you tell us about your studio setup?

NS: I'm in the process of setting up a new studio in Portland, Oregon, which I'm very excited about. My machines are point carvers, 6" grinding machines, Foredom handpieces, and an NSK for fine work. There are lots of various diamond-plated and sintered bits, bamboo chopsticks, and diamond pastes.

GG: What's the most challenging rough you've ever carved?

NS: My Guinness World Record 703-carat tanzanite carving, L'Heure Bleu, was challenging because tanzanite doesn't like any heat and would fracture easily, plus it had a variety of harder and softer inclusions.

GG: Have you ever had a failed carving that you learned from?

NS: An elaborate rutilated quartz carving went off to a competition and arrived in several pieces. My mistake was pushing the carving too much in heavily rutilated areas, which I think weakened the carving.

GG: Are there gemstones, specific origins, and colors you see more in demand this year?

NS: In jade, the Guatemalan blue and lavender colors seemed very popular at the Monterey Bay Jade Festival in June. Jade prices continue to rise dramatically because of so many factors: mines closing, demand from China, and diminished supplies.

GG: If you could mentor a new generation of gem artists, what would be the first lesson you'd teach them?

NS: The worst advice someone gave me was not to carve the precious material away. Most cutters carve for weight. That stopped me for a while until I became highly design-driven. I carve deeply, but I maintain the perimeters as much as possible to create large, unusual carvings. I recommend that new carvers ignore design advice and let their creativity flow. And not to let too many people comment on

a work in progress. They won't see what you are seeing in your mind.

Michelle Mai, owner of MVM Gems.

Mai cut three synthetic sapphires for Somewhere In The Rainbow in 2020, focusing on current events. This one is based on Ruth Bader Ginsburg's legacy of championing rights and the power shift her death left on the Supreme Court.

MICHELLE MAI, OWNER, MVM GEMS, CALIFORNIA

GemGuide: When and how did you become a lapidary artist?

Michelle Mai: I started faceting in 2016. Since early childhood, I've collected rocks and crystals, and I've always been keen on working with my hands. I started cabbing at a local club after college and quickly found and fell in love with faceting.

GG: How would you describe your lapidary style?

MM: I'm drawn to symmetric shapes, small tables with complex crowns, botanical motifs, sparkle and scintillation. Occasionally, I draw inspiration from fantasy or chemistry, or slip in an Easter egg.

GG: Can you tell us about your studio setup?

MM: I facet on an Ultra Tec V5 out of my fiance's kitchen—space is scarce in the San Francisco Bay Area, and my bench is literally arm's length from the stove! I design in Gem Cut Studio with mostly meetpoint-style faceting, and use primarily Gearloose laps and polish compounds.

GG: Have you ever had a failed carving that you learned from?

MM: One of my very first commissions was a gorgeous neon lagoon blue-green Afghan tourmaline rough supplied by the client. As I was preforming the rough, it shattered into tiny unusable pieces. I called the client, absolutely distraught. That experience taught me not just about technical considerations regarding cutting potentially stressed and unstable rough, but also about the importance of cultivating good client relationships and how to gracefully communicate and recover from failures.

GG: Are there gemstones, specific origins, and colors you see more in demand this year?

MM: I've seen an uptick in requests for synthetic stones such as sapphire, alexandrite, spinel, YAG [yttrium aluminum garnet], and a keen interest in rainbow moonstone and other phenomenal gems.

GG: What challenges is the lapidary community facing?

MM: My biggest challenge this year has been sourcing high-quality natural rough. As demand for unusual colored stones has increased throughout the market and larger companies have turned towards gems they used to disregard, far less becomes available for individual lapidaries like myself.

GG: If you could mentor a new generation of gem artists, what would be the first lesson you'd teach them?

MM: From a technical perspective, it's fantastic that there is so much more available information now than ever. But for your own growth, don't take shortcuts in learning. Don't be afraid to experiment, but also mind the advice of the experienced. From a business perspective: learn the ropes of operating a small business. It'll save you so much grief later on!

DIANA TRUJILLO, OWNER, CLARA PEPPER, MINNESOTA

GemGuide: When and how did you become a lapidary artist?

Diana Trujillo: I started my obsession with gemstones the way many of us in the jewelry industry have started: collecting beads, rose cuts, and cabochons. As my collection grew, so did my preference for higher-quality stones, and eventually it led me to research why some faceted stones have great sparkle while others are dull and windowed. I bought a book to learn the technical aspects and kept my eye on Facebook Marketplace for a used machine. I finally found an antique machine in 2020, during COVID, and teaching myself to use it turned out to be a perfect hobby for a solitary couple of years!

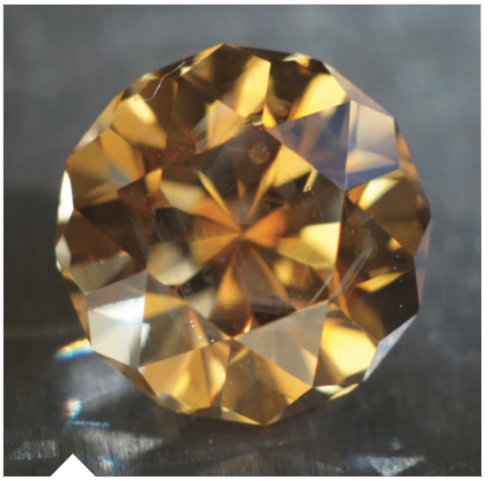
GG: How would you describe your lapidary style?

DT: Quilt-like stones, with a focus on glittery and delicate repeating geometric patterns.

GG: Can you tell us about your studio setup?

DT: I have taken over our guest bedroom for my lapidary work (sorry, husband!). I use a Facetron machine, and I love it due to the quick angle changes and height adjustments. It is a great choice for stones with many "tiers" (or angle changes), such as pears, which could have as many as 30-50 tiers. For comparison, a standard round has only eight tiers.

Diana Trujillo, owner of Clara Pepper.



Trujillo's "Reedling" design on a Montana sapphire.

GG: Have you ever had a failed carving that you learned from?

DT: I cut a client's tsavorite garnet rough that gave me nightmares afterwards. It had a crystal inclusion near the middle that was surrounded by tiny feathers. In the process of cutting the crown, I got too close to those tension cracks and a third of the stone split off. Now I know to warn clients that seemingly harmless inclusions in their rough could derail plans down the line.

GG: Are there gemstones, specific origins, and colors you see more in demand this year?

DT: I mostly work with sapphires, and I have noticed that teal is extremely popular at the moment. It can be hard to source natural teal or forest green sapphire that isn't too dark or even black under indoor lighting. Thus, one of my most popular commissioned requests is synthetic sapphire since it can be used to achieve a green-leaning teal that still looks bright indoors.

GG: What challenges is the lapidary community facing?

DT: From a business perspective, high-quality natural rough has gotten almost prohibitively expensive. Every rough purchase is a gamble of hundreds of dollars, which may or may not result in a profitable sale.

MAGGIE KLINEDINST, OWNER, ON & UP DESIGN/MAGGIE KLINEDINST, MARYLAND

GemGuide: When and how did you become a lapidary artist?

Maggie Klinedinst: Four years ago. I worked at a jewelry/bead store from ages 15 to 27. In the beginning, I purchased all the materials because I hadn't built up the skills to branch out more. Gradually, I started making the components in my pieces and learning various fabrication techniques. Then it was a slippery slope of being curious about how the gems I was buying came into existence. After some YouTube and forum rabbit holes, I found a class at the Gem Cutters Guild of Baltimore.

GG: Can you tell us about your studio setup?

MK: I have a small studio, but I make the most of it with some solid organization! I have an Ultra Tec V5 for faceting, a CabKing for cabbing, a Foredom flexshaft for carving, and then I have a jewelers' bench with a basic setup of rotary and hand tools, and a small torch setup. I keep things on wheels so I can move them around depending on what I'm doing.

GG: What's the most surprising rough you've ever carved?

MK: One thing I carve that is hyper-local to me is Baltimore Stoop Marble. Baltimore is a city filled with white marble steps, and I use broken pieces of some of these in my art. It's a nod to my adopted home.

Maggie Klinedinst, owner of On & Up Design/Maggie Klinedinst.

A Montana sapphire cut by Klinedinst.

GG: Have you ever had a failed carving that you learned from?

MK: When I was first learning and experimenting, I had a series of gems that I called my "little failures." I had a local jeweler Sarah "Spee" Parker turn them into a brooch to commemorate the learning journey.

GG: What challenges is the lapidary community facing?

MK: Some challenges I've seen relate to keeping local clubs thriving. The club I'm a part of was founded in 1951. We've been lucky in that we've seen a renewed interest in the lapidary arts, but we've also seen neighboring clubs fold as there wasn't a membership to support it.

GG: If you could mentor a new generation of gem artists, what would be the first lesson you'd teach them?

MK: Join a club or an online community if there aren't any clubs in your immediate area. Lapidary is something that can be treated like an apprenticeship, and learning from others who have decades of experience is invaluable. You'll quickly learn that there are many ways to achieve the same result.

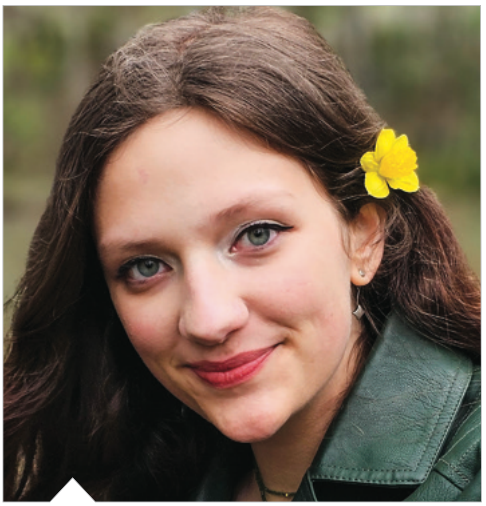
NADINE MARSHALL, OWNER, I LOVE GREEN ROCKS/ TUMBLEDUPONFACETING, WASHINGTON

GemGuide: When and how did you become a lapidary artist?

Nadine Marshall: In 2018, at the age of 19. I did six months of lessons with my mentor, Mike Zinski, who provided the machinery and educational opportunity I needed at a young age to learn. My parents helped me find and save up for a V2, and we eventually found one for sale in California.

GG: How would you describe your lapidary style?

NM: Precision bespoke gemstone faceting. My goal is always to facet the most beautiful and valuable gem possible, taking into consideration unique characteristics, color, light return, and often focusing on American gemstones.



Nadine Marshall, owner of I Love Green Rocks/ TumbledUponFaceting.

A 2.25-carat Merelani mint garnet cut by Marshall.

GG: Can you tell us about your studio setup?

NM: Currently, I am using an Ultra Tec V5 and am able to do most of my work with only that machine. I also have an old tile saw that came with my original V2 that I use for the occasional gem I need to trim. All of my cutting and polishing equipment is diamond plated, with the exception of my ceramic polishing lap for soft gems.

GG: What's the most challenging rough you've ever carved?

NM: A piece of kunzite from the Pala mines in Southern California. The material is known for being soft and low in toughness due to its low symmetry crystal system and two planes of cleavage. It has a tendency to splinter, chip, cleave, and scratch, however, I have managed to successfully cut it.

GG: What challenges is the lapidary community facing?

NM: In general, most colored gemstones are cut outside the U.S., typically in countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, and it is taught as a skill for specifically cutting large quantities of gemstones. However, within the U.S. lapidary community, it is more difficult to get involved in because of the up-front costs, accessibility to learning, and getting your hands on the resources, such as good facet rough. On top of that, rather than working for a company, the lapidary community in the U.S. has to run more individually. There is a gap in the generational handoff of the trade, and the tenured and skilled lapidary artists are having to adapt to social media and marketing. Meanwhile, the younger generation is struggling to get plugged into mentors and teachers within the lapidary community but have grown up with the internet and social media and could bring that skill set. By bridging the skill sets between the tenured generation and the incoming generation, we could see a revival within the lapidary industry. ◆

About the Author: *Sonia Esther Soltani is a jewelry writer contributing articles to trade and consumer publications. She is the former editor-in-chief of Rapaport, where she managed the company's print, online, and social media products. Sonia is also a career coach, helping jewelry professionals navigate career transitions and personal branding.*

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