

# UPFRONT

**BOOKS** DREAMS OF THE RED PHOENIX | **ART** CONSERVATOR KATJA GIBSON | **STYLE** SHAPE SHIFTING

Jewelry designer  
Elizabeth Locke  
imbues her work  
with mystery  
and mysticism.  
*by Sallie Lewis*

## *All That Glitters*

*Photography by Sarah Cramer Shields*

## In a studio in Bangkok, Thailand, Elizabeth Locke listens to the clatter and clashing of gold being

hammered. The shrine-studded metropolis is a home away from home for the Virginia-based designer, whose gilded jewelry collections have been created there for nearly 30 years.

Born and raised in Staunton, Locke, who has a degree in modern Italian literature from the University of Florence, visited Bangkok in the late 1980s on assignment as a features writer for *Town & Country*. While there, she met a group of goldsmiths whose work, though ordinary in design, was beautifully handcrafted and full of potential. The experience sparked her imagination and set a dream into motion.

After returning home, Locke enrolled at the Gemological Institute of America in New York City, borrowed \$20,000 from her father-in-law and set off to create a business that has established her as one of the most successful jewelry designers in the market today. Her designs are sold at her flagship store—The Other Elizabeth—in Boyce and at Elizabeth Locke Jewels on New York’s Madison Avenue, as well as at Neiman Marcus and dozens of independent stores around the country.

Today, Locke still works with the same Thai goldsmiths to make her timeless designs.

“What I wanted for myself did not look like the jewelry that I saw in shop windows,” she says of her early designs, which included large, heavy chains made of hammered gold and chunky rings with luminous cabochon stones. These handcrafted classics remain some of the designer’s best-selling pieces.

Designers are inspired by many threads in the textured tapestry of the world and, for Locke, these inspirations are often historic. “I’ve always been fascinated by antique jewelry, especially the really early designs from the Etruscans, Greeks and Romans,” she says. From the milky depth of a South Sea pearl to the bold impression of an ancient coin, or the sorcerous quality of a Venetian glass intaglio, there is a sense of mystery and mysticism in every piece.

The designer, who has a strong affinity for collecting rarities, has amassed an impressive assemblage of 19th-century micromosaics. These minute *objets* depict tiny scenes and still lifes from microscopic shavings of colored tesserae (small tiles). In what she calls a “continual treasure hunt,” the jeweler combs the crannies of the globe, from European markets to antique shows, in search of uncommon objects and lost art forms.

Locke’s clientele is varied, ranging from 14-year-old girls to 90-year-old matriarchs. For some, the appeal of the jewelry is in the gold’s texture or the stones’ striking colors. For others, it is a piece’s weight and solidity, its mythological symbolism or perhaps the feeling of discovery that wearing it can produce—like unearthing treasure.

Locke’s jewelry feels at once nostalgic and new. (Locke buys every stone and draws every design.) “Jewelry is always designed for the era in which it is worn,” she says, and her process is a reflection of this tenet, constantly evolving and modernizing while paying homage to the past.

Every piece of Elizabeth Locke jewelry is made by hand; roughly 40 percent of what she produces is one of a kind. This means that globetrotting is an inevitable part of the designer’s job description.

In January and February, Locke travels in search of stones and antique bits and pieces for her jewelry. In March, she flies to Bangkok and supervises new designs. In April and May she attends trunk shows around the country, and in June, Locke gives herself the gift of gardening at home in Virginia. In July, she’s back in Bangkok, only to return again in November for the production of last-minute Christmas pieces.



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Elizabeth Locke designs. Left: Venetian glass intaglio bangle bracelets.

Though the pace of her travel is intense, Locke embraces it and the people she meets along the way, including the two Italian artisans who create her Venetian glass intaglios out of 17th-century molds, or the carvers in Idar Oberstein, Germany, who produce seals from semi-precious stones. In Bangkok, Locke works with 35 goldsmiths who bring her 19-karat hammered gold pieces to life. “I really cannot imagine trying to do what I do in any other country in the world,” she says of Thailand.

When Locke isn’t traveling the globe or working with her team in Bangkok, she’s at her store in Boyce. The shop used to be the town’s general store, a place where people ventured for sandwiches or baling twine. Today, the quirky, Italian-inspired interior is a backdrop for Locke’s glittering designs, and an expression of one Virginia woman’s talent and vibrancy.

“It’s odd,” she says. “I divide my time between a village of 100 people and a megacity of over 12 million.” This balancing act is perhaps one of the reasons that her designs are so well loved: They’re at once urban and rural, old and new, refined and powerful—an ageless blend of far-flung worldly wonder and American sophistication. [ElizabethLocke.com](http://ElizabethLocke.com) 