

Rings True

A Fellowship with the Ring

Tucked in between a dental practice and an insurance agency, the Rings True studio is easy to miss amid the hustle and bustle of Ridgewood Shopping Center. Yet cross the threshold and you enter the quiet realm of a master craftsman who has created pieces for the jewelry industry's premier designers and retailers.

Inside, a man sits working at a jeweler's bench. This is Karl Linger, and the bench has been his domain for 40 years. Across a storied career at some of the world's finest jewelry houses, he has created rings for Tiffany, cleaned brooches and bracelets recovered from the RMS Titanic, and built the setting for one of the world's largest diamonds.

Now he'd like nothing more than to create your wedding ring. You'd be in good company: Karl was trained at the famed Oscar Heyman Bros. in Manhattan, a venerable institution that supplies some of the finest jewelry and stone setting work in the world for high-end retailers such as Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Tiffany & Co., and Bailey, Banks and Biddle. He also worked for many years at the prestigious Molina Fine Jewelers in Phoenix, Arizona, where he expanded his bench skills to include platinum fabrication, and setting large sensitive and important gemstones.

"I've been privileged to work with renowned jewelers," Karl says. "But to create original pieces that will become family heirlooms—that's my passion." In addition to accepting commissions for bridal and anniversary jewelry, bracelets, necklaces and earrings, Karl also makes expert repairs and modifications to existing jewelry.

"And yes, I replace watch batteries," he says laughing.

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Trained as a diamond setter by masters of the Old World craft, Karl Linger has opened his own Raleigh studio in Ridgewood Shopping Center to handcraft one-of-a kind original wedding rings and exquisite bespoke jewelry.



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The studio is neatly divided between a customer area and his workshop, bridged by a counter of hewn oak with seating for customers. In the front part of the studio are comfortable chairs, photos and mementos. There are a few select displays, but no brightly lit cases stuffed with manufactured jewelry: Rings True isn't about selecting someone's else's retail design, but co-creating your own with a master artisan.

Behind the counter, tools of the trade fill the workshop. The jeweler's bench bristles with rows and racks of neatly organized hand tools—pliers, hammers, files, saw blades, rotary tool bits, gravers, polishing wheels, mandrels, tweezers and magnifiers. There's equipment to cast wax models into gold, platinum and silver, a precision lathe, and torches for soldering, melting and refining metal.

While most of the work is done by hand, a powerful computer workstation loaded with CAD software allows photo-realistic modeling of each piece and preserves each creation for perpetuity. "Each design is safely archived so if your jewelry is ever lost, it can be recreated," Karl says.

The heart of Rings True is the unfinished oak counter where Karl and his customers bend their heads together over sketches and photos, and samples of precious stones and metals. Karl delights in this collaborative process. "Most bench jewelers rarely meet the people who wear their pieces," he explains. "I wanted to create a transparent environment —no middlemen or sales people—where I work face to face with customers so nothing is lost in translation".

In coaxing ideas out of patrons, Karl will show them samples of different styles—old fashioned and modern, fine and lacy, architectural and geometric. He queries each person on their taste, what they want their rings to express, and on practical matters such as their occupation and lifestyle.

"So often I'll encounter people with rings that are totally impractical for their occupation," he explains. "If you're a nurse putting on latex gloves, or a carpenter wearing work gloves, that matters to the design of your ring. You want something that won't get beat up or require repair."

"Sometimes a customer will bring me their ideas, and other times they come in without a clue," Karl says. "Either way we spend a lot of time talking it through."

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Rings True is open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. in Raleigh's Ridgewood Shopping Center. Walk-ins are welcome, though appointments are encouraged.

What of Karl's own style? "I believe in letting a ring or other piece become what it wants to become—to express the customer's heart in gems and precious metal."

While he creates jewelry from every tradition, he has a particular appreciation for designs with an Asian influence—light, clean forms expressing movement through fine, fluid lines. Regardless of the type of setting a customer is drawn to, Karl fashions the delicate intricacies of each with a skill shared by only a handful of artisans.

Karl says most commissions can be completed in 4 to 8 weeks, depending on complexity, but he encourages couples not to wait until the last minute. While virtually all retail bench jewelers today work from pre-fabricated platinum and gold wire, Karl often creating his own wire from solid blocks of gold and platinum to provide him with precise control over the quality and characteristics of the metal—handwork that can't be rushed.

"If you're planning a June wedding, you don't want to come to me in May," he observes. "And if you want something for the winter holidays, let's start in August or September."

So what does it cost to wear one-of-a-kind rings created by a master of Old World jewelsmithing? With no middle men and minimal overhead, prices are surprisingly competitive with jewelry retailers who can only offer off-the-shelf designs.

"To me, the most important things are to work to the highest standard, and to achieve something of enduring beauty, Karl says. "If it's not beautiful..." He shrugs and smiles. "It has to be beautiful."

Ridgewood Shopping Center
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