

Century-old German jewellery house Hemmerle is a staunch defender of the craftsman's trade. And to prove it, the pioneering firm recently renovated a town house on a quiet residential street in Munich and turned it over to an expanding workforce of 15 dedicated cutters, stone setters, polishers and goldsmiths.

With the exception of a laser-guided soldering machine for pavé setting stones (placed unceremoniously in an upstairs corridor), it's a time-honoured set-up. Staff are all seated behind ubiquitous wooden workbenches, bashed and battered after years of use and draped with a leather bench skin to catch any stray gems. Even the huge oak and iron anvils for rougher smithing work have been around since the company's inception back in the 19th century. This is, no doubt, a scene familiar to many a fine jewellery house, but what makes Hemmerle different is its desire to revive and promote a technique that was on the verge of disappearing.

The Austrian method of knitting precious stones on silk originated in the 1800s and had all but died out until about 15 years ago, when a 'master knitter' (who has to remain nameless for security reasons) approached third generation owner Stefan Hemmerle in his Munich atelier and persuaded him to adopt the technique. Requiring a high degree of skill, this time-consuming process begins with the fashioning of each individual bead from a block of stone. Each block is cut into strips, then cubes, then beads, and then individually drilled by hand. With wastage as high as 60 per cent, it's easy to see why the technique had all but disappeared.

When we heard that Hemmerle had revived this technique, we quietly insisted that the company create a head-turning accessory for us. With Teutonic efficiency, it delivered a double pink-silk bangle that winds around the wrist twice in beads carved from carnelian (a translucent, semi-precious variety of the silica mineral chalcedony) with pavé tips in red spinels set in brown patinated copper. The beading process – in which beads are wrapped around a stainless steel band – is complicated, but for a one-of-a-kind piece, the effort is clearly worth it.

Stefan's daughter-in-law, Yasmin, explains: 'The bangle was knitted "in the round" so each bead had to be graded for size and then placed accordingly as the weave followed the bangle's shape.' Linked by a fine silk thread (dyed to Hemmerle's specification), each bead's final positioning was meticulously mapped out before the process began, not unlike a conventional knitting pattern. And our decision to extend the bangle twice around the wrist meant the finished piece of approximately 6,000 beads took over 100 hours to complete, not including the setting of the spinels in the tips. The effect is impressive in its perfection, the beads hugging the bangle's core, says Yasmin, "like a second skin". ✪

www.hemmerle.com

Venerable beads

Carnelian and red spinel bangle, by Hemmerle

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTIAN KAIN STYLIST: CLEMENTINE GUILMOTO WRITER: JESSICA DIAMOND

KNIT WIT
The Wallpaper* carnelian and red spinel bangle was made in the Hemmerle workshop using an almost lost technique of knitting precious stones on silk

Wallpaper*