

The Iconoclast

Charting jeweler Alexis Bittar's rise from the SoHo streets to the world fashion stage

BY KRISTIN YOUNG

When Alexis Bittar was growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., his parents, teachers in the city's public school system, bought and sold antiques to make extra money for the family. His father once paid \$300 for an old water tower he found listed in *The New York Times* classifieds and turned it into a house in Maine (the couple still lives there to this day). Even though he was just 3 years old, Bittar remembers the trip to the scrap yard in Westchester County where the 100-foot diameter, two-story oddity was gathering dust. Being raised in such a quirky and artistic environment instilled in Bittar an early respect for unconventional-ity. "Anything was possible," he says.

You could say the same thing about Bittar's career. As down to earth and intelligent as he is talented, the 42-year-old designer moves easily between conversations about how he got his start—he sold baubles for cash at age 13 on St. Mark's Place in New York City's East Village—and winning the prestigious Council of Fashion Designers of America's Accessory Designer of the Year award in 2010. He spent one year at SUNY Albany, but hated it. "I actually don't remember what I studied," he says. "I was not exactly focused." Save for a short stint as a club kid, Bittar spent most of his early 20s hand-carving Lucite and selling the pieces as a street vendor in SoHo.

"I come from a lineage of intellectuals, and so I was against the grain on every level," he says. "[My family was] really concerned."

It was, however, the streets that gave Bittar his first big break. A representative of the Guggenheim Museum discovered his sculptural talent and began selling his pieces. In 1992, the Museum of Modern Art followed suit, stocking his designs in its store. It didn't take long for Bergdorf Goodman's fashion director Dawn Mello to hear about Bittar, leading to his first foray into the wholesale arena in 1997.

In 2002, the designer truly hit the big time: He began collaborating with HBO's *Sex and the City* costume designer Patricia Field to produce jewelry for the cast. The celebrity floodgates had opened.

"We work with everyone," Bittar says matter-of-



Zanzibar gold
gem-encrusted
Marquis ring;
\$245



Zanzibar Gold
pavé papillon pin;
\$495



Alexis Bittar in front of the Brooklyn Bridge

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Creativity runs in the family: Alexis Bittar's father turned an old water tower into their home in Maine.

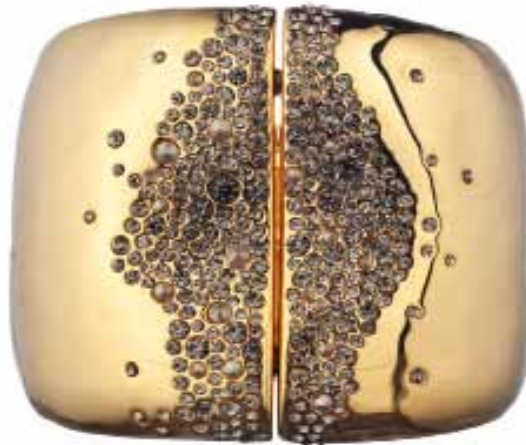
factly, rattling off the names of famous clients including Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Cameron Diaz, Alicia Keys, and Blake Lively. Even Michelle Obama has taken a liking to Bittar's work, wearing his Lucite flower pins as prominent accessories. The collection routinely graces the pages of *Vogue* and French *Vogue* thanks to the interest of celebrity magazine stylists such as Grace Coddington and Emmanuelle Alt, among others. In fact, in 2010, Bittar received more press coverage than any other jeweler, beating out Cartier, Tiffany, Van Cleef & Arpels, and Chanel—"without any ad dollars spent," he says, "which is pretty incredible."

Today, the Alexis Bittar line is carried in 600 specialty stores and roughly 230 department stores in 52 countries. While fashionistas routinely seek out Bittar's collections at highbrow emporiums such as Barneys New York, Harrods in London, and Harvey Nichols in Dubai, design enthusiasts appreciate his avant-garde style at art-world venues such as the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, which is currently exhibiting Bittar's limited-edition Lucite and stainless-steel furniture.

Because of the line's far-reaching appeal, opening his own retail stores was an obvious next step. There are currently three Alexis Bittar stores in New York City, two in Los Angeles, and one in Chicago. Bittar would like to open a few more in the coming years, including one on Manhattan's Upper West Side as well as points further south. "We've got a massive following in Florida," he says.

But make no mistake—Bittar is no "costume jeweler," nor does he like to be labeled an art jeweler. He lands somewhere between fashion and luxury, which is why fine jewelers around the world have gravitated toward his collections, particularly in recent years. Alexis Bittar designs sit comfortably, for example, in the showcases at Long Island's upscale London Jewelers alongside prestige names such as Mikimoto and Van Cleef & Arpels. Uniquely, they are able to satisfy consumers' demand for lower price

The Reverse-set Crystal Cuff, as seen in SATC2



Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) glammed up with Bittar jewelry to in last summer's *Sex and the City 2* sequel.

The Midnight Garden Gold Ombre Bee Pin, as seen on Mrs. O



On Halloween 2010, fashionable First Lady Michelle Obama welcomed trick-or-treaters to the White House while wearing a Bittar bumble bee.

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points without sacrificing a level of exclusivity. “That was amazing to see,” he says, of the line’s reputation for being an “affordable luxury.” “[Retailers] knew we were different from their fine jewelry and were not going to impede on their core business.”

In the end, however, Bittar would like to be known as the guy who made plastics chic. And, if all goes his way this season, he will soon be known as the guy who put powder coating—the stuff you paint cars with—on to the fashionable necks and wrists of urbanites coast to coast. “The matte quality is something I can’t get with anything else,” he explains. “I’m always trying to work with new materials, from wood to stones to crystals and metals. Because I have three lines, I can have that versatility. We use everything, but we are most inspired by things that give you a sense of the unknown and wonderment, so that people don’t know what they’re looking at. That’s the most fun you can have—to make something that’s usually used on cars look tasteful on the average woman.”

Bittar’s luxury-with-a-twist sensibility is evident in everything he creates. The Zanzibar collection, for instance, features oversized necklaces made of clear resin pods encased by wooden horns. Hand-painted leopard and monarch pieces are accented with molten gold hardware. A large, gray Lucite cuff featuring a wicker-like basket treatment hints at the colors of Africa. In the Elements group, a necklace he calls Tilda, after the actress Tilda Swinton, whom he’d love to count among his clients—“It’s such an obvious fit,” he says—features large spears of ebony and wooden beads with oversized gold medallions and tiger-eye stones.

“I’m never thrilled with a safe formula,” says Bittar, adding that he draws as much inspiration from cultures around the world as he does from the way a particular woman on the street dresses. “I get excited when I see [a woman] comfortably standing out of the pack. I’m not attracted when it’s coming from a pretentious standpoint, but the need to express herself?”

Next up—drum roll, please—is a foray into fine jewelry, by spring 2012. “It’s definitely going to be a marriage of modernism with the craftsmanship of antiques,” says the designer, noting price points will range between \$250 and \$12,000. “It will combine bridge and fine, sterling with gold, precious with semiprecious. Other than that I can’t give you too much.” ■



18-inch Zanzibar gold leopard-link necklace; \$350



Zanzibar gold large wicker-hinge bracelet; \$395

Elements Tilda necklace; \$1,200

