

Vail Daily



- Kristin Anderson/Vail Daily

Dan Telleen: Designing history in Vail

Karats gallery in Vail exhibits more than art

CHARLIE OWEN
VAIL, CO, COLORADO,

VAIL, COLORADO — How do you put a price tag on art that is over 350 million years old?

Dan Telleen doesn't really know how to answer that question, nevertheless, he has to attach a value to his art if he wants to sell it and some of his art just happens to be over 350 million years old.

Telleen's art background is in ceramics, but when he first started selling his pieces, he found that it wasn't his pottery that sold the fastest, but his jewelry. He was teaching art at a school in Grand Rapids, Michigan while creating his own collection of work to sell during summer break. Every summer Telleen would visit Colorado and try to sell his art.

"I would look around Colorado and find a spot that was empty and make a deal with the landlord and sell whatever I made during the winter," Telleen said.

Eventually, while in Estes Park in 1969, Telleen caught wind of a little town called Vail from a customer. She told him that there wasn't much going on in Vail, but she saw potential in the new ski resort.

That customer was right.

"A year later I quit teaching and came to Vail and (I've) been here ever since, making jewelry to sell," said Telleen, who is now in his fourth decade of running Karats gallery on East Meadow Drive in Vail.

Small space/Big heart

Inside Karats, music plays faintly in the background and there's a subtle odor of cleaning oils and burnt wax. Paintings line the walls and decorative pottery is scattered in display cases set inside the walls. This is where Telleen designs his masterpieces. It's a work studio and gallery all in one, explains Telleen, and that's what he thinks sets him apart from other jewelry galleries.

"We make (art) here, we do it all right here in this room and we sell it all too, right here in this room, and I think it's what makes us unique (to) the retail in town or even in Colorado or the country. We're a gallery that has a studio and we're doing it all right in the same spot," Telleen said.

The jeweler's bench behind the counter looks out onto the street towards the mountains. Sunlight filters in through the picture window, naturally brightening the studio. The bench is littered with cutting tools, books about ancient coins and artifacts and a microscope. Karats is the very definition of a paradox. Everywhere you look new is mixed with old.

Evolution of art

"If we had a theme at all, it's about time and evolution," said Telleen, who incorporates ancient coins and artifacts into bracelets, necklaces and rings. "We create unique pieces — one-of-a-kind pieces — and we also do original pieces, pieces that originate in our gallery, in our studio that may be part of a series, they may be very similar to each other or they may be exact replicas of each other," Telleen said.

Return customer Connie Dorsey has been buying from Telleen for over 20 years now. Every time he needs jewelry for his wife, he heads to Karats.

"We just love the work that he does," Dorsey said. "I think it's his individualism that we like and that keeps us coming back."

Looking at some of the jewelry in Karats you might think you wandered into a museum instead of an art gallery. Some of the coins used in Telleen's jewelry are 2,500 years old and from places like Greece and Egypt. He has been an avid coin collector since childhood and feels that old items such as these connect us to a time and place that we can only appreciate if we understand the lands from which they came. He has a keen awareness of the past, present, and future, and how they can be brought together in one object.

"As Americans, relating to King Tut is a cool thing," Telleen said. "I think that other people feel that way too, not just Americans. There are things that we all have in common. Even today we are creating objects that some day are going to be old, lost things that people will find."

Karats could add natural history museum to its resume. If the ancient coins and royal seals aren't old or strange enough, Telleen has created a line of jewelry from meteor pieces. He even uses trilobites, a fossilized crustacean that is millions of years old, in a line of earrings.

An unusual blend of history and modern art, Karats is not your average gallery. And Dan Telleen is not your average artist. He is a simple artist with a deep love and respect for his craft and an even deeper appreciation for how that craft can bring history and people face to face.

Arts and Entertainment writer Charlie Owen can be reached at 748-2939 or cowen@vaildaily.com.

<http://www.vaildaily.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071112/AE/71112015&template=printart>