



# AD

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MAIN PHOTO: LINNY HOBBS, COURTESY OF THE DORS DUKE FOUNDATION FOR ISLAMIC ART



A diamond, peridot, ruby and 18k gold ring, by David Webb, c. 1960s



A pavé set diamond and 18-karat gold brooch, by Marianne Ostler, c.1960



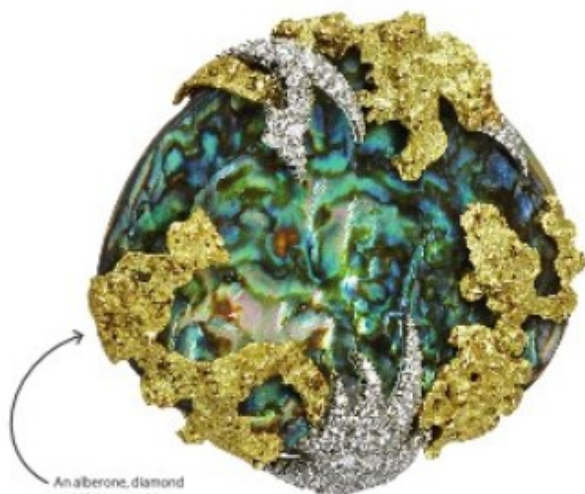
A pair of amethyst, tourmaline, peridot and 18k gold ear clips, by Dinh Van, c. 1970s



# GOLD *standard*

Gallerist *Mahnaz Ispahani Bartos* sources rare, vintage gems from around the world

WORDS SOPHIE STEVENS



An alabaster, diamond and 18-karat gold brooch, by Meferio dits Meller, c.1970

A pavé set diamond and textured 18-karat gold ring, by Kutchnsky, 1972



**M**ahnaz Ispahani Bartos' first foray into the jewellery business started with an unfortunate stroke of bad luck. "The diamond in my engagement ring cracked," she laughingly laments, referring to its reputation as the hardest gemstone. "I immersed myself in the hunt for its replacement and started looking at jewellery properly again, so it served as a catalyst for what I do now."

This is overseeing her eponymous brainchild Mahnaz Collection, a New York-based gallery specialising in fine vintage, design and artist-made jewellery. The in-house collections are steadily built over what can take several years, whilst undergoing rigorous scholarly research to position the jewels in their historical and cultural contexts.

It is an academic approach that Ispahani Bartos honed over a 25-year career as an international affairs professional, after the 1971 and 1979 revolutions in Pakistan and Iran sparked her desire to 'fix some of the conflicts that we create'. Armed with a doctorate in International Relations, she worked for several public service organisations, including a decade at the Ford Foundation directing the American Foreign Policy Program.

Her move into the jewellery world cemented a love of design that began at an early age. Raised in Pakistan with Indian and





Iranian heritage, Ispahani Bartos lived in a modernist house built by an Italian architect. "My parents were art collectors and I grew up in an environment that was rich in tradition," she recalls. "Mughal jewellery was very much part of my upbringing, and where I am from, the relationship you have with your jeweller is one of your earliest and most formative experiences."

She has cultivated relationships around the world with dealers, shops and auction houses, through which jewels of significant value still often change hands in an industry based upon trust. Once such pieces enter the Mahnaz Collection, the real work begins. "We spend a long time trying to authenticate pieces," explains Mahnaz. "For our last exhibition [*London Originals: The Jeweller's Art in Radical Times*], for example, we basically learnt the entire British hallmarking system."

The exhibition at the gallery's East 57th Street headquarters showcased jewellers from London's swinging Sixties and Seventies, a time of seismic design change. The period saw a revival in jewellery design that had largely plateaued after the Second World War. Ispahani Bartos has collected works by Andrew Grima – the avant garde British jeweller considered the father of this movement – since she was a teenager.

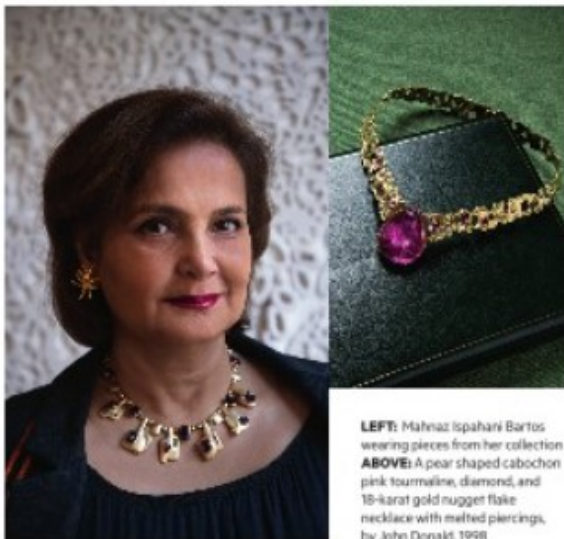
"They were very difficult times and not much was happening," Mahnaz notes, "but then the 1961 International Exhibition of Modern Jewellery took place at London's Goldsmiths' Hall and showed there was a need to revive the idea of design in jewellery. For example, Kutchinsky was a very traditional jeweller that made beautiful works in platinum, white gold and diamonds,



A ruby, sapphire, diamond, enamel and 18-karat yellow and white gold souter, by Emil Meister for Cazzaniga, c.1970

A cabochon moonstone, diamond and engraved 18-karat yellow and white gold ring, by Andrew Grima, 1973

*"Where I'm from, the relationship you have with your jeweller is one of the most formative experiences"*



**LEFT:** Mahnaz Ispahani Bartos wearing pieces from her collection  
**ABOVE:** A pear shaped cabochon pink tourmaline, diamond, and 18-karat gold nugget flake necklace with melted piercings, by John Donald, 1998

but they made this quick turn in the 1970s when they noticed that fashions were changing and there was a demand for bolder, more vibrant jewels on a larger scale."

It is histories such as this that drives Ispahani Bartos' passion for acquiring jewels from particular periods, citing 'mainly late 1950s up to 80s' as her areas of speciality. Patience is a core element of her practice; it usually takes acquiring four or five pieces over time before Mahnaz and her team decide the direction of a particular collection. "From our point of view it has to be a period that represents some transition or dramatic change from one area to another," she explains.

Ispahani Bartos also helps clients develop jewellery collections that represent particular periods. A contemporary collection, for example, requires 'at least one piece by the pioneering German jewellery house Hemmerle', whereas a 1970s aficionado should 'start with an Elsa Peretti for Tiffany gold necklace or cuff. There you have a highly original designer working with an established house who transformed the idea of very high-end jewellery and its wearability'.

As for her own jewels, Mahnaz has some key favourites that she is rarely seen without, including a 1950s 'Hindu' ring from the French jewellery house René Boivin that speaks to her own heritage – 'I've lived away from my country of origin for over 40 years and this ring just has that connection' – and jewellery by Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx that she has personally loaned to museums.

For the time being, however, the treasure hunt continues for what would be her ultimate jewel. "I still think it's the piece I haven't recognised yet," she insists, "but when I do there is going to be this amazing 'aha' moment. I'm waiting for it." □ [mahnazcollection.com](http://mahnazcollection.com)