

Donna Chambers

New York jewelry designer Donna Chambers has built her career designing with pearls. So it was kismet when, several years ago in Tucson, she came across a table displaying 18th-century Chinese gaming chips made of solid pearl.

"I'm known as the pearl lady. . . . My work has always been of pearl, whether freshwater or cultured. I use a lot of mother of pearl, abalone, and mabes. I was in Tucson one year, and I did a double take. I saw these mother-of-pearl, beautiful carved pieces. A lady had a dish of loose chips; I picked up a few and made two or three pins with them," says Chambers.

The reaction to these unique pieces was so strong that Chambers spun her discovery into her signature jewelry line, and the basis of most of her designs. She uses the traditional gaming chips in all shapes — round, oval, triangular, marquise, square — in any number of unique 14K gold settings, including rings, necklaces, pins, and earrings.

The appeal is not just aesthetic; the authentic, engraved gaming chips have a dual historic resonance. Most of the chips were made from 1736 to 1796, during the Ch'ing Dynasty, under the reign of the philosopher emperor Ch'ien Lung. However, while Chinese in origin, the chips are more representative of an era in British culture. This was the period of a "gambling craze" in the 18th century, when the chips were imported as gambling counters. Wealthy British families would commission carved chips from Chinese artists with their family crest in the center and the outer edges engraved with flowers, butterflies, pagodas, or geometrical designs. The chips' varying shapes signified amounts of money. British gentlemen had their own sets to carry when they traveled.

Chambers buys the chips from several English antique dealers, combining them with colored gemstones in vogue. Last season, she designed chandelier earrings. This season, she is using briolettes, amethyst, topaz, citrine, and peridot. "Now, blue topaz is popular. I use the basics; pink, you know, is hot. Amethyst is always classic. . . . Basically, I'm just going free-form, winging it."

Chambers also used gaming chips as an element in her one-of-a-kind design, *The Pearl Goddess*. Worn as a pin or pendant, the figurine is structured with pearls and colored gems. Her tiny face is finely-carved tiger's eye, moonstone, amethyst, or turquoise, and it is topped with a headdress adorned with pearls or a rainbow of colorful gemstones. Her body is made of a gaming chip etched with elaborate floral patterns.

Although the gambling chips have an Asian resonance, Chambers, for the most part, uses contemporary settings. "These are gambling pieces," Chambers says. "They were not made for jewelry; they were used for gambling."



TOP: A necklace with amethyst, peridot, and pearl and a pair of earrings with pearl and blue topaz drops, both featuring Donna Chambers' signature antique Chinese gambling chips. Photos © Azadphoto.com.