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Designer's jewelry has exotic air

By Rose Mary Budge
San Antonio Express-News

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Masha Archer's necklaces, some almost as large as breastplates, resonate with royal splendor. About as far from a simple strand of pearls as the North Pole is from Antarctica, the regal necklaces speak of ancient times, faraway cultures, exotic lands and fantastic dreams. They look as if they might have been unearthed on an archaeological dig. Yet they meld with modern wardrobes and are the signature of a contemporary artist.

"You can wear them with a gown to the opera and turn around the next day and wear them with jeans," says the designer. "My pieces transcend time and boundaries. They refuse to be categorized."

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More than 200 of her pieces will be at Saks Fifth Avenue from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. today through Saturday, as Archer presents her one-of-a-kind collection. The dramatic necklaces, priced at \$700 to \$12,000, drip with diverse materials and a kaleidoscope of color. Ornate hair sticks (\$200); earrings (\$165) and rings (\$100 and up) are part of the collection.

"Wherever I go, I pick up bones, beads, semiprecious stones, artifacts, old coins — all kinds of interesting treasures," she says. "They reflect my travels and are essential elements in my work."

Traveling began when Archer, born in Kiev, Ukraine, was a toddler. Her sculptor father and artist mother made a daring escape from the Bolsheviks in 1942, pulling Masha and a few possessions on a sled over miles of ice and snow. The family eventually went to Germany, where her father kept sculpting in spite of poverty and oppression. From his example, Archer learned an important lesson: "Seize the moment. You cannot wait for things to be better to seek your dream."

Her father was only in his 40s when he died. But he left behind a daughter determined to develop her talent and carry on the family's artistic traditions. She studied painting at the Pratt Institute in New York, but discovered that fashion better suited her talents. Early in her career, she made clothing as well as accessories. Her photographer husband (the late Charles Archer) suggested concentrating on jewelry. It has been her passion ever since.

"Masha's work is remarkable. I've never seen anything quite like it in all my years in fashion," says Cliff Bueche of Saks Fifth Avenue. "It's remarkable how she can take things that you'd never think of putting together — things like bits of sculpture and Tibetan silver beads — and create harmonious pieces."

The pieces tantalize with a variety of shapes, textures and reflective light. But

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practicality also is part of the mixture.

"Just like the best and most comfortable clothes, necklaces must move with the body and they can't be too heavy," Archer says. "I insist that even the largest pieces lie flat and feel wonderful against the skin."

Does it take an especially self-confident woman to wear the dramatic jewelry? The artist doesn't think so. Indeed, she says a bold necklace can empower a not-so-bold individual. "I've seen a shy woman put on the jewelry and suddenly be transformed," she says.

Her jewelry is produced in a San Francisco studio not far from the street where Archer and her husband settled early in their marriage. Avid collectors, the couple filled their home with treasures from their travels and priceless sculpture and art. Countless valuable pieces, including his collection of negatives, were destroyed when fire roared through the building in April 1986. The Archers escaped, along with their children, but were left virtually destitute.

Charles died in 1993. But Masha has soldiered on.

"The work has saved me," she says. "I can get totally taken up by it and have pieces in progress always."

Many movie actresses as well as male entertainers favor the flamboyant, folkloric necklaces. ("They can look very masculine and strong — wonderful for evening," the artist says. "The opera singer Placido Domingo wears them.")

The unisex styles also have been featured on the opera stage, shown in galleries and museums and, recently, spotlighted at an exhibit in Kiev. Honors, including an award from Fashion Group International, fill shelves at her San Francisco studio. Yet, the artist feels there are miles to go.

"The creative mind must always keep searching," she says.

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