

# The New York Times

## ‘Giving Modern Jewelry a Soul’

Nadia Morgenthaler is one of the few contemporary designers who also is considered a master of her craft.



Nadia Morgenthaler, center, at her atelier in Geneva. Her jewelry seems to reflect both past and present tastes. Credit...Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

**By Nazanin Lankarani**

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In the crowded field of contemporary jewelers, many qualify as designers but few are masters of their own craft.

Nadia Morgenthaler is one of the rare artisans who combines both skills.

[Her namesake brand](#), established in 2013, makes only 10 to 15 one-of-a-kind pieces a year. They are executed at her headquarters in Geneva, which has two craftsmen devoted to her work and six who produce pieces for well-known high-end jewelry brands (whose names she refuses to disclose). And the jeweler herself receives clients, by appointment only, in the showroom.

Ms. Morgenthaler’s creations have a romantic feel and an aesthetic harmony, easy wearability and durability, and, like haute couture, are meticulously finished, front and back.

“What makes my pieces ‘high jewelry’ is that they are perfectly hand-finished,” Ms. Morgenthaler said in an interview early this year in Paris, where she had traveled to receive an industry award. “I don’t care to design a piece that will sell better, or consider if it has too many or too few stones. What matters to me is that the piece is crafted as perfectly as possible and that no detail is left to chance.”

Her jewelry seems to reflect both past and present tastes, which, she said, is her way of “giving modern jewelry a soul.”

“It took me years to define my own style,” Ms. Morgenthaler said. “I think my pieces have the feel of historic jewelry with a noble ancestry. But they also have a touch of poetry and the force of contemporary jewelry.”

Long chandelier earrings are her signature. And many have a whimsical quality, like a pair designed with rock crystal drops taken from an actual antique chandelier and cut down to size, then encircled by a blackened metal ring and suspended from a series of fine chains, all speckled with tiny natural pearls.

Valery Demure, founder of [Objet d’Émotion](#), a fine jewelry gallery based in London, said “Nadia’s jewelry seems to belong to a different time.” This year she featured Ms. Morgenthaler’s jewelry at the decorative arts salons PAD Monaco and PAD Geneva.

“I can almost imagine her jewelry, especially pieces with a gothic-romantic feel, coming out of an old classical painting,” Ms. Demure said.



Ms. Morgenthaler’s Chandelier earrings with tourmalines, diamonds and natural pearls.  
Credit... Nadia Morgenthaler

Ms. Morgenthaler’s pieces are recognizable for the contrast between their dark metal bases and gemstones like tourmalines, spinels, indicolite, rock crystal or diamonds, most in muted shades. “The contrast gives importance to form, which is what gives its force to the design,” she said.

Natural pearls have become a signature accent, adding a subtle touch of sensuality. “Pearls for me serve to link different elements of a design, or as an end point to a piece,” Ms. Morgenthaler said. “I use them like an element of architecture.”

Now 50 years old, Ms. Morgenthaler has been honing her jewelry-making skills for 30 years. When she graduated from the École des Arts Décoratifs de Genève, she began working for Philips Bonet, a Geneva jeweler who now is retired. His workshop served high end jewelers from Geneva and Paris, and a few gemstone dealers. “I started working in 1989 in Monsieur Bonet’s atelier,” Ms. Morgenthaler said. “For years, it was just the two of us, and that’s how I learned to do absolutely everything in jewelry.”

Many prominent jewelers, including some well-known Parisian houses, design their own pieces but outsource their production to little-known but highly skilled workshops, a fact that most keep a secret.

“In the early 1990s,” Ms. Morgenthaler said, “we worked for many of the great jewelry maisons and made a lot of pieces in the opulent styles of that period.”

Then, in 1994, Ms. Morgenthaler enrolled at the Haute École d’Art et de Design in Geneva. “I wanted to learn to be more creative and less technical,” she said. “I loved drawing, and given that computers were less common back then, I drew quite a lot.”

During her studies, she also worked part time for two years in the design department at Chopard. “I was mostly working on diamond-set pieces in the style of the 1980s,” Ms. Morgenthaler said. “I left because what I really wanted to learn was to make jewelry by hand rather than work for a big brand.”

In 1996, she returned to Mr. Bonet’s workshop, which had been renamed Arts Fusion. By 2009, the jeweler was contemplating retirement. “Monsieur Bonet asked me to take over his business because I was his most senior employee and he wanted the workshop to retain its existing clients,” Ms. Morgenthaler said.

She accepted. “I am not an entrepreneur,” she said. “But I saw in that offer the opportunity to make my own jewelry with all the ideas that were brewing in my head.”

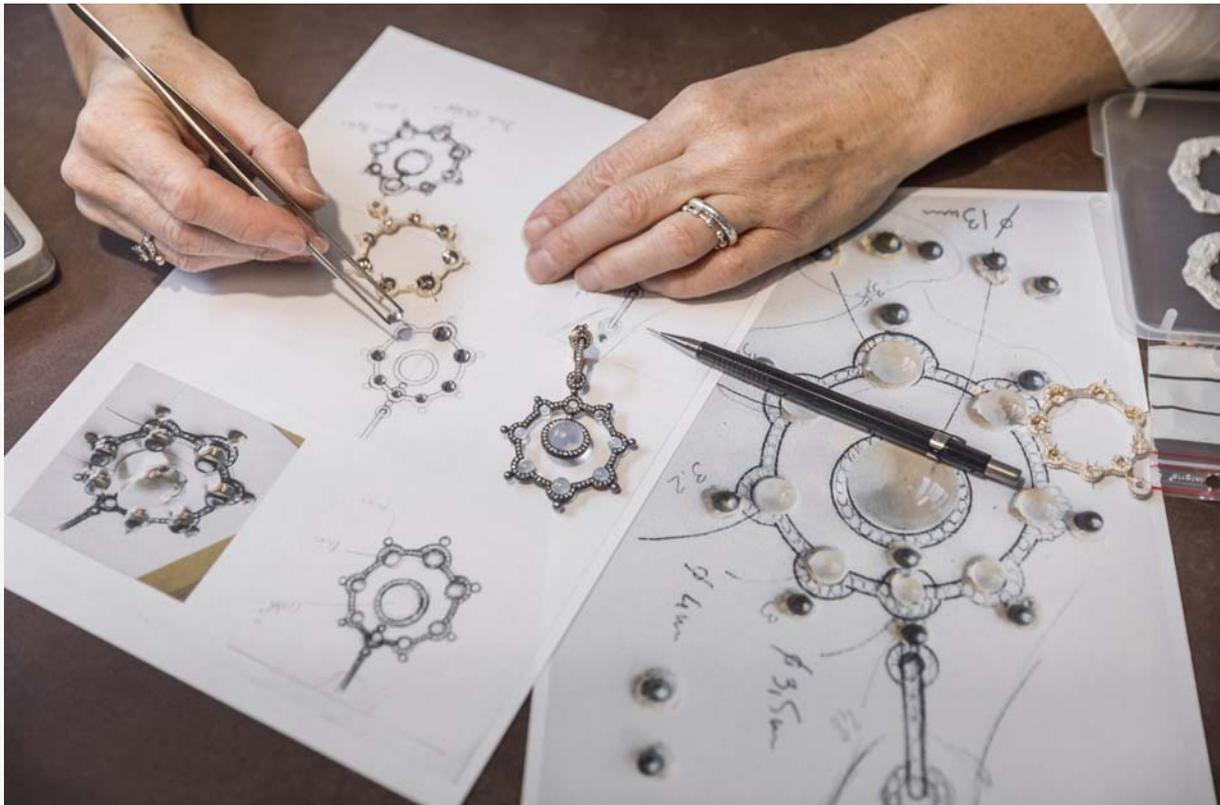
Those ideas, she said, reflected the shapes that inspired her, like the architecture she observed or the shape of an antique chandelier she had found in a flea market.

“The drawing is so important,” she said, describing her creative process. “I use blackened silver to show the lines of my drawing, and also to bring out the color of the gemstones or the natural luster of pearls.”

Technically speaking, Ms. Morgenthaler’s pieces are engineered, to ensure their sturdiness.

“Silver alone, for instance, is too soft so it must be worked with layers of red gold to produce a solid structure,” she said. “The technique is complex, because of the interaction of different materials and the different tensions that must be considered when soldering.”

“The same technique is found in medieval jewelry or in royal jewels,” she said. “It is also the way Fabergé used to work.”



Ms. Morgenthaler placing pearls, diamonds and crystals on design plans for new jewelry. Credit...Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

A selection of Ms. Morgenthaler's pieces was featured in May at the Designer Vivarium section of GemGenève, a jewelry fair in Geneva. The section was curated by Vivienne Becker, a jewelry historian, to include what she called exceptional contemporary designers "working privately and under-the-radar."

In a recent email, Ms. Becker wrote: "Nadia Morgenthaler's jewelry possesses an exquisite refinement, both of design and craftsmanship."

"I love her seamless interweaving of antique splendor, architectural details, sense of history and romance with breathtakingly new structures," the email continued. "As a skilled artisan she understands so well how to construct and craft jewelry and she has used her expertise to bring new three-dimensional shapes, forms and volumes to jewelry; always with a perfect sense of proportion."

In addition to her Geneva showroom, Ms. Morgenthaler also sells from the FD Gallery in New York. And since July, her jewelry has been featured on EIP Privé, an online community established by Net-a-Porter to offer e-retail and personal shopping services to select customers.

"We have also organized private shows for clients," Ms. Morgenthaler said, "and made many contacts on Instagram, which seems to work very well."

Ms. Demure of Objet d'Émotion said, "Nadia is developing her brand awareness. Her jewelry is sure to appeal to sophisticated and culture-savvy clients, especially to those shopping for rarefied luxury."

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