

# A Crafty Career

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Photo by Ed Marco

Jewelry by Reller: a 14k dolphin necklace with blue topaz; a 14k pendant with a great white shark's tooth; and a pendant with a 'piece of eight' treasure coin from the wreck of the Atocha.



Reller: The first step has to be perfect, as does the last.

Reller paid many dues while honing his jewelry skills. But after four years as an apprentice, he passed the journeyman's test that is given by Genossenschaft der Juwelieri, the goldsmiths' guild in Vienna.

At age 25, he became a master craftsman, a lofty status that entitled him to open his own shop and employ journeymen and apprentices. Within five years, Reller built a business manufacturing "high-fashion cigarette cases, lockets, powder compacts - anything with hinges." His customers included "the best houses in Europe."

In the 1930s, he became "politically aware", and with the occupation of Austria by Hitler, Reller, who is of Jewish descent, fled to Italy with just a small briefcase and \$5 in tow. "They were arresting Jewish-looking people in the streets," Reller says. "Within an hour I decided to escape, and took a propeller-driven plane to Italy."

While awaiting his U.S. visa, he worked as a jeweler in Naples. And on March 2, 1939, he arrived by boat in New York with 50 cents in his pocket. Reller would go on to prove that back then, a little bit of change went a long way.

## Making a Case for Success

Later that year, Reller unexpectedly ran into Mathia Austin, an old friend from Vienna. They were eager to work together. But as Reller says, "It was the war years. You couldn't make plans. I was subject to the draft. I wasn't sure what was going to happen to me."

During the war, Reller worked at various jewelry industry jobs in New York and New Jersey, eventually making cases as

In 1945, he and Austin finally became a team, forming Aurel Jewelry, a New York City-based operation that produced 14k watch bracelets for high-quality companies such as Omega, Hamilton, Longines and Benrus.

By 1955, the watch market was "being hurt by low-cost imports," Reller says, and in 1956 Aurel was dissolved.

Reller had fallen in love with the climate and lifestyle of Miami, where he maintained a winter home. So he decided to make it a permanent residence and open Reller Inc. in the Professional Building in Miami in 1956. (A few years later he became one of the first manufacturers to move into the famous Seybold Building in downtown Miami).

The palm tree became the registered trademark of the company, which established itself as one of the major charm houses of the '50s and '60s.

"The charm business flourished for two decades, starting in the late '50s. Anyone who didn't have a charm wasn't a human being," Reller says tongue in cheek.

In the '60s, Reller built an extensive line of regional souvenir jewelry with motifs such as gold palm trees, orange crates and alligators. In addition, Reller drew on his tool and die experience and started producing coin mountings, which remain a mainstay of the company.

In the '70s, Reller's only son, Bernard, joined the business. He quickly became active in designing jewelry under the name "Collections by Bernard" for affluent nautical aficionados.

By the early 1980s, the company had left the "cramped quarters" of the Seybold Building, and moved to Gainesville. Ownership of the business was transferred to Bernard, and after a year in

When Marcus Reller says he's from the old school, he's not kidding.

Reller, the 86-year-old patriarch of Reller Inc., a fine jewelry manufacturer in Gainesville, FL, entered the jewelry trade at age 15 as an apprentice in Vienna, Austria.

As a young apprentice, he'd come to the shop early in the morning, before the jewelers arrived, and stoke the wood stove so they'd be warm.

"You had a potbelly in the middle of the room, and you had to keep the stove burning," Reller recalls.

Under the tutelage of "journeymen" and master craftsmen, Reller learned jewelry-making skills that would shape his long career.

"Each apprentice served four journeymen," Reller says. "We made pendants, pillboxes and cigarette cases.

"We learned how to roll wire, how to melt, how to solder. Some of these phases of jewelry-making were done in primitive ways. We soldered with a blowpipe, holding the tubing in our mouths to direct the flow of air.

"And we were paid a fraction of what the [more experienced] jewelers were paid. If they made \$50 a week, an apprentice got \$4 to \$6 a week."

Lehrgeld zahlen. Loosely translated, that's German for dues paying, one of the featured "courses" in "the old school".

These days, Marcus jogs every morning and enjoys afternoons lounging in the rejuvenating Florida sun. He passionately follows world political and economic developments by listening to shortwave radio and reading foreign periodicals.

But as an official director of Reller Inc., he works a few hours each day, using the Seybold office as a convenient place for functions such as meeting with buyers from South Florida, the Caribbean and Latin America. In addition, he attends major trade shows to keep his finger on the pulse of the modern jewelry industry. As in the days when Reller began making charms and souvenir jewelry, the company still favors thematic jewelry - collections based on endangered wildlife, aviation, sports and nautical motifs, as well as pieces made with replicas of Spanish artifacts produced from metal actually found on the 17th century shipwreck of the Atocha.

Unlike the Atocha, Marcus Reller has survived some rough sailing. And now, in the twilight of his career, he is able to look at the broader picture of the industry in which he grew up. It is an industry that has hit its share of jolting waves in recent times.

"The future of the jewelry business will be survival of the fittest", Reller says. "You have to know how to satisfy old customers. It's easier to make an old customer happy than it is to find a new customer.

"And I believe in quality control from the first step to the last. The first step has to be perfect, as does the last. If the boss is a perfectionist, the people who work for him will strive for perfection.

"But the jewelry manufacturing industry in the United States has made great advances. In fact, in my opinion, it is the best