

Jean Vendome Artist Jeweler

L'ÉCOLE, SCHOOL OF JEWELRY ARTS
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PRESENTS



Exhibition
from Oct. 8
to Dec. 18

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Photo : Benjamin Chelly





L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts
presents
JEAN VENDOME,
ARTIST JEWELER

Exhibition from October 8 to December 18, 2020



*Cache-cache (Hide-and-seek) ring, 2007, sanded and polished yellow gold, watermelon tourmalines.
Private collection.*



Brooch/pendant, yellow gold, diamonds and amethyst flower.
Private collection.

Jean Vendome, whose real name was Ohan Tuhdarian, created his first jewelry collection in 1950, and worked tirelessly right up until his death in 2017. His multifaceted talent combined eccentric and surrealist elements with contemporary graphic design, giving his jewels a refined and intricately designed appearance.

The pieces he crafted during his seventy-two years of intensive work demonstrated the art of enhancing fine stones by combining them with precious materials, using a highly accomplished jewelry-making technique. Nonetheless, he always observed his own personal rule: to show the stones without betraying them. He was a pioneer of modern jewelry, and his uniquely creative approach placed his work somewhere between gem art and high jewelry.

He broke away from the traditional focus on stone quality – it was the beauty of the pieces that formed the very essence of his work, and gave it such a unique signature, a dreamlike touch of fantasy that elicits emotion and imagination; a manifested desire to capture the beauty of nature by making it eternal and forever new.

This is why he always chose “phantom” stones, such as rutilated quartz or lapis lazuli, whose mysterious inclusions gave the piece extra soul. For him, the value of the stone mattered little. Whether it was a diamond, a geode, a fossil or a pebble, nothing was more important to this artist and esthete than creating a strange form of beauty – as Baudelaire said, “the beautiful is always bizarre”.

Jean Vendome was a pioneer of modern jewelry. As both a full-blown work of art and a small sculpture to be worn, he gave immense expressive value to his work. His primary goal was to transform the jewel in order to change how it is worn and to make it playful and creative, so that parts of a necklace and a bracelet could also be worn as part of a ring or brooch.



*Le Dormeur (Brown Crab) necklace,
silver, crab claws and garnets.
Private collection.*

In the pursuit of new shapes, he combined raw crystal settings and sculptures with geodes, indulging his passion for mineralogy which he shared with his friend, the writer Roger Caillois. The shapes and sizes of these minerals reflected his taste for eccentric and flamboyant forms that catch the eye and the light – they are themselves journeys and worlds to explore. The contrast between straight and jagged, smooth and rough, lines and curves, precious and raw, creates something amazing that touches us physically. The chromatic richness of his palette, with fluctuations between warm and cold colors, enhanced his innate understanding of the material. By juxtaposing all these elements like a vast mosaic of otherworldly memories, he creates abstract, metaphysical, and poetic compositions never before seen in jewelry-making, which evoke the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire.



The “Jean Vendome, Artist Jeweler” Exhibition

From October 8 to December 18, L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts will bring to light the universe of this adventurous creator, who, as a true artist, set about creating his own world. He bucked fashion trends with his own personal and pioneering style, which means that his pieces have personality. Simple yet sophisticated, powerful yet intricate, eccentric yet well-designed, constructed and deconstructed, Jean Vendome's jewelry is always emotional. In order to be appreciated fully, it must be loved and understood, as it is the jewelry that chooses the wearer.

The private collections on display will emphasize the visionary side of his creations. One hundred and thirty pieces will be on show, including Aléna Caillois' wonderful necklace. The retrospective will also feature pieces from public collections at institutions including the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, as well as the sword of the academician Roger Caillois, on special loan from the Musée des Confluences in Lyon.

The exhibition will showcase a wide range of his pieces. Visitors will be able to retrace his innovative exploration of shapes and his avant-garde approach to changing scale and traditions in order to adapt his jewelry for the modern and liberated women of the 1970s. Jean Vendome's prolific creations resonate like a poetic and meaningful echo of the major artistic movements of the second half of the 20th century. From kinetic pop art to the dream of the Apollo 13 space mission, his jewelry pieces evolved into *Constellations*, *Aurore Boréale* and *Espace* during the 1970s. The geometric shapes of the skyscrapers in *Les Tours* betray his passion for urban architecture and the race upwards. The 1980s were the years of “imaginary walks”, where he played on the mimetic analogy of agates, fragments of eternity, and matte and polished gold jewels with “phantom” quartz, rutilated quartz and dendritic agate. The 1990s are marked by the use of ever stronger colors, which Jean Vendome called his “vagrant” or “wild” colors. It was a time of escapism and dreaming.

A sculptor in search of fascinating inclusions, radiance, materials and colors, Jean Vendome, alchemist and jeweler, will never cease to amaze you.

Specialist Curator

Sophie Lefèvre is the specialist curator for the exhibition. She has been the head of communications at the Center for Research and Restoration of Museums of France (C2RMF) since 1994. A restorer of graphic artwork and an art historian by training, she organizes conferences on the conservation of graphic and photographic documents. She has also taken part in several exhibitions of paintings from the beginning of the 20th century at various museums, including an exhibition on 1920s realism that took place in 1998 at the Musée-Galerie de la Seita in Paris, where she was the co-curator. She is the author of the monograph *Jean Vendome, Artiste-joaillier*, published during the “Jean Vendome” exhibition at the Lyon Natural History Museum (Somogy Éditions d'Art, 2000)



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Exhibition from October 8th to December 18th, 2020
Tuesday-Saturday / 1pm-7pm
Free admission by reservation only on:
www.lecolevanclleafarpels.com

Practicalities:

The exhibition is accessible **only by prior reservation** in order to respect the rules of physical distancing.

Each visit slot lasts 1 hour with a maximum of 30 people.

In addition, special «**Behind the scenes at the exhibition**» courses, with a 2 hour format including a private visit of the exhibition, give the opportunity to discover with an expert the secrets of the universe and of the creations of Jean Vendome.

Unless otherwise stated, all the photos of the jewels are from Benjamin Chelly.

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Exhibition Catalog

A special issue of the magazine *Connaissance des Arts*, dedicated to the exhibition, will be given to all visitors to guide them during their visit.

This catalog was written under the direction of Guillaume Glorieux, Director of Education and Research at L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts.

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by Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter, Art Historian

connaissance des arts

special issue

Jean Vendome Artist Jeweler

JEAN VENDOME, ARTIST JEWELER

connaissance des arts

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Foreword

Exhibition Catalog

Jean Vendome, Artist Jeweler, Paris, 2020



Jean Vendome in the 1980s
The Jean Vendome Archives.

Staurolites from Brittany, trapiche emeralds, diopases and phantom quartz . . . Exploring the work of Jean Vendome (1930-2017) is like delving into a universe where stones and poetry are intertwined, like a journey into the heart of the mineral world. For its eighth exhibition in Paris, L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts is proud to pay tribute to this exceptional jeweler and pioneer of contemporary jewelry.

The exhibition featured in this catalogue underscores Jean Vendome's singularity as a twentieth-century jewelry designer. His works drew upon his encounters with artists of his time, particularly Vasarely and Kijno, the explorer Paul-Émile Victor and authors, especially Roger Caillois, with whom Jean Vendome shared a passion for the natural beauty of stones. Conceived around 130 pieces of jewelry and objects that reveal the full span of his career, the exhibition explores three directions within the visionary work of a most uncommon artist-jeweler.

The first part of the exhibition is focused on Jean Vendome's profound renewal of jewelry design from the very beginning of his career. Influenced by art movements of the 1960s, he cultivated an entirely new vision of jewelry design, favoring abstract forms and using rough minerals in his compositions, an unprecedented practice.

The second part of the exhibition is organized around the académicien's sword Jean Vendome designed for Roger Caillois. It is an intimate journey into the artist's genius and includes pieces designed for his wife, Nelly, his gemology professor Dina Level and Roger Caillois's wife, Aléna. Each unique piece was inspired by the beauty of minerals, from his "indelible paintings" of agates to his "fragments of eternity" composed of phantom quartz and the "vagabond colors" of his palettes of tourmaline, rutilated quartz, green apophyllite and cobaltocalcite. Jean Vendome's creative process highlighted the qualities of each mineral, and each in turn imposed certain forms upon the sculptor.



Finally, the third part of the exhibition explores the jeweler's Baudelairean universe, his penchant for a certain "bizarre beauty" which implied a new approach to jewelry design. Indeed, Jean Vendome brought together noble materials traditionally associated with jewelry and unexpected elements, deployed unusual combinations of format and developed an aesthetic that broke with common practices and conventions.

L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts is dedicated to promoting the history of jewelry art as well as the savoir faire and science of stones; it seemed only natural that the school would pay homage to Jean Vendome.

Founded in 2012 thanks to the support of Van Cleef & Arpels, L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts invites the general public to discover gemology, the savoir faire and history of jewelry design in a range of courses, talks, research projects, exhibitions and publications at its two permanent sites in Paris and Hong Kong. Itinerant sessions are also offered across the globe. Open to all, exhibitions are a major component of L'ÉCOLE's fundamental mission of sharing the culture of jewelry with the widest audience possible.

Marie Vallanet-Delhom

President of L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts

Nicolas Bos

President and CEO of Van Cleef & Arpels



Roger Caillois's sword, 1971,
white gold, steel, tourmaline, quartz,
peridot, garnet, beryl, amethyst, obsidian,
diamond, moldavite and leather.
Lyon, Musée des Confluences.



“Life is a Series of Encounters”

Jean Vendome (1930-2017)

Article from the exhibition catalog *Jean Vendome, Artist Jeweler*
Paris, 2020

Jean Vendome, rather an odd name for a jeweler. Was it destiny, or perhaps a coincidence, that the jeweler bore the same name as the renowned Place Vendôme? Not quite. In the early sixties, a man named Ohan Tuhdarian was exhibiting his designs at Bijorhca, a trade show for jewelry professionals. Driven by jealousy, a fellow exhibitor demanded that his stand be closed for advertising under the name “Vendome,” even though it was spelled without the accent. At the time, Ohan’s shop was located at 81, boulevard Voltaire in Paris and the trade show, where he sold his creations to leading jewelry houses, was vital to his business. The bailiff summoned to shut down his stand took the time to listen to young Ohan’s vision of jewelry design. Impressed and moved, he suggested that Ohan appropriate the name “Vendome” by preceding it with his first name and registering it as a trademark. “Then I would be powerless,” he said. So the young jeweler immediately followed his advice. This anecdote demonstrates the passion, speed, humor and personality of its protagonist. It also illustrates the young man’s passion and his ambition to be recognized in the art of jewelry design.

But let us back up a bit. The war had begun stirring things up and Ohan’s family left Lyon for Épinay-sur-Seine, a town near Paris, in 1939. Health issues kept the boy from attending school and he became an apprentice at his uncle Aram Der’s jewelry workshop at the age of thirteen. He learned the basics of the trade; his skill was already apparent. At the age of eighteen, Ohan opened his first workshop in Paris’s Eighteenth Arrondissement and left it under the management of his sister Araksi during his military service in Orléans. The young man’s talent did not go unnoticed by the director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, who convinced his general to let him take drawing lessons at the school. During his studies, Ohan developed a passion for drawing and particularly for sculpture; he also attended classes taught by Professor Dina Level at the National Gemology Institute. She was an exceptional storyteller and her guidance helped confirm the young man’s predilection for the natural beauty of stones. This parallel curriculum of study led Ohan to forego the monotony of designing mass-produced jewelry and dedicate himself to sculptural creations.

One day in the 1950s, Jean Cocteau walked into the new boutique on boulevard Voltaire. He was looking to have a piece of jewelry designed from a nugget of gold and Jean Vendome suggested a pair of cufflinks. Captivated by the material—both matte and shiny, a bit baroque—the latter invented a technique for melting and hammering gold so it would resemble a nugget. And so Jean Vendome’s first collection, *Pépîte (Nugget)* (ill. 1), came to be.



Ill. 1: *Pépîte (Nugget)* necklace,
1956, yellow gold, white gold and
diamonds.

Private collection.

It would enjoy resounding success and serve as a source of inspiration for many great jewelers.

At about the same time, a woman brought in a Lalique piece to be melted down. Vendome studied the openwork enamel and gold piece meticulously, fascinated by its colors and how delicate and graphic it was. A month later, he returned the piece intact. Its owner was dissatisfied but Vendome had come to an important realization, that a piece of jewelry was a work of art that could not be melted down, for its value was inherent in its design and not in the material from which it was made. In an unprecedented 2012 interview, Jean Vendome emphasized the influence of Lalique: “The one I sought most closely to resemble in order to advance was always René Lalique.” Among Vendome’s other sources of inspiration were jewelry designers Vever and Lacloche.

For his first creations, Jean Vendome sought a material as marvelous and colorful as Lalique’s enamels. It was in an aquarium that he had filled with inexpensive minerals sold by the pound that he found what he was looking for. He took some of the stones and wrapped them in gold wire: these were his first pieces. Sometime thereafter, in 1956, he designed the *Mal pavée* («*Badly*» *Pavé*) brooch (ill. 2), a poetic creation of beryl, peridot and tourmaline cabochons—in various shades of a very pale greenish blue—set randomly on a flat piece of white gold. It was a gift for his wife, Nelly. This first revolution would lead Vendome to build his universe around “wild,” imperfect stones and free his designs to reveal the wealth of the mineral palette.



III. 2: Mal Pavée («*Badly*» *Pavé*) brooch, 1955,
white gold, tourmalines and beryls.
Private collection.



Ill. 3: *Boréal (Boreal)* ring, circa 1960, polished white gold and diamonds.
The Didier Guérin collection.

There were other significant encounters. Upon returning from his expeditions, Paul-Émile Victor had his watches repaired by Jean Vendome. The jeweler's insatiable thirst for knowledge was nourished by the explorer's tales of the aurora borealis, the cold and the stretches of ice and inspired him to create *Boréal (Boreal)* (ill. 3), followed by *Nocturne (Nocturnal)*. Crafted from white gold, these designs were infinitely delicate (the jeweler was sparing in his use of the metal) and set with tiny diamonds that sparkled as if in a field of snow. The choice of inexpensive aquamarine, in part a consequence of his limited resources, was something he turned to his advantage, the stone's pale, cold hue helping to evoke the feeling of a polar freeze (ill. 4).

Ill. 4:
Nocturne (Nocturnal) Set



On the left:
Nocturne (Nocturnal)
brooch, circa 1977, white
gold, platinum and
diamonds.
Karen and Michael
Rotenberg Collection

On the right:
Nocturne (Nocturnal)
ring, 1960, white
gold, diamonds and
aquamarines.
Private collection.



Jean Vendome's presence at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1967 left an impression on Suzanne Larrue, who included his S ring (ill. 5) alongside Salvador Dali's *The Eye of Time* brooch to illustrate twentieth-century jewelry in Larousse's *L'Encyclopédie*. The jeweler's interpretation of the letter "S" replaced the letter's curves with right angles and was set with a single stone of garnet, aquamarine or citrine. An immediate success, the S ring remained popular through the 2000s.



III. 5: S ring, 1966,
white gold, diamonds and aquamarine.
Private collection.

The following year, Vendome's designs were displayed beside those of Georges Braque at the Delisle gallery. Having established his reputation as an avant-garde contemporary jewelry designer, he moved his shop to 350, rue Saint-Honoré, just steps away from Place Vendôme. The new address was like a nod to that propitious encounter with a bailiff many years earlier. Jean Vendome had become a jeweler in his own right, and from 1969 on, he was no longer dependent on the major jewelry houses nearby to purchase his creations.

That same year, a new customer came into the shop. His name was Roger Caillois and he had been sent by Dina Level and Henri-Jean Schubnel, director of the mineralogy gallery at the National Museum of Natural History. Wanting to surprise Vendome, the pair had not forewarned him of the prestigious visit. Recently elected to the Académie Française, Roger Caillois studied the display cases, leaning in closer to look at the *Ve avenue* ring, before turning to Jean Vendome with the words: "You will design my sword." Two weeks later, in what would become a weekly tradition, the two couples—Aléna and Roger, Nelly and Jean—met for dinner at a restaurant. Vendome had five proposals for the académicien's sword, but Caillois was captivated by the first design and refused to see the others.

In 1970, when Caillois published *L'Écriture des pierres*, an exploration of the mineral world made accessible to the general public, the complicity between the two men was absolute. Jean admired Roger's culture and Roger was fascinated by Jean's creativity, whose elusive nature he sought to comprehend. One was obsessed with explaining everything and the other, with comprehending everything: the earth's movements, the processes of mineral formation, the ability of crystals to diffract light and nature's formation of mysterious shapes. Their favorite stone was tourmaline. Upon returning from a trip to Brazil, Aléna and Roger brought several of the stones to Nelly and Jean's vacation home in Siouville-Hague in the Manche department of France. Jean immediately created mock-ups of a necklace, a brooch and a ring with the stones as they watched him work. The two men shared close ties that went far beyond the simple relation of artist and client. It was a deep-rooted friendship, one shaped by shared travels, which expressed itself in correspondence that did not cease until Roger Caillois's death and was particularly meaningful to the jeweler during a two-year hospital stay following a car accident in 1973.



The year after Roger Caillois became a member of the Académie Française, Jean Vendome was first featured as a pioneer of contemporary jewelry in Larousse's *Grande Encyclopédie*, with a thirty-six line biographical entry alongside a picture of his *Ve avenue* ring. Julien Green would be the next member of the Académie to ask the jeweler to design his ceremonial sword.

In 1980, Jean Vendome's workshop-showroom moved next door, to 352, rue Saint-Honoré. The invitation to the boutique's opening was prefaced by words that Caillois had written in the guest book of the jeweler's previous boutique: "For Jean Vendome, artist and craftsman, who brings together the joys of creation and craft: how fortunate is he who unites mineral and metal, noble materials that he further elevates by bringing them together in beauty. Your friend and fellow admirer of stones."

From then on, there were many new jewelry collections as well as exhibits and retrospectives of the jeweler's work. Among the more significant events were *Bijoux de Jean Vendome* (The Jewels of Jean Vendome), an exhibit held in the mineralogy gallery's Hall of Treasures at the National Museum of Natural History in 1998 and *Jean Vendome, artiste joaillier* (Jean Vendome, Jeweler-Artist), an exhibit at Lyon's Museum of Natural History in 1999 celebrating the museum's acquisition of Roger Caillois's sword.

These encounters with notable figures provide insight into the artist's visionary aesthetic. Jean Vendome dedicated himself to the creative process at a frenetic pace, working six days a week for seventy years, completing an estimated thirty thousand pieces as well as thousands of drawings that have yet to be inventoried. His work was prolific and extremely diverse: certain designs are geometric and others baroque, but his lines of jewelry are never in opposition and each is immediately identifiable as having been produced by his hand. The artist traveled to mineral fairs in places as far away as Tucson, Arizona or Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines in eastern France in search of stones. He conceived each piece on paper, sometimes creating a mock-up, before bringing his designs to life, often as unique creations set with stones as fragile as trapiche emeralds (ill. 6) or opals. Of the jeweler's creative process, Roger Caillois observed, "Jean Vendome . . . has not forgotten that the artist is born of the craftsman." The unity of Jean Vendome's work derives from a singular creative process unlike that of a traditional workshop, in which the roles of craftsman and jeweler were separate and distinct: mastering each step of the process was essential to avoiding the monotony of performing the same movements a thousand times over.



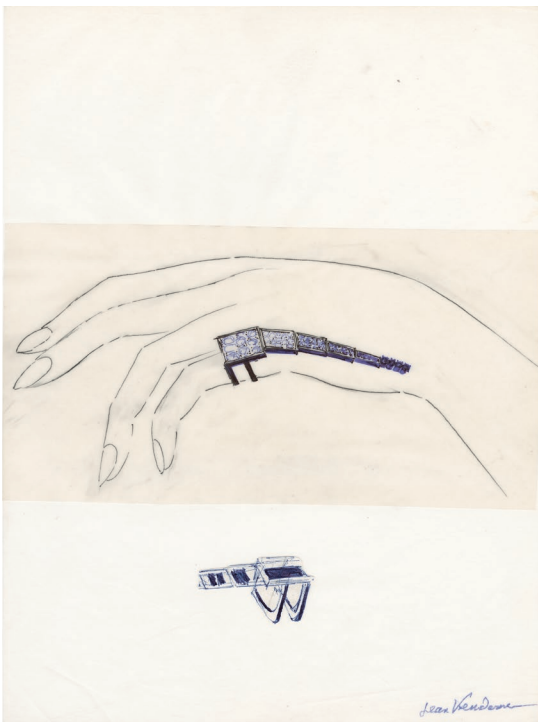
III. 6: *Vénus* (Venus) necklace also called *Clin d'oeil* (Wink) necklace, 1990, yellow gold, diamonds and trapiche emerald.

The LAURASAR collection

Each new design began with a drawing. Jean Vendome would sketch his creation using a pencil and colored felt-tip pens. If it was a ring, he often drew a life-size version of a finger wearing the design on a corner of the page before bringing it to life. “When I draw, it is more about developing an idea than a drawing that is meant to be kept,” he confided. “I blacken a lot of paper. In the evenings, drawing relaxes me and I am constantly looking for a certain allure... All of my drawings are the start of something else.” Drawing allowed for an outpouring of creativity that brought the jeweler’s first intentions to light, always with the right perspective and exquisitely precise strokes; each drawing revealed a multi-faceted, demanding quest.

Drawing is a technical process and Jean Vendome could have delegated it to a workshop, but he preferred doing everything himself: “When a piece of jewelry is successful, it is because it was made straight away. I mean that from the moment when I draw to the moment when I make a mock-up and then the piece itself, it happens immediately. The less time there is between the different phases, the more beautiful the piece.”

Jean Vendome’s refusal to accept the industrialization of the design process demonstrated his attachment to post-war artistic movements. It would not be until 1961, however, that a first exhibit showcasing artists alongside jewelers would be held in London, confirming the emergence of a new generation, including Vivianna Torun (1927-2004), Henri Gargat (born in 1928), Jean-Claude Champagnat (1923-1988), Gilbert Albert (1930-2019) and Andrew Grima (1921-2007). But Jean Vendome remained singular and his appetite for revisiting every aspect of his art and his ability to remain open to all possibilities were truly unique. His collection of books revealed an interest in the contemporary art world; it included works on Arman (ill. 7), Pol Bury, César, Vasarely and kinetic art and studies of light, movement, magnetism and architecture. “He sees a piece of jewelry as a work of art, like a miniature, mobile sculpture that everyone can wear and bring to life in different ways throughout the day and that sometimes deserves to be put on display,” stated a brochure from the Isy Brachot gallery in 1972.



III. 7: Sketch study for the *Ferret* ring, tracing paper, felt-tip pen.
The Jean Vendome Archives.



The following three designs were emblematic of the artist's quest for new forms:

The *Tour (Tower)* ring (1956, ill. 8) is at first surprising. "When people saw this design for the first time, they wondered how they could possibly wear an incomplete ring," the artist explained.



Ill. 8: *Tour (Tower)* ring, 1956, yellow gold, citrine.
Private collection

He had been inspired for this perfectly proportioned, graphic piece by the emphasis placed on the void as a structural element that he admired in the work of English sculptor Henry Moore. Vendome also found that rings broke up the length of the finger, so he left his design open, letting the stones flow freely between fingers. With its square profile and open design, the piece was revolutionary and it brought the bezel setting back into fashion. Vendome continued to evolve the design until 2017. It was one of his most imitated pieces but he never sought to protect his designs. "I don't want to be blocked by a system or trapped by my own hand; I want to remain free and always be able to reinvent everything," he said. When asked if it bothered him that others copied his designs, he replied, smiling, "An idea is meant to germinate," before adding, "A piece of jewelry is a work of art, not a consumer product."



Ill. 9: *Ve Avenue (5th Avenue)* ring, 1966, white gold, platinum, diamonds.
Private collection



Ill. 10: *Ferret* ring, 1984, yellow gold and tourmalines.
Private collection.

Ve avenue (5th Avenue) (1966, ill. 9) is a ring set with forty-two diamonds, each a different size and set at various heights in difficult-to-reach hollows, crowned with a large diamond. Finding balance between the size of the finger and the sculpture, which had been inspired by Manhattan's skyscrapers, was a great challenge: the jeweler was looking to perfect the harmony between the imposing volume of the piece and the hand that would wear it. The design was a great success and Jean Vendome created fifty pieces.

As for the *Ferret* ring (ill. 10), it seemed to echo Goethe's statement: "Art and technique always balance one another, and, closely related as they are, always incline toward each other, so that art cannot decline without turning into commendable handicraft, handicraft cannot rise without becoming artistic."¹ The artist's exploration of new forms and scales resulted in a pointed design that, in lengthening the hand, made it more elegant and metamorphosed it into sculpture. The jeweler sought to combine a perfect adaptation to human morphology and impeccable technical execution, and the result was an articulated ring showcasing a graphic palette of rutilated quartz, tourmalines or diamonds.

¹ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, or The Renunciants*, trans. Krishna Winston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.293.

Jean Vendome was not deliberately seeking to create extravagant or dazzling jewelry; he simply wanted to distance himself from more conventional approaches and elevate jewelry to a form of art. Perhaps he was driven by nostalgia for the reign of Louis XIV, when jewelers were recognized as artists and granted the right to bear swords.

Thanks in part to his fellow jewelers, he developed a reputation for having a penchant for oddities. His erotic pieces, lariat necklaces, brooch/pendants and ring/pendants, with their generous combinations of baroque pearls, precious stones and minerals, were indeed singular. The distance he placed between his designs and the norms of the industry was reminiscent of Baudelaire: “Beauty is always bizarre. I don’t mean to say that it is deliberately coldly bizarre, for in that case it would be a monster that has gone off the rails of life¹.” The poet was referencing the definition of eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke and the analogy he had drawn between the sublime and the terrible. With Jean Vendome, this departure took the form of unexpected formats, innovative settings and articulations that played with symmetry. The artist’s fondness for borrowing freely from nature went against the practices of the traditional jewelry world. But the use of shell debris (ill. 11) and lobster or crab claws recalled the assemblages of many contemporary artists. Indeed, the lobster—a symbol of luxury in gastronomy but not in jewelry—belonged to the mythology of the art world, with its carapace resembling embellished armor, and had fascinated artists from Gérard de Nerval, who used to walk one on a leash in the gardens of the Palais Royal, to Salvador Dali and Jeff Koons.

Jean Vendome was dedicated to the concept of a unique piece of jewelry that could metamorphose from a pendant to be worn in the daytime to a brooch or ring for the evening. His desire was to make such designs accessible to all: “A piece of jewelry should in no way be an external sign of wealth but rather an expression of one’s personal taste in harmony with modern life.”

Jean Vendome’s ultimate goal? The emancipation of jewelry!

Sophie Lefèvre, curator of Jean Vendome, Artist Jeweler



Ill. 11: pendant, 1980, silver and shell fragment. Private collection.

Focus on 6 emblematic pieces by Jean Vendome

Tour (Tower) ring, 1956, yellow gold, citrine.
Private collection

Created in 1956, the citrine *Tour (Tower)* ring by Jean Vendome is iconic. Its simplicity and inventiveness are emblematic of his work. A model that was frequently reworked in his creations, it was first exhibited by Brussels gallery owner Isy Brachot in 1972 and continued to evolve until 2007, while nevertheless retaining its distinctive line.

This ring was particularly innovative in the world of jewelry. The base is square in shape and it is open at the top of the finger, adding an aesthetic of emptiness, a structuring element also observed in the work of sculptor Henry Moore, whom Jean Vendome greatly admired. Citrine features in each of the three towers, bringing a dizzying degree of verticality in terms of the hand.



At first, the *Tour* ring surprised the public as many thought a piece was missing from the ring: here, the stones were in a bezel setting, while at that time stones were typically in a prong setting.

According to the designer, the aesthetic interest of this ring was that it consisted of a void, leaving the entire length of the fingers free and conferring a certain “intelligence to the hand” by allowing the stones to appear between the fingers. The differing height of the towers, as well as the harmonious asymmetry, became recurring features of his work.

No patent for this model was ever filed. In this, Jean Vendome remained faithful to his deep conviction: “I do not want to be blocked by a system or trap myself” he said, adding that “an idea is made to germinate”. In the exhibition we find two other versions of *Tour* rings, with three precious stones, one with emeralds and diamonds, and the other solely with diamonds.



S ring, 1966,
white gold, diamonds and aquamarine.
Private collection

The S ring was the first jewel to enter the Larousse Encyclopedia in 1972 in the entry devoted to Jean Vendôme, but as early as 1967 it could be found alongside Dali's jewel-watch, The Eye of Time. Suzanne Larue, editor for Le Larousse discovered the ring and its designer in 1967 during an exhibition at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs.

The S is a highly minimalist ring that stands out for its unique shape and volume. From a square section of white gold wire, Vendôme constructed a rectangle that he folded three times at right angles. A semi-precious stone sits on the top, slightly protruding from its gold frame. The stone sits as if it were placed on a pedestal and offers an innovative sense of volume. In various versions of the ring, aquamarine, citrine and garnet were (or were not) set with diamonds emphasizing the U-shape, in a solid but open-ended pavé.

The stone rises well above the finger, allowing the light to pass through it, thereby highlighting its color and size. This ring was the culmination of the designer's research and experimentation. Vendôme had a perfect command of classic jewelry techniques, which allowed him to think about what kind of jewelry piece he wanted and to go beyond the fundamentals of his training. Like the artists of his era who decided to start from scratch, Jean Vendôme deconstructed and reconstructed new forms. This particular model was popular and it exists with variations: different heights that adapt to the hand and finger, as well as the stones used. Following in the footsteps of Lalique, whom he admired, Jean Vendôme showed more interest in semi-precious stones than precious stones. He also chose not to focus on the industrialization of jewelry, as this was of little interest to him.

*Ve Avenue (5th Avenue) ring, 1966,
white gold, platinum, diamonds.
Private collection*

At the end of the 1960s, Jean Vendome opened a store as close as possible to the Place Vendôme, at number 350 rue Saint-Honoré, so as to attract the international clientele of some of the capital's most prestigious hotels. Although he hadn't yet visited America, the architecture and especially New York's skyscrapers fascinated him.



He therefore created this ring, *Ve Avenue*, which gained immediate attention and was selected to appear at the Montreal Universal Exposition in 1967. It can also be found in the *Larousse Encyclopedia* from 1968.

It is a mini-sculpture: the ring sits perfectly on its square base. The skyscraper effect is suggested through the juxtaposition of forty-two square white gold threads all ending in a diamond, not a single one set at the same height, and the larger one dominating the whole with the smaller ones hiding in the vertiginous hollows of the ring. This model is an example of a great technical virtuosity and despite demand, Vendome stopped its production after approximately fifty editions.

It was this geometric design that won over academic writer, Roger Caillois, who entrusted Vendome with the realization of his academician's sword. Vendome would create other models following his stay in New York, including the Manhattan, also presented in this exhibition.

This iconic ring is a bridge between high-end jewelry and artistic jewelry.



*Ferret ring, 1984,
yellow gold and tourmalines.
Private collection.*



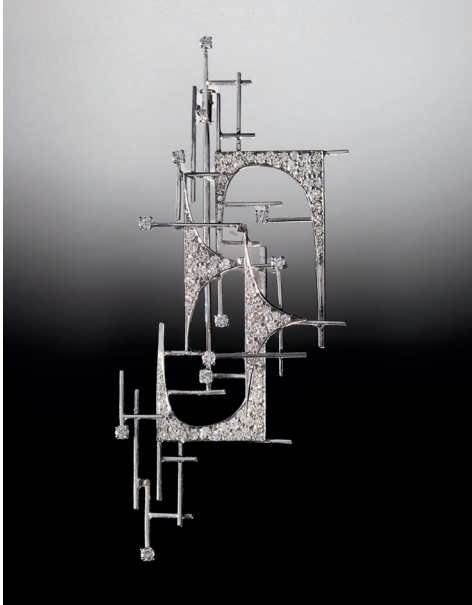
*Ferret ring/pendant, 1974,
white gold and diamonds.
The Didier Guérin collection.*

Ferret ring

The first *Ferret* ring dates from the late 1960s. It is adorned with tourmaline or garnet, topaze, diamonds and peridot and can be worn as a pendant. Given the choice of stones and triangular shape with the tip pointing upwards at the wrist, this flat rutilated quartz arrow was the first piece by Jean Vendome to enter the MAD Collections.

This seven-cm long articulated jewel transforms the hand, which it perfectly marries, into a mobile sculpture. It extends to the wrist and lengthens the finger. The sections are articulated together in such a way that they undulate in response to the movements of the hand. The stones and gold express the cohesion of the whole. They are fixed so as to have equal grips and the weight is distributed evenly. The joints are of precise lengths and correspond to the level of flexion of the finger. It is a lively lightweight ornament, where the movement of the hand is mirrored by that of the ring.

The shape also allowed the designer to play with the mineral palette and they are all very different. He experimented with the graphic design of the mineral sections, thereby ensuring each *Ferret* ring was truly unique.



On the left:
Nocturne (Nocturnal)
 brooch, circa 1977,
 white gold, platinum
 and diamonds.
 Karen and Michael
 Rotenberg Collection



On the right:
Nocturne (Nocturnal)
 ring, 1960, white
 gold, diamonds and
 aquamarines.
 Private collection.

Nocturne (Nocturnal)
 brooch, 1962, polished
 satin-finish white
 gold, diamonds and
 aquamarines.
 The Didier Guérin



Nocturne (Nocturnal) set

Giving a name to a piece of jewelry or a collection was the last step in Jean Vendome's creative process. The title of the jewel or set of jewelry was often related to its source of inspiration: an exhibition, a work in a museum, an art book, a magazine, the fact of walking in the streets, the stories of an explorer, a meeting with an academician... The designer fed on the images and shapes he saw, and transformed and translated them into his work.

The inspiration for *Nocturne* was a photograph of a square he passed on a regular basis: "One day I saw a photograph of the Place de la Concorde. I remember a very linear image where the headlights of the moving cars created lines and streaks of color. When I saw these flashes captured in a photograph that gave a sense of dynamism to the architecture and the city, I began to draw these shapes. As they were a nocturnal sight, the name *Nocturne* came to me spontaneously. For the stars, I used arrangements of small diamonds to evoke their light," he explained to Sophie Lefèvre (*Jean Vendome, artiste-joaillier, 1999*, Somogy Editions).

The *Nocturne* ensemble featured on the cover of *Jours de France* magazine in 1969, beautifully worn by actress Marie-José Nat.



Tippy (Teepee) necklace, 1988, yellow gold, shell, tourmaline, yellow sapphire
Private collection

“The creator must always bear in mind that the objet d’art, in its form and in its proportions, must remain wearable.” (Jean Vendôme, *Journal des Métiers d’Art*, September 1983)

The art of Jean Vendôme’s work was his ability to observe nature and to translate this into design. This is the case with the *Tippy* necklace, a combination of worked yellow gold, four shell plates (in this case *Conus geographus* L.) arranged like a breastplate with tourmaline crystals, one of which, trapezoidal in shape, plays with the natural graphics of the shell, the rectangular tourmalines and the yellow sapphire.

It is a perfect example of the freedom that Jean Vendôme granted himself in his work. It illustrates a technical perfection with hinges that provide mobility and flexibility to this highly structured necklace. This is what the artist called a composition jewel: “the link in the harmony where the opposition of materials, shapes and colors make the jewel an original work.” Nevertheless, it is an elegant item that is comfortable to wear.

The motif that attracted Jean Vendôme to this shell was its graphic design, where natural “teepees” appear. This very particular design, which owes nothing to the hand of man, has been extended to the side and back sections with yellow gold, and gives its name to the necklace.

The combination he makes here with tourmaline, one of his favorite minerals, creates a special tension through the juxtaposition of semi-precious stones, minerals and seashells.

This necklace evokes the text *L’homme et la coquille [Man and the Seashell]* (1937), where Paul Valéry confides: “the seashell has served me, suggesting by turns what I am, what I know, and what I do not know...”