

Friday, June 10, 2011

Design Details: Focus On Jewelry

By Anna Wyckoff

The close up is one of the most intriguing techniques of cinematography. The intimacy of the proximity vaults the audience through the movie screen, and puts it a breath away from the character. Details like eyelashes, skin texture and jewelry can be as big as a billboard and high definition television has brought this penetrating gaze home.

Few craftsmen specialize in the creation of jewelry for film and television. Of them, even fewer have survived the economic climate of the past few years. We converse with the artisans at two companies, each with a very individual approach, whose success is a testament to their excellence in a rarified field.

Scott and Jennifer Janiak-Ross Skinny Dog Design Group

At Skinny Dog Design Group, master goldsmith Scott Janiak-Ross and his wife, designer Jennifer Janiak-Ross, use a computerized process that allows them to marry old world techniques to cutting-edge jewelry design. "The important thing," explains Scott, "is when a Costume Designer calls us, we are able to give them a digital rendering via email in 24 hours for approval. Then we are able to create a finished product 36 hours from the approval point."

Working from isometric drawings, a sketch, research, a script, or just a rough concept, Jennifer creates a model in a program called Rhino 3D. Secondly, using ClayTools she sculpts the piece with a haptic arm, which allows her to use a pen as a sculpting tool and enables her to feel the push and pull of the clay. Next, she writes what is called a G-code file that runs the wax mills which cut the wax forms. These forms are sprued, cast and finished. Scott explains, "We have a complete manufacturing facility on-site, from the digital rendering to the final stage of gold and silver plating. However, we work mostly in sterling silver or brass."

There is great flexibility with the end result. For example, if a ring needs to be resized for a stunt person, they can remake the ring with the same details and proportions without having to start at the beginning. In the film "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," the ring had to grow with the child. Forty-three rings were created in all, some 25 percent larger than the original in order to capture all of the details.

The Janiak-Ross' have just wrapped "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides," where they worked with the prop master on Blackbeard's ring. "It is a large onyx piece with a skull up top surrounded by tiny skulls. We aged it with a hammered finish and then there's bones that outline the ring," says Scott. Larger duplicates with elastic backs were made for the stunt men so they would not break their fingers during sword fights.

At the moment they are hard at work on "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter." "We're doing all sorts of great stuff for that," Jennifer enthuses, "period vials and rings that hold blood, pendants, all kinds of weird things. It's really fun!"

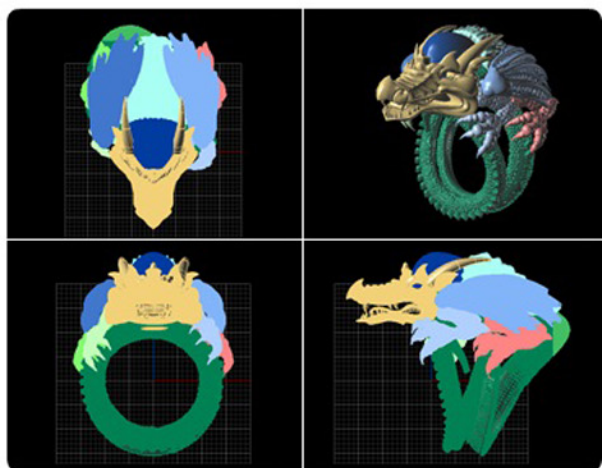
"What we can produce, a prop house can't," Scott explains, "if the script calls for a class ring from a certain high school from a certain year, you can't just get away with any old class ring anymore, because it'll all show up in your high-definition TV."

Times change, and technology is adapted to suit. Ultimately, the machine is only as skilled as the fingers and mind that controls it. Although they may be scarce, there will always be room for craftsmen, especially as science moves onward, and the handmade becomes even more valuable.

Skinny Dog Design Group
Long Beach, California
www.jewelrypropshop.com
T: (562) 436-7237
E: waxgirl@skinnydogdesign.com



Scott and Jennifer Janiak-Ross
proprietors of Skinny Dog Design Group.
All photos courtesy Skinny Dog Design Group.



Four views of a ring design was rendered in 3-D on computer for "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." The digital file was used to manufacture the ring.