

Reller Gold

A Pirate's Treasure

The year was 1681. The seas were calm and the sky was clear—clear enough for the crew of the Santa Maria De La Consolación to stare in horror as they witnessed six British pirate ships close in on their treasure-carrying Spanish galleon. Slow and bloated, due to its massive cargo of silver, gold, and precious gems, the fate of its crew seemed doomed.

>> By **Diana S. Zimmerman, Special Features Correspondent**

Hurricane seas, shark-infested waters, jagged cliffs, and ruthless pirates—all in a day's work for the bounty-carrying seamen of centuries gone by. So it is, as well, for Bernard Reller, founder of Reller Gold, and a man who readily admits, "Physics was just not exciting enough for me." Ah (or should we say "Argh!"), but a pirate's bounty, now that is something Reller can really take to heart. And so, this second generation master jeweler, utilizing "Pieces of Eight" and other ancient coins salvaged from ships long since claimed by Neptune or taken by the bloody hands of notorious scoundrels, began creating his world renowned Pirate Collection.

"As a kid, I was a science nerd," he explains, "who also loved sports cars, engines, flying, and any type of adventure. Even though the experimental physics projects he worked on during and after graduate school at the University of Florida were interesting, they lacked the type of excitement that Reller was looking for. So, in 1972, he and a friend headed to the Caymen Islands. It was there that fate played a hand. "One day, while skin diving off a reef about a half mile from the beach, I pried this coral encrusted object from the sea floor. When we cleaned it, we discovered that it was a bronze timber pike from an old shipwreck." His find triggered an encounter with Captain John Leeper of the research and salvage vessel "Beta." The eager young Reller quickly signed on to pursue that most romantic of quests—sunken treasure. His electronic and mechanical background offered the skill sets that Leeper needed, and, before long, he was sailing the Western Caribbean.

After returning to the mainland in 1974, Reller established a casting company, *Casting P.B.S.*, in Miami to service his family's jewelry business. Marcus Reller, Bernard's father, was an established jeweler who learned his trade in Vienna, but was forced to flee to escape the Nazis. It wasn't long before the younger Reller began designing nautical jewelry. With the 1975 release of Steven

Spielberg's "Jaws" movie, he decided to create a pendant titled "Jaws at Your Throat," a 14K gold take-off of the shark from the movie poster. "I expected to market a few pieces to divers and surfers," he says, "but was shocked when orders began rolling in by the dozens." The overwhelming success of this one item inspired him to produce additional pieces for the nautical market.



BERNARD RELLER

Reller continued to design jewelry with an emphasis on detail and accuracy, including touches such as miniature working anchors; anatomically correct sea creatures; shells that are detailed replica castings from perfect natural specimens; and sails on tiny boats that are "properly trimmed." His decision to focus on representational nautical jewelry stemmed from his belief that this genre is not subject to the whim of fashion, and, therefore, if masterfully executed, will never go out of style. One such piece, a delightful gold octopus holding a conch pearl is not only a conversation starter, but a fanciful work of underwater art. Today, Reller's "Caribbean Collection" is arguably the most extensive and accurate in the industry. Drawing inspiration from everything oceanic, an important segment of this line was inspired by the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland. When Disney World opened in Florida, Reller began selling his pirate themed skulls and swords to the park.

"In 1980, with gold soaring to \$850 an ounce (that would be equivalent of it going to \$2000 an ounce today), I decided to go to London and began working in sterling silver for a store chain called The Great Frog Limited that specialized in jewelry for Heavy Metal groups and French tourists." By 1982, gold had dropped back to more manageable levels and Reller re-launched his Caribbean Collection with new designs and fresh ideas. Always observant of hot trends, he also created an immensely successful line of tennis bracelets based upon that sport's popularity at the time.

In 1985, fate took another twist when his long-time friend and noted treasure hunter, Mel Fisher, discovered the Atocha. This mother load



of precious metal, coins, gems, and other artifacts was salvaged off the coast of Key West. Interest in the Atocha and other shipwrecks exploded, and Reller was asked by Fisher to design jewelry using coins and emeralds from the find. This put him on a worldwide path to notoriety. During this time, Reller was also commissioned to create replica coins from an 80-pound silver bar from the Atocha, which he still sells.

By using the unique shape of each coin or artifact, Reller is able to create one-of-a-kind pieces that are not only spectacular, but enhance the intrinsic romance of the coins. One such piece includes two crossed swords that form the mount around a skull-shaped eight reales (pieces of eight). Since each coin is unique, so is each piece he designs. "I try to follow the shape of the coins and create settings that capture the intrigue," he asserts. Fate dealt Reller another winning hand with the release of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. "Disney has brought the fascination for pirates to an entirely new generation," he states. Captain Jack Sparrow is not the only one to discover treasure. The sale of pirate jewelry has skyrocketed for Reller Gold.

In 1999, Stan Pollack, then president of Jewelers of America, challenged him to construct a life-sized gold lobster to celebrate the opening of his new store, G. M. Pollock and Sons, at the Rockland, Maine lobster festival. "Rocky," a 14K gold, foot-long lobster made his debut to delighted fans.

In 2003, after 10 years of development, Reller and two colleagues finally overcame a challenge they set for themselves—to create a ring with a self-sizing shank for individuals with arthritis. ForeverFit™ was born. With superior ease of use and installation, plus the ability to continually adjust to fit over swollen joints, this patented creation has revolutionized this market and allowed countless women to wear their precious wedding rings. To commemorate his love of flying, Reller created a 14K gold sculpture of a futurist Wright Flyer. So perfect in every detail, it won the "Daedalus Award for Excellence" at the Wright Brothers Centennial Celebration.

But what of the ill-fated *Consolación* and its crew? "The ship's captain headed to a nearby Island," Reller explains. "Not wanting his cargo to be seized, he sunk the galleon. The pirates were so angry, they tracked down the *Consolación's* captain and crew, killing them in a bloody battle. To this day, the island is called 'El Muerto,' the dead man." Although most of us will never meet a real pirate, we can touch a small piece of their history through the plundered treasures of seafaring buccaneers and the masterful artistry of Bernard Reller. (www.rellergold.com)

