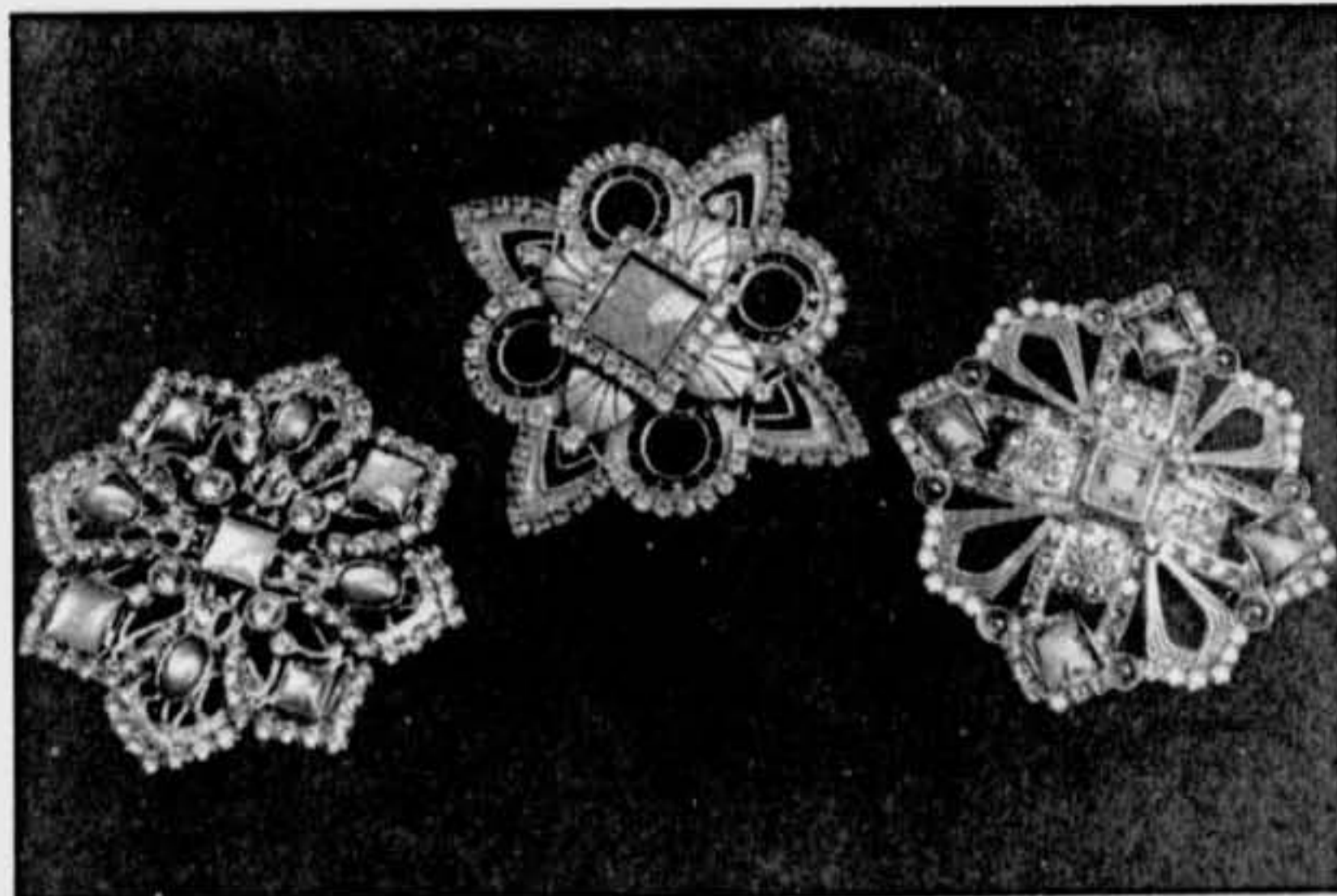


Sorrelli jewelry finds beauty in Berks



Eagle/Times: Diane Staskowski

Lisa A. Oswald, Sorrelli Inc. president, checks some of the hand-crafted reproductions of jewelry she designed.



Pins, necklaces and rings are designed as future heirlooms by Sorrelli, which recently opened its first retail store in Kutztown.

Eagle/Times: Tony Florini

■ The Richmond Township company moved to the county from Brooklyn in 1987 to find artistic inspiration for its designs.

By Bernard J. Colan

Eagle/Times

The narrow road that twists to the Richmond Township workshop of the Sorrelli Inc. jewelry company, the 72 acres behind it and the roosters crowing in front of it all help to flavor the jewelry made inside.

In essence, the business moved to Berks County from Brooklyn in 1987 to lighten up a little, said its president, Lisa A. Oswald, and her husband, Kermit D. Oswald.

"Lisa's designs were becoming too dark, too somber," Kermit explained.

"They became more colorful when we came here," Lisa said.

She designs earrings, pins and necklaces as ornate heirlooms that look like they've been handed down by a tasteful grandmother.

"I think (our jewelry) became prettier because of this environment," she said, spreading an arm to include the workshop her husband coaxed from an old barn

near Kutztown, the chickens pecking around it, all in the context of woods that even sport a Carl Sandburg poem tacked to a tree.

Although it has been in Berks that her fashions adopted a more optimistic glow, it was in Brooklyn that Lisa parlayed a \$300 loan in 1981 to what now are sales of about \$2 million for her wholesale company.

Oswald makes a living packaging the pretty in jewelry that she's been making since she was an 8-year-old growing up in Valley Forge, creating oven-fired necklaces made of clay that she sold to her relatives.

Ten years later, while she was on her way toward a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Kutztown University, she met Kermit while she was goldleafing chicken bones as part of an art project.

Kermit himself was well known in the fine arts community of Kutztown. After meeting Lisa in Kutztown, he went to live in New York, where Lisa, coincidentally, had accepted an internship with established jewelry designer Debra Fine Yohai.

"It gave me an opportunity to show what I could do without spending any money," Lisa said.

But branching out on her own, she used the \$300 loan to fashion some samples in the style that has made her business prosperous.

"It's a style that your grandmother would probably love and that she would hand down," she explained, showing earrings, necklaces and pins all made from prototypes she created with an antique exuberance.

Lisa took the samples she made to a wholesale trade show in New York and came away with orders totaling \$75,000.

With the help of her twin sisters, Susie and Sandy, she opened Sorrelli (Italian for "sisters," she said) in Brooklyn to fill the orders.



Necklaces are created at a converted barn in Richmond Township that is the "factory" for Sorrelli jewelry.

"We pushed really hard, working 16-hour days, seven days a week," Kermit said.

"It was hard to keep up with the demand, because it's not like we're producing molded toothbrushes or stamp castings, but real art that has to be put together with intricate skill," Lisa said.

Incorporating the company in 1982, Sorrelli developed a strong following in high-end boutiques and the jewelry departments of some of the nation's largest retailers, where Sorrelli products range from \$20 to \$500.

The company has grown steadily each year and fields a staff that includes office management, support and artisans who put together jewelry designed by Oswald and Sorrelli artist Amanda Foster.

They work in a 5,500-square-foot remodeled barn. Downstairs a small digital photo studio has been set up so that images of Sorrelli jewelry may be e-mailed, burned into CD-ROMs, uploaded onto the company's Internet site (www.sorrelli.com) or printed for brochures.

An office in a small outbuilding packages shipments, keeps track of orders and is "where the phone rings," Kermit said.

Although the couple agrees that its rustic location provides artistic inspiration, the tradeoff is when the weather is bad, and particularly when snow is high or that twisting road ices up.

"We lose about 15 days a year because of people not being able to show up for work," Kermit said.

Still, Sorrelli is growing upward and outward, having recently opened its first retail store in Kutztown, which did well over the holidays, the Oswalds said, emphasizing there is no particular secret to their success.

"We get up every day and work at it," Kermit said.

Along with a strong work ethic, the company also sticks to its first philosophy of making just enough product to fill orders, rather than guessing what is going to sell and stockpiling ornaments.

"We're cautious and we put money back into the company," Lisa said.

And consequently, putting money into what they call "chandeliers for the ears" and other modern antiques designed to ornament the dress of upscale ladies of all generations.