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MYSTERY BOX CHALLENGE

*Creating beautiful
designs in four
weeks' time*



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Mystery Box CHALLENGE

**Four weeks + four designers
+ one box of mystery materials
= endless possibilities**

BY SHAWNA KULPA

Slow and steady has been said to win the race, but there are times when speed matters. Just ask designers Aleksandra Vali, Brenda Smith, Jo Haemer, and Tim Green. When they agreed to participate in the annual *MJSA Journal* Mystery Box Challenge, they knew that they would have to create a piece of jewelry in just four weeks' time. While that might not sound overly daunting, the designers also didn't know what materials they would have to use to create their piece. It wasn't until they agreed to participate that they received their boxes and discovered the following materials:

- One 4-inch x 4-inch sterling silver sheet from David H. Fell & Co. (dhfco.com)
- One 8-inch 22-gauge 14k yellow gold wire from Stuller Inc. (stuller.com)
- One square peridot, one rectangular cushion citrine, and one pear-shape iolite from Gemorex International Inc. (gemorex.com)
- One 4-inch x 4-inch x 2-inch cocobolo wood block from Bell Forest Products Inc. (bellforestproducts.com)

On the following pages, you'll discover how the designers worked these random elements into thoughtful pieces of jewelry—and met the deadline. If you'd like to see the pieces in person, they'll be on display at MJSA Expo New York (March 12-14 at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center), where they will be raffled off. All proceeds from the raffle will benefit the MJSA Education Foundation, which provides scholarships to U.S. students enrolled in jewelry-design and jewelry-making programs at colleges, universities, and technical schools. (Unable to attend Expo? Raffle tickets can also be purchased by calling 1-800-444-6572.)



Coffee Talk

ALEKSANDRA VALI

Aleksandra Vali, Geneva, Illinois

When Aleksandra Vali takes on a new project, she usually does “millions” initial sketches. However, when she received the materials in this year’s Mystery Box, she dove right in and began carving the cocobolo wood. “Sometimes I just take the material and it speaks to me and I start carving,” she says.

Perhaps she was so anxious to get started because carving is her favorite technique in jewelry making (“it’s my relaxation time”). She quickly discovered, however, that carving wood was different from working with her traditional carving wax. “The cocobolo is a hard wood so you have to press a lot harder,” she says. “I was really tired when I was finished. It made me appreciate wax!”

While she didn’t start out with a vision in mind, she knew early on that she would create a pendant (with the possibility of it being a combination pendant/brooch).

“I’m a sculptor in my heart and soul. At first, I preferred making rings as little sculptures, but I later found the same flexibility with pendants and brooches,” she says.

“I start my creative process with a feeling that I want to express. I recently got an unusual invitation to work on an interior design project for a luxury café that would be cosy and welcoming, so my thoughts and feelings were submerged in the coffee universe.

As she worked, she contemplated which of the gemstones supplied best complemented the wood, which reminded Vali of coffee. As a professional artist, Vali pays particular attention to the color psychology. “The chocolate of the wood and the orange hues of the citrine is a particularly tasty combination. In Italy, when you order espresso, you get an orange peel with the coffee. The colors just go together.” The coffee inspiration may even help explain the final shape of the wood pendant. Vali felt that because the wood is a warm material, the piece should have soft lines. Ultimately she went

with an oval shape; she thought the rounded lines befitted the delicate, natural material. And, while she admits that it was never her intention, one cannot help but see a faint resemblance to a coffee bean in its shape.

Once the pendant shape was finalized, Vali had to determine how she would attach the citrine. She opted to use the silver to hold the stone, but she was concerned about the metal’s contrast with the wood. “I wanted to make the silver invisible so I oxidized [it] with liver of sulfur to neutralize the color.”

To attach the silver disc to the wooden pendant, Vali soldered small posts to the back of the disc. She then drilled corresponding holes into the wood, inserted the posts, and riveted them on the backside.

She also used pieces of the silver to help attach the gold sun rays she wanted to add as accents. She cut different size snippets of the gold wire and flattened them with a smithing hammer. She then soldered tiny pieces of twisted silver wire that she screwed into the wood and secured with epoxy. “It’s similar to how we attach pearls,” she says.

Due to time restrictions, Vali had to settle for keeping the piece as a pendant instead of a dual pendant/brooch. But even without being able to do that, Vali is still plenty pleased with her coffee-inspired pendant. “The best pieces I make I create in a couple of days,” she says. “When it takes years, I don’t feel the piece. But when you feel it, you create it real fast. I was ready for this project.”