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Made in Brooklyn: Bonbon Oiseau



Deb Stein is not what you'd expect from a jewelry designer. She doesn't keep up with fashion magazines, doesn't consider next season's trends, and doesn't have an Etsy store. In fact, she never even meant to be a jewelry designer. Her company, **Bonbon Oiseau**, just sort of happened.

"I really backed into this business," she remembers. "I was selling a few pieces I'd made at a friend's shop called Therapy in Williamsburg. Daily Candy wrote about my stuff, and suddenly, I had a business." She'd dabbled in beading during grad school, but otherwise, she had no background in jewelry making. "I started

getting emails from *Teen Vogue* and shops all over the country. And I thought, 'I don't even know how to do this.'"

That was in 2005. Today, Stein's Bonbon Oiseau creations—all made in her Greenpoint studio—grace showroom floors from Paris to Tokyo, and are mainstays at Brooklyn boutiques like **Cog & Pearl** and **Kill Devil Hill**, and shops spanning the US and Europe. And while you won't find any Bonbons on Etsy, Stein does have online shops on **Big Cartel** and the **Bonbon Oiseau website**.

Stein's style is punctuated by a certain punk that can only come from such unconventional beginnings. Before stumbling into jewelry, she was a painter with an eye (and ear) for stories. She spent two years in India researching a family of toymakers and artisans to see how they passed tradition through their families. "They did everything from scratch. Every little bit—the hair from their paintbrush was pulled from a squirrel's tail, and that squirrel was in a cage right next to them." She'd uncover their stories and weave them into her paintings, fueled by her subjects' dedication to handmade everything. So when Stein dropped painting and picked up jewelry designing, it makes sense that her storytelling bug immediately resurfaced.

She's since mastered her jewelry-making techniques through metal smithing and stone setting classes, but otherwise, Stein is entirely self-taught. "Mostly I subvert the techniques into what I need them for and what I want to do," she says. "I still consult with my old teacher, Caroline Glemann from **Liloveve**, or a few fellow designers (like **Virginia Galvan**) who are great metal smiths."

Antique glass, beads, and reclaimed treasures mark her signature style in every piece. But nothing within the Bonbon line is arbitrary. Every collection unravels a story, and each piece is a vignette from that tale. Many series even belong to a sole heroine. "In the 'Around the World in 80 Days' collection, I imagined the main character Phileas Fogg as an intrepid female traveler touring the world and picking up little talismans along the way," Stein explains. "Each charm and detail in the collection reflect the memories and souvenirs I imagined she'd brought home."

Her "Reve des Bonnie & Clyde" collection is inspired by—yes—renegade outlaws Bonnie & Clyde. Stein made each piece imagining what Bonnie Parker might have had in her jewelry box while on the road. The result was hand-wrought silver, Victorian etched glass hearts, antique charms, and woven chains with a sexy edge.

Not every backstory is borne from quirky characters: many Bonbon creations come from Stein's own travels. One of her most cherished collections is inspired by a trip to China. "The idea started with Bruce Chatwin. He published an essay called "Rock's World" about an ancient village outside of Lijiang," she explains. She visited the village after reading the essay, and years later, the "Fleuri d'Hiver" collection emerged. "That collection came from every detail I remembered about the nature, people, and colors I experienced there. The red from a thousand-year-old camellia tree that a monk protected during the Cultural Revolution. The yellow of the mustard fields. The celestial symbols the Naxi women wore on their coats were represented by little black sequins."

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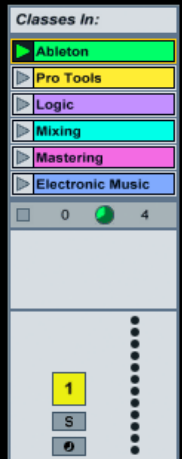
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Even the beads Stein uses tell a story. Many come from sources in Paris, Texas, and here in New York. “My favorite source,” she says, “is a genteel old-school Frenchman with a jewelry shop in Paris. His daughter saw my work and told me the glass I was using was the work of her grandfather. So I went [to her father’s shop] and he tentatively showed me a tray of beautiful old glass rings and funny twisted beads in bright reds, turquoise, violet, and ivory. He told me his father used to produce the glass beads for Chanel and the costumes of the Folies Bergere dancers in the 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s.



“When I came back the next day —always a two day process with him because he’s only willing to show me a few things at a time—we bargained for over an hour in a very Victorian way —he wrote down the prices to show for my approval, I’d cross it off and say I could pay this for this many, it went on and on! A true character that makes designing with the beads that much more inspiring.”

A story is literally hiding in every detail of her work, whether it’s in the beads themselves, or Stein’s design muses. Bonbon Oiseau’s upcoming 2011 collection, “Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining,” takes an unexpected turn. There are no villains or enchanting voyages behind these creations. The sole inspiration, in fact, is Stein’s father. “He’d always use these old sayings—he’d often say, ‘every cloud has a silver lining.’ After a sad year of mourning his death, I was inspired to create an uplifting collection based on his favorite saying.” Together with her assistant, Vanessa Kinzer (who helps create every collection), Stein used seed beads to design intricate woven patterns that look like clouds. A thin silver (or gold, above) chain creates the graceful lining.

Stein also brings her fervor for people and stories back into the Brooklyn community. She spearheads an annual holiday raffle for the Food Bank of New York City, where she and eight other artists donate a piece of their work to the prize. The swag features Brooklyn-made goodies including a feather calendar by the **Wild Unknown**, assorted wonders from **Sesame Letterpress**, hand-poured organic candles from **Tamika Rivera** of Therapy, and a set of jewelry from Bonbon Oiseau’s own Fleuri d’Hiver collection. The winner is drawn on Christmas Eve, so there’s still time to throw your hat into the fashionably charitable ring—details can be found on the **Bonbon Oiseau blog**.

“It’s an especially fun raffle to organize because everyone is so grassroots,” Stein said. “If we can band together and offer our work as a way to give back, it’s a no-brainer.”

*Maria Gagliano is a writer, book editor, and co-publisher of **Slice magazine**. She’s a Bensonhurst native living in Park Slope, where she’s teaching herself to sew, garden, pickle, preserve, and bake like her Sicilian family. She chronicles her (mis)adventures at **pomatorevival.com**.*

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Bonbon Oiseau 1 month ago

Thanks for the article. Maria was a great interviewer-thoroughly enjoyed talking to her!
Just to let your audience know, we'll be selling raffles in support of the Food Bank for NYC at the Brooklyn Flea through December 23rd at Booth G57~ and this weekend, Dec. 18th & 19th at the Williamsburg Winter Wonder (www.wburgwinterwonder.blogspot.../)

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cindy quaint 1 month ago

i love deb's work and her. this was a wonderful interview and it was interesting to learn more about her inspiration. the story about the frenchman with a jewelry shop in paris was fabulous. i'm not sure every designer would have such patience, but deb seems to really enjoy the process as much as the end result so that experience makes it all the richer.

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nadia 1 month ago

what a wonderful article, although i know deb (who is the kindest person out there) it was great to read details i had not know. i love her pieces and love her to pieces!

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