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Cougar's Creations are whimsical, delicate jewelry

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Dale "Cougar" Armstrong is a self-described "rock hound."

Best known for her work as a wire-jewelry artist, she is also a lapidary, author and teacher.

Often considered a childhood pastime, Armstrong's interest in rock-hounding began with her family's weekend trips in search of abandoned pegmatite mines, where they searched for rocks and semi-precious stones. This early fascination and education about rocks and minerals has shaped the course of her life.

Armstrong attended the University of Florida where she studied geology and fine arts. Prior to discovering her talent for wire jewelry and "before the age of computers," she worked as a technical advertising artist for several years.

Armstrong said the wire jewelry because it allowed her to use the beautiful stones she had collected for years. The three-dimensional, geometric nature of the art was also appealing to her design-oriented mind.

Within three months of beginning to make wire jewelry around 1994, Armstrong was creating her own designs.

Armstrong has training in two-dimensional art with Carl Haskins of Vermont and William Keyworth of New Hampshire. She spent several years under the instruction of Karl Drerupe, a cloisonné and repossé artist.

"Inspiration comes from anything, anywhere," said Armstrong, "Sometimes I start to see what kind of piece a stone needs to be worked into when I am refining it."

Armstrong's work has been described as "whimsical and delicate," qualities that distinguish it from the most common form of wire jewelry -- wrapping the wires around a center wire, which makes for a heavier-looking end result. The whimsical nature of Armstrong's work has caught the attention of the science-fiction community, where she has been commissioned to make pieces that are featured on the covers of books and at national conventions.

Armstrong's home and workshop, located up a winding road in the hills of Riceville, contain a treasure trove of rocks, stones, minerals and fossils collected from across the United States. Her extensive schedule of shows and classes and working to create her jewelry leaves little time for searching for more material.




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Armstrong has been featured on several television shows including PBS' "Beads, Baubles and Jewels." She is the host of "Jewel School" on Jewelry Television, which is aired regularly, and two instructional DVDs, the third to be released sometime in July or August 2008. Armstrong has been interviewed twice in the past five months on "Knoxville Style." Luckily the piles and buckets of rocks and minerals she has already acquired should last a long while. Her husband Charlie, originally a boil-maker by trade, has "learned the family business," is a lapidary, and often refines stones for Armstrong to use.

Armstrong also purchases bulk amounts of precious and semi-precious stones to work into her jewelry. "I want to make nice things available to average people," said Armstrong. She keeps the price of her items in line with the cost of materials and the time she spends to create them.

Armstrong's studio was built by friends and family. Many pieces of her equipment were given to her or traded for jewelry. The space reflects her personality with walls painted in the bright colors of a sunset, feng sui honored, and an area to display finished pieces in the front. Pieces of jewelry from headpieces to earrings, necklaces to rings, arm cuffs to bracelets are displayed in jewelry cases with colored backgrounds. Some are what one would expect from hand-made wire jewelry -- a random assortment of beads in a random pattern. Others feature intricate beadwork and patterns on wire woven with intricacy that brings to mind lace -- a shiny, metal lace.

Behind a wall and door is the work area for refining stones. Behind another door is an organized catalog system for finished pieces of jewelry, which fill tiny drawers after tiny drawers. In the main part of her studio, each wall has large windows. Sun catchers and wind chimes hang in each window.

She conducts private and semi-private classes in her personal studio and is a frequent instructor at Lapidary Journal Bead Fest events, Bead Expo events hosted by Interweave Press and J.O.G.S. International Exhibit. Armstrong has recently begun offering kits on her Web site for beginner wire jewelry projects.

Armstrong has been featured in publications including "Wedding Jewelry," "Wire Jewelry," "Art Jewelry," "Wire Works," "Bead Unique" and "Wire Artist."

Armstrong participates in charity events for organizations including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. Armstrong's daughter, Skye, 24, has juvenile diabetes, which makes the cause near to her heart.

Her work is displayed at the Museum Center at Five Points in Cleveland and Athens Area Council for the Arts in Athens, both of which she sponsors.

Her Web site, www.cougarscreations.com is maintained by her brother, who lives in Maine.

On the Web:

www.beadsbaublesandjewels.com

www.jewelrytelevision.com

www.wbir.com/life/programming/local/style

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