

# Jewellery master's Broome business proves portentous

Artist and metalsmith John Miller has created one of the most recognised jewellery brands in WA.



Isabel Vieira  
isabel.vieira@businessnews.com.au

“It’s an incredibly rich, wonderful and diverse medium to be working in, and over fifty years it’s grown into a monster

— John Miller

ONE of the state’s most renowned creatives is bringing his career full circle, with the latest step in John Miller’s jewellery journey a chance to get back to business in Broome.

In 1979, Mr Miller was told there was no demand for a jewellery store in Broome. That didn’t stop him, however, with the master jeweller forging ahead and operating in the Kimberley tourist town for a stint.

Now based much further south, in Yallingup, the artist and metalsmith this year celebrates 50 years in the business, with his John Miller Designs one of Western Australia’s most recognisable jewellery brands.

It all started with a chance encounter at his local pub where the then 18 year old was offered a job buffing silver in a jeweller’s shop in Perth.

The opportunity came right after Mr Miller dropped out of the Claremont School of Art, where he learned the fundamentals of art history, before later attending the WA Academy of Performing Arts.

He said it only took one day in the silver shop to know he had found his craft.

“I walked in and looked around and saw all these sheets of silver, tools, wire and gemstones and just thought to myself, ‘I can really work with this’,” Mr Miller told *Business News*.

“On day one, I just looked around and thought ‘Yep, I can do this’, because my bedroom when I was a kid was always full of tools, rocks, and bits of wire.

“I kind of knew how to do it, so I started making stuff.”

Not long after, Mr Miller packed his workshop into his van and headed to Darwin to establish what he said was the town’s first jewellery shop, in 1973.

The narrow storefront operated for several years as his first dedicated jewellery shop, after which he travelled to Sri Lanka on a sapphire buying visit.



It was upon his return to Australia that Mr Miller decided to move back to his childhood town of Broome and open a store.

This pioneering business step was the precursor for major brands such as Kailis Jewellery to build the reputation for quality pearls and jewellery Broome has today.

“Everybody said ‘Who’s going to buy jewellery in Broome, what are you thinking and why would you do that?’” Mr Miller said.

“Now there are about twenty jewellery shops in Broome.

“It’s a very inspirational place in terms of ideas because you’ve got all your maritime history, like mermaids, divers and romance, treasure chests and sunken galleons, coral reefs and mangrove flats and all this beautiful stuff

that I started incorporating into my work.”

In Broome, Mr Miller started handmaking steel punches to emboss into metals, alongside developing techniques to create detailed designs on rings, bracelets, earrings and other pieces.

He now boasts a 700-strong collection of handmade steel punches, which he believes may be one of the largest collections in the world.

Some of his most recognisable jewellery features intricate outback desert scenes, while others dive into underwater worlds, all meticulously handcrafted from his workshop in Yallingup.

He uses “old-world techniques” such as fusing, forging and hand engraving, and makes many of



John Miller has worked from his Yallingup workshop for the past 25 years of his five-decade career (below).

Photo: Russell Ord Photography (main and bottom right)

Over time, he began working with metals such as gold and platinum and has incorporated diamond, sapphires, rubies, pearls and opals into his unique and custom designs.

“It’s an incredibly rich, wonderful and diverse medium to be working in and over fifty years; it’s grown into a monster,” Mr Miller told *Business News*.

“I’m never happy with where it is. I’m always trying to make new and different things and develop ideas.

“I think about my work constantly.”

As a Fellow of the Gold and Silversmiths Guild of Australia, Mr Miller’s designs feature his maker’s mark, allowing his jewellery to be identified in perpetuity.

Speaking from Broome, Mr Miller said he always knew the store in the Kimberley town he opened in 1979 would be successful.

“I’ve basically sold everything I’ve made, and I knew that I would sell everything I made because people have just always bought everything I made,” he said.

“I’ve been up here [Broome] for two weeks and the gallery is screaming because everything’s been sold again

“I have to go ... and make it because they can’t stop people from buying my stuff.

“So, when I opened that [first Broome] shop, I just knew that it would go well; and it did.”

Mr Miller said the 1970s were a heyday for jewellers due to the low level of imports.

“It was the height of jewellery in Australia because there wasn’t much being imported from Bali, Indonesia, China, Thailand and Mexico,” he said.

“It just wasn’t an established industry ... but most of it is that stuff [from overseas] now.”

Mr Miller made the sea change to Yallingup about 25 years ago. From there, he operates two galleries: one in Yallingup alongside his workshop and another in Margaret River.

He oversees 19 staff across the two locations, including a couple of apprentices.



his own tools, which is part of the reason he says he doesn’t have many issues with copies.

“I have a lot of various different styles that I work in; some of it’s very organic and non-representational and sculptural,” Mr Miller said.

“I make things that you just can’t buy.

“The commercial industry has been compromised by chasing profits and mass production where they are looking at how to shave another two or three dollars’ worth of metal when making 20,000 of

the same piece.

“So, I go the other way and make jewellery of really exceptional quality, which is hard to find and hard to buy.”

Mr Miller claims to be the largest importer of silver for jewellery making in Australia.