

LIFE ARGUS



Alice outside her garden studio with Betty the dog

I have a love-hate relationship with boxes as they are so hard to make

Jeweller Alice Robson creates her quirky gold and silver boxes within boxes in a garden studio designed for her by her husband. **KATY RICE** reports.

THE studio where Alice Robson makes her silver and gold jewellery could not be more convenient. It is just a short walk along a winding gravel path between the kitchen of her country cottage and the cedar-clad garden building her architect husband designed for her. Inside the building, all painted in subtle Farrow and Ball shades, she has a bespoke workbench beneath windows that let in natural light and look out over the rambling natural garden at their cottage in the pretty village of Flimwell.

Alice's work is on display, necklaces from her Pod Collection, whose design was inspired by the Christmas decorations you slot together and created from laser-cut silver leaf shapes, her Pebble and Flint Collections and, most intriguingly, her signature little silver and gold boxes.

"I have an affinity with boxes," laughed Alice. "I've always loved containers and have lots of them around the house. I have five of those pieces

of furniture with dozens of little drawers. At one point, I wanted to open a box shop."

Alice's boxes are tiny and the surprising thing is that they are designed in descending sizes so one fits inside another like Russians dolls. She begins making each one with a solid cube of metal, then cuts through to begin crafting a lid. The smaller the box, the trickier the work.

"I love the idea of a little lid clicking shut on a box," said Alice. "I really have a love-hate relationship with the boxes because they are so hard to make but that's also what makes it so satisfying when they are finished."

"People keep all sorts of things in the boxes – perhaps a child's tooth, an essential pill they need as medication or even a message such as 'Marry me'. In my own box, I'd keep a diamond."

Alice, 48, who lives with husband James, their son Fergus, 16, and 14-year-old daughter Edie, plus Betty the dog, can trace her inspiration to designing jewellery to afternoon activity sessions at her school when a jeweller came in to give classes. Al-



Rose gold vermeil slender pod necklace on oxidised chain, £125

Cube necklaces, from £95



Tiny micro box pendants, from £195



Gold vermeil tiny pod earrings, £55

ice produced a silver box. "It was the most complicated thing I have ever made," she recalled. "I had always been interested in art and so when I left school, I began a course at what was then Hastings Art College, which had a metalwork department. I was the only person on the course interested in that."

Motivation

After training at Central Saint Martins in London, graduating with a degree in jewellery design, she went on to work for Dinny Hall, the high-fashion jeweller, and then the high-society jewellery designer John Donald.

The urge to travel took her to Asia and when she returned and needed a job, she worked in sales and marketing for the next 10 years.

It was only when she and husband James, who is a partner with an architect's practice in Tunbridge Wells, moved to the Sussex countryside with an infant Fergus – and Edie arriving soon after – that Alice was given the spur she needed to launch her own jewellery business.

"A friend asked me to be godmother to her child and I made a little silver box as a gift," said Alice. "My friend loved it and that gave me a real boost. I'm quite a motivated person anyway and making jewellery fitted in with being the mother of two small children."

"When I was younger, I didn't have the confidence in my ability to design but as a mother, I had become more self-assured about my own taste and style."

"So I put a few pieces together, invited friends to come and see them and the orders soon started coming in."

By now her old workbench, which she had kept at her mother's house and unearthed, was no longer adequate and, using their £15,000 savings, James designed her studio in the garden to her specifications, based on shepherd's huts.

Inside are four workbenches and a wood-burning stove and its walls are cedar-clad. While it was being built, she designed her first collection.

"I met this stylish woman who owned two accessories shops and she had seen some of my jewellery," said Alice. "She asked me to design a collection for her shops. She loved it and bought £2,000 worth of my jewellery. Then on the first day they went on sale, she phoned me and said she had just sold a necklace for £750. So she asked me to design another collection for her."

Inspiration

Inspired by nature, she designs both her collections and her bespoke pieces to "be true to myself", loving the quirkiness of the handmade. "A design may be geometric but the inexactness of the hand-made process gives a unique feel that is lost in the mass-produced or computer-generated design object," she explained.

"Metal is very tactile to work with and because it's so immediate, it's very satisfying."

"You can take a piece of metal and within minutes you can smooth it with a file. And you can polish it and suddenly you have got this smooth tactile finish."

"It's my aim to make simple, elegant and tactile pieces. My jewellery needs to be recognisable as well as classic and wearable," said Alice. "There are hundreds of jewellers out there and in places like Brighton, they can be more adventurous. But in the countryside, people are less so and prefer a piece of jewellery that's not just for one season but that will still be relevant in five or 10 years' time."

Fairs are an important part of Alice's business – they showcase her pieces and it's where she meets customers – and she attends around 10 a year.

She's a member of the Sussex Guild, a group of professional craft-people who organise shows and exhibitions for its members, and will be at the Sussex Guild show at Pashley Manor in Ticehurst on the bank holiday weekend in August.

● To find out more about Alice Robson's jewellery, visit alicerobson.co.uk.