

## A CUT ABOVE JEWELRY

# An ancient stone for the modern age

PARIS

Once a caveman's knife, obsidian is today used in more artistic endeavors

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

Ever in search of innovative new materials and gems, some contemporary jewelers and designers have recently been looking backward rather than forward.

The focus of their attention is ancient obsidian, a volcanic glass formed as an igneous rock. This natural glass, in fiery shades of brown, black or blood red, resulted from flowing volcanic lava millions of years ago.

Darkly transparent in its most prized variety, with infinitely sharp edges, obsidian served prehistoric man as a cutting blade in battle and is today used for

whose collection of obsidian jewelry titled "Armenia" was born of that trip.

"I discovered miles of black hillside covered with broken chunks of obsidian," he said.

"When nature makes glass, it is fragile and brittle," Mr. Vendome added. "I decided to integrate the breakages in my jewelry to capture the very force of this stone."

The result is a highly graphic and boldly sophisticated collection that combines the crudely sharp edges of the stone with the polished richness of gold, pearls and other traditional precious materials.

Though obsidian is found in rock formations in volcanic areas of Mexico, Italy, Japan and the United States, the purest sort comes from Armenia. Varieties from other regions often include imperfections, making them unsuitable for the luxury market.

According to Mr. Vendome, contrary to the legend that surrounds the stone, Armenian obsidian is not commonly found on the slopes of Mount Ararat, the Biblical landing site of Noah's Ark, but in an area between Yerevan, the capital city, and Lake Sevan, perched 1,905 meters, or 6,250 feet, above sea level in central Armenia.

The hillside is lined for miles with broken bits of obsidian, a glass-sharp and bleak landscape that stretches along the road Mr. Vendome traveled to handpick the pieces he used in his designs.

"Obsidian is not a vulgar pebble," Mr. Vendome said. "Its natural brilliance and texture give it a mysterious and magical allure."

The color of the stone also makes for a perfect background against which Umane, a duo of female designers based in Paris, have set white diamonds and colored stones in the contemporary assemblage of shapes and materials of their organically inspired "Gallet," or "Pebble," collection.

"The obsidian has a particular texture which gives off naturally smooth reflections under the light," said Valérie Brun, one of Umane's designers.

"There are many shades of obsidian," she said. "We prefer the dark gray variety with silver reflections."

The Paris-based jewelry and fur-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY FREDERIC HUIBRECHTS

"Tourbillon," by Roland Daraspe, is made from obsidian handcrafted in Armenia, where gem houses including de Beers have set up workshops.

surgical instruments, but it has long been used to make decorative objects as well.

Because of the size of the blocks from which it is extracted, its varying degrees of homogeneity and its rarity, obsidian is best used for jewelry and other small objects.

Some even swear by its healing properties, claiming it can calm phobias, stop convulsions, clarify the soul and bring good luck.

"I was unfamiliar with the obsidian until I made a trip a few years ago to Armenia," said Thierry Vendome, a jewelry designer in the Marais quarter of Paris



Artistry in obsidian: from left, a necklace by Hervé van der Straeten; a brooch and a "meteorite" pendant by Thierry Vendome; below, "Histoire Naturelle" earrings in obsidian and white gold with pink sapphires from Artgo.



niture designer Hervé van der Straeten has also introduced obsidian in his jewelry line this year, marrying the geometric lines of his signature gold collection with chunks of darkly transparent obsidian.

A single trip to Armenia is probably not enough to solve all the mysteries surrounding the stone.

"The best guarded secret in Armenia is the site of the blue obsidian," Mr. Vendome said. "No one knows where that variety is found."

Eight years ago, Michel der Agobian, a third-generation Armenian, was equally mesmerized by a variety of obsidian he found on a trip to Armenia that is highly transparent when cut into thin slabs.

"Transparency in the obsidian is



unique to Armenia," said Mr. der Agobian, who, on that fateful trip, also discovered an ancestral stone-cutting, or lapidary, technique that, despite being dormant under years of Soviet domination of Armenia, had remained intact.

"The stone was being used by Armenian artisans mainly to make souvenirs for tourists," Mr. der Agobian said. "Their outstanding know-how was treated as superfluous by the Soviets,

but it survived. It is so exceptional today that de Beers and other diamond cutters from Israel and Antwerp have opened workshops there."

Today, having formed a partnership with a local workshop, Mr. der Agobian trades jewelry and objects crafted in Armenia through Cub-Ar, his design and distribution company.

"Armenian cutting techniques are flawless," he said. "We brought to the table what was missing, a rigorous method, the discipline to execute from complex drawings and a respect for delivery times."

Today, Mr. der Agobian is instrumental in opening a new chapter in the long and winding history of this ancient stone, with an exhibition at the Paris-based art gallery Pierre Alain Challier that explores the aesthetic possibilities of obsidian.

For the show, curated by Jean-Baptiste Sibertin-Blanc, artistic director of the luxury crystal brand Daum, 13 contemporary designers were asked to design obsidian-made objects, all of which were handcrafted at Mr. der Agobian's workshops in Armenia.

"This exercise looks to capture the essence of the stone," Mr. Sibertin-Blanc said. "Often, by taking very little away, that essence comes through most visibly."