

# LORDS OF THE RING

Partners in life and in work from the moment they met, David and Sybil Yurman have created a New York haven for themselves and their art with as much care as they crafted a \$500 million jewelry business together.

BY SARAH MEDFORD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM FRIEDBERG

**H**IGH CEILINGS, multiple levels and a terrace with sweeping views of downtown Manhattan will always be selling points for a New York City apartment, but jewelers David and Sybil Yurman didn't buy their latest place for any of that. They already enjoy those qualities in their own West SoHo duplex right across the hall. What they really wanted was square footage—and convenience. The Yurmans are both artists (he is a sculptor, she is a painter) and for 15 years had used their second floor as a studio and meditation space. "It was too long a trip," David jokes as he hops down the stairs to join his wife at their white-marble kitchen table. Their 4,500-square-foot new space is just steps away. "What's nice is that at night I can just go in there and paint," Sybil says. The quiet meditation room upstairs is a spare bedroom now. Her husband says, "We don't have much time to meditate."

The Yurmans' namesake brand, which they founded together 37 years ago, is known for its wearable approach to fine jewelry. Their pieces are comfortable and unfussy but rooted in cultural traditions of adornment that date back to Egyptian times. Though silver has long been the company's signature, gold and other precious metals are also popular, and colored gemstones now play a key role



**ARTS & CRAFT**  
A Fang tribal mask from Gabon presides over the living room, near a vintage George Nelson credenza that once belonged to Sybil's father. Left: David and Sybil Yurman on the roof of their West SoHo aerie. Sybil collaborated on the plantings with landscape designer Ann Krupp.





**LOFTY IDEALS**  
Wave-shaped '70s sofas by Italian designer Giovanni Offredi make a statement in the living room, alongside pieces collected on the Yurmans' travels, including African sculpture and Danish furniture such as a Jørgen Hansen credenza and a green '40s sofa.

in its twice-yearly collections, as do materials like forged carbon and meteorite (both in the men's jewelry line, launched in the early 1990s). David's signature design is a thick cable, which he obtained a patent for in 2015. Prices are purposefully accessible: A silver ring in the design starts at \$125. At the other end of the spectrum, a chunky cable necklace in sterling silver and glittering pavé black diamonds is \$47,000, while custom pieces go for even more.

From their earliest days in business, the Yurmans, both 74, have viewed the process of designing and selling their creations less as a commercial enterprise than as an extension of their own artistic practices. Materials and techniques that David used for his sculptures became the cornerstone of their jewelry. This has fueled a privately held operation that generated over a half-billion dollars in revenue last year, according to company CEO Gabriella Forte, and has landed them in over 400 retail locations worldwide, including 46 of their own stand-alone stores.

**I**T ALL STARTED by chance. The pair met in 1969, in the New York studio of the Dutch-born abstract sculptor Hans Van de Bovenkamp, where David was a foreman and Sybil arrived as a project manager. They quickly found common ground: "We'd both lived in California during the beatnik era," Sybil says. "David was in Big Sur and Venice, and I was in San Francisco. Jack Kerouac lived in the house that I stayed in."

"She stepped over his passed-out body many times," David says.

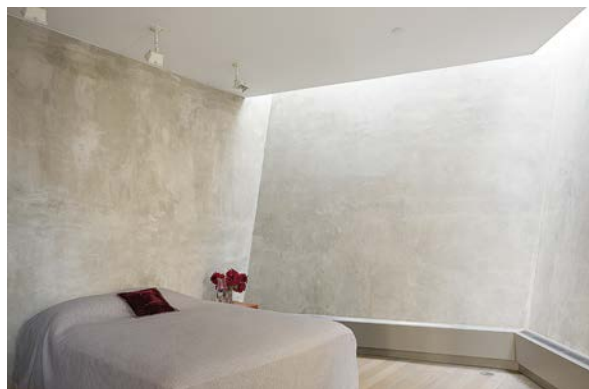
"I'd run away from home at 16," Sybil explains. "And I lived in a house called the Hyphen House, which was fairly well-known at the time. It was Michael McClure, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady—I took care of the place. Their friends or girlfriends lived nearby in the East-West house. It was a time of learning about Zen and meditation."

David had grown up on Long Island and had learned to direct-weld the summer before 11th grade. At Great Neck High School, he sold pendant necklaces and pocket-size figures to his classmates. As an apprentice sculptor, first to the modernist Jacques Lipchitz and then Van de Bovenkamp, he developed his metal-working techniques and kept a studio going on the side. Sybil had spent her childhood in the Bronx, and her father was a craftsman in fabrication shops for the architectural trade. She attended classes at U.C. Berkeley and taught ceramics before returning to the East Coast. When David met his future wife, he remembers, "I fell in love with Sybil's paintings just as much as I fell in love with her. Maybe more—depended on the day," he says, teasingly. "You had me at your first brushstroke."

He made a sculpted bronze necklace of intertwined, almost figural forms for his new girlfriend. "We went to an opening at the Forum Gallery," he says, referring to the pioneering Upper East Side gallery of figurative art where the owner, Bella Fishko, exhibited painter Raphael Soyer, sculptor Chaim Gross and others. "Bella took a look at Sybil's necklace and asked if it was for sale," David recalls. "I said no. Sybil said yes and she took it off. She was actually making a sale! Where's the romance?" He looks up at the ceiling. "And Sybil said to me, 'You'll make more.'"



**FAMILY TIES**  
Above: A photo of young David is next to one of the couple with their son, Evan.



**PLAYING THE ANGLES** Top: More Danish pieces, including a handmade carpet and an Ole Wanscher cabinet, fill the living room. Above: A meditative guest bedroom on the second floor of the main residence. Right: A 1974 sculpture by David, titled *Mother and Child*, greets visitors at the base of the minimalist staircase.



**TOP SHELF**  
Above: A bookcase displays a library collected over the years. Right: The Yurmans found their vintage Danish dining room table—which once belonged to Isak Dinesen—in Copenhagen. Sybil's *Blue Houses* (2005) painting is displayed over a '60s rosewood credenza by Danish designer H. Rosengren Hansen.



**T**HE YURMANS have lived downtown since 1978, two years before they officially launched their brand with funds from selling pieces at craft fairs and from the sale of Sybil's artwork. She was having a good run, and they seeded the launch of the new company partly from shows at prominent galleries such as the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Their son, Evan, was born in 1982. The family opened their first boutique, on New York's Madison Avenue, in 1999 and a few years later moved to their current loft, which became their private haven. Evan Yurman, now 34 and chief design director at the company, lives with his wife, Ku-Ling Siegel, a filmmaker, and their three children blocks away. The kids have their own art table and space here for sleepovers. The company headquarters are also nearby. "It was never about us being in business," Sybil says. "It was just about being able to work together."

After buying the place next door, in 2016, the Yurmans deliberately did not combine the two units; each has its own attention-getting minimalist staircase and wall of west-facing windows in the seven-story former warehouse building, which dates to 1909. The first loft also possesses skylights and several foot-thick concrete dividing walls that lend a tough elegance to the Yurmans' Danish modern furniture—Finn Juhl, Jørgen Hansen, Ole Wanscher and Hans Wegner are represented, among others—along with low-slung Italian sofas by Giovanni Offredi. The previous owner completed an extensive renovation with Manhattan-based Rogers Marvel Architects. Arranged over every available surface in the loosely defined rooms are pre-Columbian figures, tiny bronze Buddhas, 18th-century French porcelain, Japanese lacquer boxes with tasseled silk cords, a portrait of George Washington from a framer's workshop in Basel, Switzerland, and other rare finds. Several larger pieces, including a bodhisattva statue, an early-20th-century African antelope carving and two Fang masks from Gabon, serve as architectural totems against the smooth plaster walls. Japanese metalwork and 20th-century Scandinavian ceramics, including hare's-fur glazed pieces by Berndt Friberg, are favorites. "It's great going around to antique stores and saying, 'Oh, I like that—let's own that,'" says David, taking a walk around the living room. "For a long time, we couldn't."

In the dining area, he surveys one of their biggest prizes, a vintage Danish table they bought in Copenhagen that once belonged to Isak Dinesen. "I think the Danes nailed furniture," David says. "They are so steeped in craft. It's an apprenticeship—before you are a furniture maker, you're a journeyman. That's what we do, too. And it's got to be comfortable," he adds, taking a gold bangle off his wife's wrist and working the clasp as he talks. "A chair you can get out of. But jewelry is different."

Upstairs, a terrace overlooking the Hudson River and much of downtown Manhattan has been planted in an arrangement of Scotch pine, hydrangea, sedum and a profusion of Japanese grasses. Sybil, an avid gardener, collaborated on it with landscape designer Ann Krupp. "We wanted the feeling of wilderness, with grasses, not a lot of flowers," she says. "In the winter and the rain we sit out here under the canopy. Sometimes we don't go to the country, because we

can stay out here." The couple has a second home in Amagansett, New York, built of Tennessee fieldstone and surrounded by trees. "It's like a Frank Lloyd Wright house on steroids," she says.

In the Hamptons, David is able to devote substantial hours to his horses—a pastime that has interested him since childhood. He keeps several in Amagansett for trail riding; a decade ago he took up reining, a colorful western form of dressage, and a few times a year he travels nationally for long weekends "with the cowboys and cowgirls," he says. Riding Chicken Enchilada, his expertly trained Western quarter horse, he has graduated in competition. "It takes a lot of practice, a lot of discipline," he says of the pursuit. "The whole experience is great for my head—it's so other."

He also escapes to his sculpture studio. "Very small," he says of his aerie. "Little jewelry, little sculptures, welding table, drawing table, a waxwork—very concise." In one corner is a bronze mother and child that has been sized up from several inches tall; sketches for Stax, one of the brand's most recent collections, cover the table, and a vintage Eames storage cabinet holds additional materials. David has re-embraced sculpting in the past year following the arrival of Forte as CEO in 2015, which freed up a significant amount of his time. "It felt right to start welding again," he says. "I do little figures, like [the ones] I did in high school. It's very immediate."

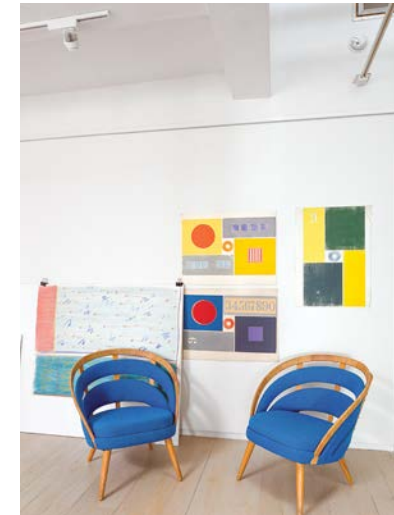
On the designer's bulletin board is a drawing he made of a cable bracelet. Yurman's interest in the form dates back to his days as an apprentice, when he would take Sybil on dates to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "These helix forms were everywhere," he recalls. "It was seminal for the ancients—the Peruvians had it, the Minoans had it, the Greeks, Romans, Scythians—it's truly a form that defines us."

He continues to direct a studio of 45 designers and craftspeople in the production of two annual collections, which are fabricated in a few workshops located around the world. His wife collaborates with him on their gold jewelry and creates the bridal line, following many years working on the marketing side. "And Sybil tweaks my designs," David adds. "She's such a noodle. But in a good way."

"My parents have always worked as a team," says Evan. The company's influential ad campaigns, for instance—shot by photographers including Peter Lindbergh, Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, and Bruce Weber, and featuring models such as Gisele Bündchen, Kate Moss and Natalia Vodianova in work shirts, bathing suits or not much at all—were born directly out of the couple's personalities. "It wasn't about a piece of jewelry," Sybil explains. "It was about a lifestyle and an ease and a casualness. It was how I wore my own jewelry and how David designed it for me. The models became a sit-in for my attitude. My sense of cheekiness and playfulness, zaniness and wildness."

"Are you zany, wild and cheeky?" her husband jokes, hugging her. "Yeah, you are," he says, laughing, as she looks on, deadpan. "I just wanted you to say it!"

"We're sculptors, we're entrepreneurs, and I think we're maker-builders," he says. "The thought of art being separate from craft—that's a mental construct. You're doing what you want to do, but then you have to find the market. Bob Dylan said it: 'You're gonna have to serve somebody.'" ●



**TRUE COLORS** Left: Two vintage chairs are displayed under prints by Sybil in the Yurmans' recently purchased loft, which they use as an art studio. Above: Sybil's brushes next to personal mementos including a taxidermied rooster named Willy.



**EASEL LIVING** "I fell in love with Sybil's paintings as much as I fell in love with her. Maybe more—depended on the day," says David, who was a sculptor's apprentice when he met Sybil in 1969 at the studio of artist Hans Van de Bovenkamp, where they both worked. Above: A 2005 painting in Sybil's new studio space, titled *Red Houses*.



**WELD DONE**  
Above and right: Jewelry designs and sculptures in David's studio.

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