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JEWELRY

From Idea to Heirloom: How a Custom Jewelry Piece Is Actually Made

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 9 min read

Most people have no idea what actually happens between the moment they describe a ring they're imagining and the day they slide it onto a finger. They picture something between magic and a factory. The reality is more interesting than either: custom jewelry is a hands-on process that moves through a series of deliberate stages, each of which can make or break the final piece.

I make custom and fine jewelry under my **Scott Ryan** line, working with **ethically sourced stones**, and before that I spent years selling and eventually helping manage at Kay Jewelers, where I learned the retail side of this business from the counter up. So I've seen custom jewelry from both ends — the customer's questions and the bench where the work actually gets done. This is how a piece really comes together, told from the maker's side.

It starts with a conversation, not a drawing

Every good custom piece begins with a **consultation**, and the best ones feel more like an interview than a sales pitch. Before I sketch anything, I need to understand who the piece is for, what it commemorates, how it'll be worn, and — just as important — the budget we're working within. A ring that gets worn every day through gardening and dishwashing needs different engineering than a piece that comes out twice a year.

This is also where I learn the story. The strongest heirloom pieces carry meaning: a grandmother's stone reset, a design echoing a place that matters, initials or a date hidden where only the wearer knows. My job in the consultation is to pull that story out and translate it into something buildable. I'll ask about metal preference, whether you like your jewelry to read bold or delicate, and how you feel about maintenance — because every choice has a trade-off, and honesty here prevents disappointment later.

A note on budget, since people are shy about it: telling me your real number isn't crude, it's the single most useful thing you can do. It lets me steer the design toward choices — metal, stone size,

complexity — that land where you want to be instead of designing something beautiful you can't afford.

Design and CAD: seeing it before it exists

Once I understand the goal, we move to **design**. This usually starts with hand sketches to nail down proportion and feel, then moves into **CAD** — computer-aided design — where the piece is built as a precise three-dimensional model.

CAD changed this craft for the better. It lets you rotate a photorealistic render, adjust a band's width by fractions of a millimeter, check how a stone sits, and confirm proportions before a single gram of metal is committed. You approve the design when it's still just data, which is exactly when changes are cheap and easy. Want the shoulders a touch lower or the halo slightly tighter? That's a five-minute edit on screen and a very expensive one in finished gold.

Some pieces — particularly organic, sculptural, or antique-style work — are still better designed and executed **entirely by hand at the bench**, which I'll come back to. But for most rings and settings, CAD gives us a shared, exact picture of the finished piece before we build it. When you approve that render, you know what you're getting.

Sourcing the stones — ethically

With the design locked, we source the **center stone and any accent stones**. This is where I'm most particular. Every stone I work with is **ethically sourced**, meaning I care about where it came from and how it got to my bench — whether that's a diamond with clear documentation of its origin, a responsibly mined colored gemstone, or a lab-grown stone.

Stone selection is where the FTC's old "four Cs" — **cut, color, clarity, and carat** — actually meet reality. Cut is the one most people underrate and the one I obsess over, because cut is what makes a stone come alive with light; a well-cut smaller stone will outshine a poorly cut larger one every time. I'll often present a few options in the same budget so you can see the trade-offs in person, because a grading report on paper and a stone under real light are two different experiences.

Sourcing timelines vary. A common diamond size and quality might be in hand in days; a specific colored gemstone or an unusual cut can take longer to find the right one. I'd rather wait for the right stone than settle, and I'll tell you honestly when patience will pay off.

From wax to metal: casting or hand-fabrication

Here's where the piece becomes physical, and there are two main roads.

The first is **lost-wax casting**, the workhorse of modern fine jewelry. The CAD model is used to produce a precise wax pattern (grown on a resin printer or milled), that wax is encased in a plaster-like investment, the wax is burned out to leave a cavity, and molten metal — gold, platinum, whatever we've chosen — is cast into that void. What comes out is a rough version of your piece that then needs extensive hand-finishing.

The second road is **hand-fabrication**, where the piece is built directly from raw metal — sheet, wire, and stock — by sawing, forming, and soldering components together at the bench. This is the older, more labor-intensive path, and for certain pieces it produces a density and character casting can't match. It's how a lot of truly one-of-a-kind and heirloom-caliber work gets made.

Neither approach is universally "better." Casting is efficient and excellent for detailed or repeatable designs; hand-fabrication shines for structural strength and singular, sculptural pieces. Part of my job is choosing the right method for what you're actually asking for.

Setting the stones

Once the metal piece exists and has been cleaned up, the stones go in — and **setting is where a lot of jewelry quietly succeeds or fails**. This is precision work done under magnification. The setter cuts tiny seats into the metal so each stone sits at the correct height and angle, then secures it with prongs, a bezel, channel walls, or beads of raised metal, depending on the design.

Good setting is invisible when it's right and obvious when it's wrong. Stones should sit level, secure, and evenly spaced, with prongs tight enough to hold for decades but shaped so they don't snag. A stone set a hair crooked, or prongs left slightly thin, is the difference between a piece that survives a lifetime and one that loses a diamond in year three. This is one of the stages where paying for real skill pays you back over the life of the piece.

Finishing: the difference you feel

Finishing is the stage customers underestimate and jewelers live and die by. After setting, the piece is refined through a sequence of filing, sanding, and polishing — or given a matte, brushed, hammered, or antiqued surface if the design calls for it. Edges are softened so the ring is comfortable, the inside of a band is polished smooth, and any engraving is added.

This is slow, meticulous work, and it's what separates a professional piece from a homemade one. The finish is the first thing your eye registers and the first thing your skin feels. A flawless mirror polish, crisp bright-cut detail, or a perfectly even satin surface is the signature of someone who cares — and it's often the last 10% of effort that delivers half the perceived quality.

Timelines and costs, honestly

Custom work takes longer and often costs a bit more than pulling a finished piece from a case, and it should — you're paying for design time, skilled labor, and something made to your exact specification. Here's a realistic view of the stages and typical timing. Treat these as practitioner ranges, not promises; a complex piece or a hard-to-find stone can extend any of them.

Stage	What happens	Typical time
Consultation	Define the vision, budget, and materials	1 session (plus follow-up)
Design & CAD	Sketches, 3D model, renders, your approval	A few days to about 2 weeks
Stone sourcing	Finding and approving the right stones	Days to a few weeks, stone-dependent
Wax & casting (or fabrication)	Producing the metal piece	About 1 to 2 weeks
Setting	Seating and securing every stone	A few days
Finishing & QC	Polishing, engraving, final inspection	A few days
Total	Idea to finished piece	Roughly 3 to 6+ weeks

On cost, the honest answer is that it depends almost entirely on **metal choice and stone selection**, which together usually dominate the price, followed by design complexity and labor. Platinum costs more than gold; a larger, higher-quality center stone can be most of the budget by itself; and intricate settings with many small stones add setting labor. A simple custom band and a highly detailed multi-stone piece can differ by an order of magnitude. This is exactly why the budget conversation up front matters so much — it lets me design **to** your number instead of surprising you at the end.

What makes a piece heirloom-quality

Not every well-made ring is an heirloom. The pieces that get handed down share a few traits, and I build toward them deliberately.

- **Sound construction.** Adequate metal weight, strong solder joints or a solid cast, and prongs and settings engineered to be re-tipped and maintained over decades rather than replaced.
- **Quality materials.** Solid precious metal and stones worth preserving — an heirloom is, in part, a store of real value.
- **Timeless design.** Trend-proof proportions that will look right on a grandchild, not just this season.

- **Serviceability.** Built so a competent jeweler can resize, re-tip, and re-polish it generations from now.
- **Meaning.** The story and craftsmanship that make someone *want* to keep and pass it on.

That last one can't be bought off a shelf, and it's the real reason people come to me for custom work. A finished custom piece isn't just an object — it's the consultation, the design, the ethically sourced stone, and the hours at the bench, all carrying a story forward. Done right, it outlives all of us. That's the whole point.

Key takeaways

- ② Custom jewelry moves through defined stages — consultation, design/CAD, stone sourcing, casting or fabrication, setting, and finishing — each of which affects the final piece.
- ② The consultation matters more than people think; sharing your real budget lets a maker design toward it instead of surprising you at the end.
- ② CAD lets you approve an exact 3D render while changes are still cheap, though some organic and antique-style pieces are still best built entirely by hand.
- ② Setting and finishing are where quality quietly succeeds or fails — precise stone setting and meticulous polishing are what make a piece last and feel professional.
- ② A realistic idea-to-heirloom timeline runs roughly 3 to 6+ weeks, with cost driven mainly by metal and stone choice, then design complexity and labor.
- ② Heirloom quality comes from sound construction, quality materials, timeless design, serviceability, and genuine meaning — not just a big stone.

Frequently asked questions

How long does custom jewelry take to make?

A typical custom piece runs roughly three to six weeks from consultation to finished product, depending on complexity and stone availability. Design and CAD take a few days to about two weeks, casting and setting add a couple of weeks, and sourcing an unusual stone can extend the timeline. Rush work is sometimes possible but the best results come from not rushing the bench.

Is custom jewelry more expensive than buying from a case?

It's often somewhat more, because you're paying for design time and skilled labor on a piece made to your exact specification. That said, cost is driven mostly by metal and stone choice, which you control — so a custom piece

can be built to almost any realistic budget. The value is that you get exactly what you want, made well, rather than a compromise from a display case.

What is CAD in jewelry making?

CAD, or computer-aided design, is software used to build a precise 3D model of your piece before any metal is committed. It lets you view photorealistic renders, adjust dimensions by fractions of a millimeter, and approve the design while changes are still easy and inexpensive. Once the model is approved it's used to produce the wax pattern for casting.

What does ethically sourced mean for gemstones?

It means caring about where a stone came from and how it reached the bench — diamonds with clear origin documentation, responsibly mined colored gemstones, or lab-grown stones. In my Scott Ryan work every stone is ethically sourced. It's about being able to answer honestly for a stone's provenance rather than treating that question as an afterthought.

What's the difference between casting and hand-fabrication?

Lost-wax casting uses a wax pattern to cast molten metal into a mold, and it's efficient and excellent for detailed or repeatable designs. Hand-fabrication builds the piece directly from raw metal — sheet and wire soldered together at the bench — and produces exceptional strength and character for one-of-a-kind work. Neither is universally better; the right choice depends on the specific design.

Can I use a stone from an old piece of jewelry in a custom design?

Yes, and it's one of the most meaningful things you can do. Resetting a grandmother's diamond or an inherited gemstone into a new design carries the story forward while giving it a form you'll actually wear. The stone is examined for condition first, since older stones sometimes have chips or wear that affect how they can be set.

What makes a piece of jewelry heirloom-quality?

Heirloom quality comes from sound construction, genuine precious materials, timeless design, and serviceability — the piece has to be built to be maintained and passed down over generations. Just as important is meaning: the craftsmanship and story that make someone want to keep it. A big stone alone doesn't make an heirloom; the way the whole piece is made and what it represents do.

How do I choose the right diamond or gemstone for my piece?

Consider the four Cs — cut, color, clarity, and carat — but don't underrate cut, which is what makes a stone come alive with light and is often where I focus first. A well-cut smaller stone frequently outshines a poorly cut larger one. Whenever possible, view options in person under real light, because a stone on paper and a stone in the hand are very different experiences.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.

