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London's rocking gem fest

By Suzy Menkes

LONDON

Don't mention the R-word — unless it is about rich red rubies, royal refinement or rocks that rock. Recession may be looming in Britain, with unemployment up and the economy on the slide, but London Jewellery Week kicked off with spectacular celebrations, from fireworks in the headquarters of the private bank Coutts to the cult architect Zaha Hadid showing a sculpted body piece embedded with Swarovski crystals.

And proving that money hasn't dried up as Prime Minister Gordon Brown reins in the super rich, the auction of Onassis gems, which fetched £6.8 million, or \$13.3 million, at Christie's last week, smashed jewelry sale records.

Some of the events were serendipitous. Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia, who had his glamorous aunt by marriage, Princess Michael of Kent, routing for him at his soirée, had no idea that London had launched a jewel season when he brought his hyper-colorful gems from his New York atelier to Partridge in Bond Street.

The royal-blood designer displayed a family amethyst that had left the Russia of the czars with his great-grandmother, Grand Duchess Vladimirovna. But it was worked into a modern, multicolored necklace with the gems hung on a hippie leather plait. The melding of old and new — for the guest list, as for the jewels — was the week's class act.

On the other side of town, Nadja Swarovski was bringing on the bling at Runway Rocks. Designers ranged from bravura jewelry specialists Shaun Leane and Johnny Rocket to the fashion wunderkind Christopher Kane (threading crystal ribbons through golden rings). They all showed different ways of embellishing the body: lighted with techno rubies by Hussein Chalayan; while the Indian designer Manish Arora created a multicolored skeleton worked on a bodysuit.



David Brook

The bold fashion statements — and a raucous presentation that seemed outmoded in the wobbly financial climate — tended to eclipse real jewelry talents, like Naomi Filmer's highly original crystals in a waterfall of human hair.

The inaugural Coutts London Jewellery Week (www.londonjewelleryweek.co.uk), in partnership with the London Development Agency, was energetic but unfocused. It encompassed anything from affordable engagement rings from Hatton Garden, the city's diamond district, to heritage pieces offered in the historic Burlington Arcade

shopping passage to 50 contemporary jewel designers on display at the Tower of London. A multitude of retailers, craft workshops and especially staged events created a spotty celebration of the city's offerings.

Yet the basic concept of focusing on jewelry — at the same time as London's Graduate Fashion Week of catwalk shows — proved just how dynamic England is about pushing for creativity with an inimitable cosmopolitan mix of haute, hip and hippie.

"Jennifer Lopez has got one like that — have you seen her wearing it?" asked Stephen Webster, the jewelry designer with a star-studded clientele and a rock 'n' roll attitude. His exceptional pieces included J-Lo's curry-colored Tiger's eye ring and a "shark's jaws" ring, its gold "teeth" whitened with pavé diamonds and clenching a smoky quartz stone.

Theo Fennell, who is in the process of remodeling his role to concentrate on one-off designs and on training a new generation, said that he admired student creativity at the Royal College of Art (where the company bestows annual awards), Central Saint Martins and Birmingham Institute of Art and Design.

"I love the idea of London jewelry week, but it is going to need time to mature," said Fennell. "But people are realizing that this town is the best for schools and best for young jewelry designers."



Theo Fennell



Stephen Webster

Among the jewelry creations on display last week in London were, from top, Naomi Filmer's "Hi-Hair Twinkle" at the Swarovski Runway Rocks event with crystals in a waterfall of human hair; Zaha Hadid's sculpted body piece with Swarovski crystals; Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia with his aunt, Princess Michael of Kent; an 18-carat white gold pavé brilliant cut white and black diamond and ruby snake trellis shield pendant by Theo Fennell, and Stephen Webster's shark's jaws ring with gold "teeth" whitened with pavé diamonds.

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A slide show of the jewelry that was shown in London.