

April 26, 1966

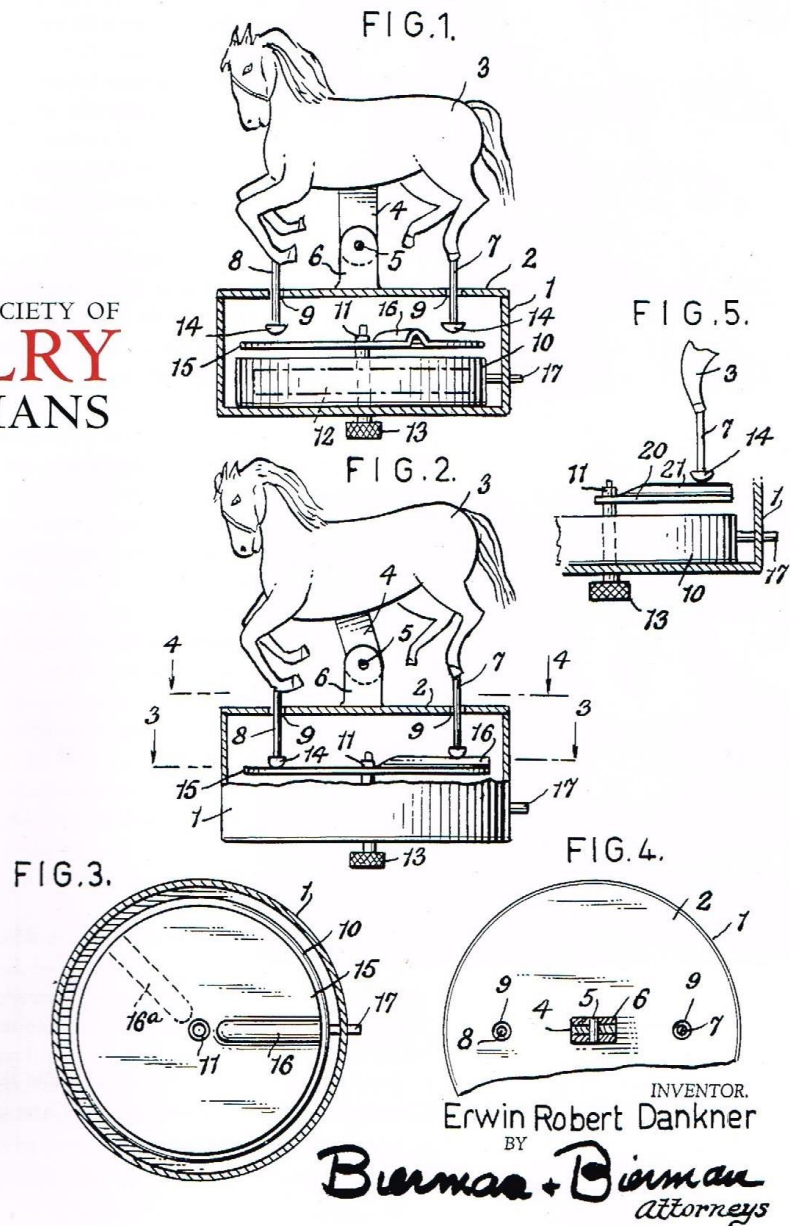
E. R. DANKNER

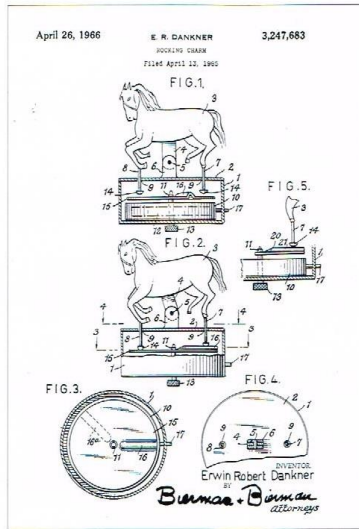
3,247,683

ROCKING CHARM

Filed April 13, 1965

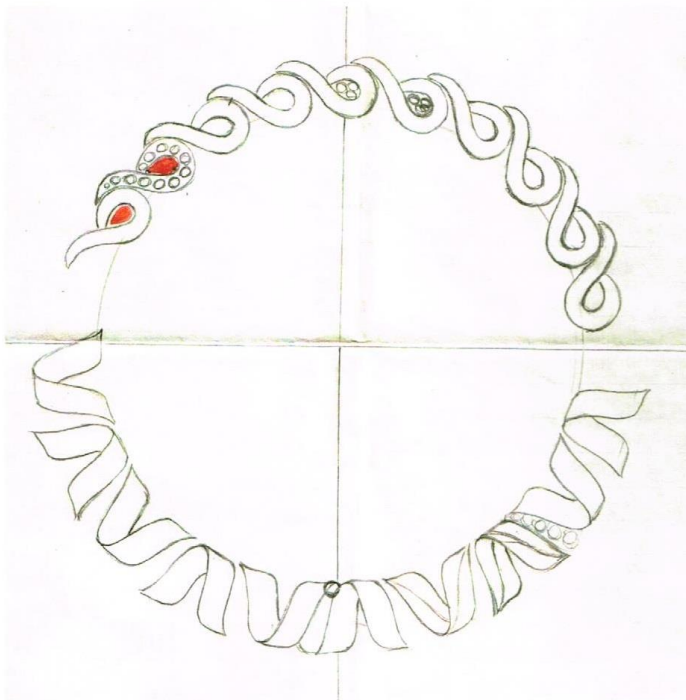
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ABOVE: Patent for Dankner's mechanical charm design, 1966.

BELOW: Robert Dankner. Sketch for two necklaces, c. 1980-1990.



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JEWELER




DANKNER: A NEW YORK JEWELER CLOSES

By Courtney Marhev

After over sixty years in New York's Jewelry District, Robert Dankner finally closed his manufacturing workshop last May (2014). At the height of its operation in the late 1970s, the Dankner Company employed as many as 27 people—jewelers, mold makers, setters, office managers, runners, and salesmen—but in the end, it was just 86-year-old Robert on his own, crafting sterling sculptures in a small upstairs shop on 47th Street, surrounded by old tools, stacks of catalogs, and thousands of molds. Although this was the end of an institution, it was unfortunately commonplace; just one more example of an undeniable trend in the New York jewelry industry. Local manufacturing in Manhattan's famed Diamond District has declined sharply since the 1980s, with New York-based craftsmen like Dankner replaced by cheaper production houses overseas; their shops taken over by brokers' offices.

Dankner's interesting story is in some ways typical of jewelry manufacturers of his era: an immigrant achieving the American dream through relentless hard work, built upon a solid foundation of craftsmanship learned in his home country. His father Henry Dankner was well-known as one of the finest jewelers

in Budapest, Hungary, who won awards and made pieces for the Habsburg Court. However, the onset of World War II dramatically changed the Dankner family's fortunes, as they were Jewish. In an extraordinary series of events, they managed to escape the Nazis and made it to Switzerland, where Henry found work as a jeweler and his two teenage sons trained at the bench. About four years later, the Dankner family immigrated to New York City. Henry saved his money while he worked as a model maker for the Hamilton Watch Company, and by 1951 he had founded his own jewelry business, "Henry Dankner," a manufacturing wholesale operation featuring original, fashionable designs. The company would also be known as Dankner & Sons, Dankner Originals, and, at the end, Dankner's RoDan Creations. It was a family business, with sons Robert Erwin and Anthony George working alongside their father. After their father's decline in health and death in the early 1970s, the brothers took over the business, which continued to prosper, pro-

	L 17	Carousel
	L 18	Hula Dancer w. 1 ruby 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ MM 1 sapphire 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ MM
	L 19	Dancing couple

ducing lines of jewelry each season for their traveling salesmen to sell across the country. They supplied large, luxury department stores like Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as many other fine independent jewelry stores.

Dankner's creations were marked with a wreath-encircled D. Robert's sketches and archived catalogs show lyrical, abstract, and organically-inspired suites of brooches, earrings and necklaces, which were typically cast and finished by hand, and set with diamonds and other precious stones. Dankner innovated designs in yellow and white gold before it emerged as a widespread trend in the 1980s. Recalling meetings with more than one buyer, Robert said, "The buyers were leery at first, because they were not used to both yellow and white gold being used in one piece. But the trend caught on because the play-of-light and the contrast looked beautiful, and the pieces matched everything." The Dankner Company also became known for their vast array of charms for every interest and occasion. Perhaps the company's most remarkable works were their Living Charms, which utilized mechanical watch movements to make small, enameled dancers spin, hearts beat, and horses run, among other delightful conceits.

From the 1980s to the 2000s, business for jewelry manufacturing in New York slowed, and Dankner's business was no exception. Numerous factors played a part: economic downturn, jobs moving overseas, and evolving technology. Already in many ways a vestige of time gone by, Robert Dankner officially retired as a bench jeweler at the end of April, 2014. He spoke of having creative energy, and plans of attending art school to focus on painting, and getting back to the design fundamentals that always inspired him.

Dankner's shows a microcosm of the evolution and decline of the jewelry manufacturing trade in New York. The building where Robert Dankner's final



ABOVE LEFT: Dankner stock book entries for mechanical charms c. 1965-1970.

ABOVE: An assortment of Dankner mechanical charms in 14-karat gold and enamel containing watch movements, c. 1965-1970.

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ABOVE: Henry Dankner & Sons
advertisement, c. 1980.

ABOVE RIGHT: Saks Fifth
Avenue advertisement featuring
Dankner jewelry, c. 1970.



This year, stir her yuletide cheer with ice! From the extraordinary
Dankner collection at SFA...diamond-studded jewelry of exceptional
design. To dazzle her ears, a radiant crest of pavé diamonds; \$3240.
To encircle her finger, the prominent shrimp design ring; \$1595. And
igniting her lapel, a swiggle of precious fire! \$1945. All set
in 14K gold. In Precious Jewelry Collections, Street Floor.
Today and tomorrow in New York. George Dankner will be
joining us from 12 to 4 each day.

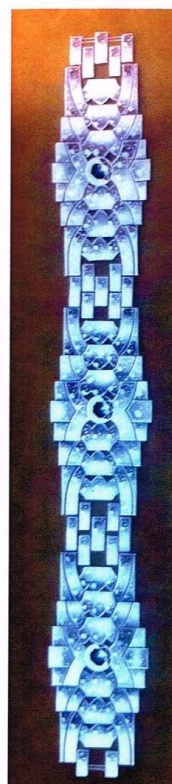
Saks Fifth Avenue

Saks Fifth Avenue at Rockefeller Center

workshop was located is just one of many around the District clearing out small jewelry producers in order to convert their workshops into office space, which tend to yield more rent with less hassle. Some small jewelry manufacturers on 47th Street were given notice to vacate due to changes in building ownership and management, while others around "the Street" have found their rent prices increased to the point of being prohibitive. In some buildings, like a new highrise with

a modern façade in the middle of 47th Street, casting is not allowed, and manufacturing is only accommodated for large companies on a limited basis. For many, this building is symbolic of a new 47th Street. There is a general sentiment of the "cleaning up" of the Diamond District, of clearing out dirty workshops with their dust, chemicals, and fumes, and all of the inherent building code implications.

Because of deregulation and cheap labor overseas, it no longer makes sense for large, profit-driven companies to produce standard items here in the United States, especially in Manhattan where overhead is so high. This crucial, industry-sustaining work has virtually disappeared. This loss of jobs, combined with economic downturn (arguably due to loss of production across industries nationwide), has resulted in many local jewelry manufacturers closing. Consequently, in a domino effect, many of the businesses which relied on them—such as vendors and casting houses—have also folded.



What is also being lost, what Robert Dankner represents, is an entire generation of trained craftsmen. With none of the standard work to practice on, there is no way to learn the trade, and so the new generation is much less equipped and less likely to ever achieve mastery at the bench. Without master smiths, there will be no one to do the work for the few manufacturers who remain, those who fulfill orders for high-end, custom pieces. The old masters like Dankner were what was left of the manufacturing industry after the standard work had gone, but now that generation is retiring, and there are few who can replace them.

With the departure of trained goldsmiths like Robert Dankner, and small independent workshops like his, we are witnessing the end of an era in the jewelry industry of New York. This is the city that, throughout the twentieth century, supplied the vast majority of inventory to the entire United States, but now only accounts for a small percentage. The local manufacturers who remain need to either adapt their professions, or find independent avenues to the end consumer if they are to have any hope of endurance.

The Dankner company legacy can be seen in its archives: molds, binders, catalogs, and shoeboxes of clippings and designs, all bequeathed to the Library at the Fashion Institute of Technology in downtown New York, where it has been properly preserved and organized for students of jewelry design to explore; where they can see how a jewelry business was run in mid-twentieth century in New York.

ABOVE LEFT: Page from Dankner Originals catalog, c. 1980.

ABOVE: Henry Dankner. Designs for diamond bracelets, hand-painted on Lucite, c. 1930-1940.