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Alex Gulko works on a wax-ring prototype in his custom jewelry shop.

Jewelry reflects Ukrainian insight

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In a beechwood and glass case at jeweler Alex Gulko's studio, there's a small, delicate brooch, "Butterfly Under Sunset." Gold rays swim out from a pearl sun, the piece reflecting both the precision of an engineer and the grace of an artist.

In his native Ukraine, 43-year-old Gulko trained as an electrical engineer, but jewelry making gradually moved from avocation to full-time work.

"First, I found that it gives me more creativity," says Gulko. "Second, I found I like art, and instead of being logical like engineering, it's something more spiritual. It also gave me the freedom to be self employed."

Gulko recently opened his eponymously named shop at 314 S. Ashley St., where *Rage of the Age* used to be until it closed in February.

Initially, however, Gulko apprenticed to a teacher who had learned from his own father, an artisan in the workshops of Carl Faberge, jeweler to the Russian royal family and maker of those fabulous eggs.

Later, Gulko took painting and sculpture lessons from a professor at Ukrainian State University. He'd think about becoming a

sculptor but realize jewelry design his real love. Eventually, his work would be part of several state exhibitions and be bought by the Ukrainian Museum of State Treasure.

But it was a hard life. To get materials, Gulko had to bribe officials with things like earrings. Obtaining studio space was difficult, as it was state controlled.

When the Communist government toppled in 1991, Gulko worried about civil unrest. He kept gold and diamonds in his studio. What if the studio were raided? Inflation, sometimes running 1,000 percent, threatened economic existence.

"At many different levels, this affected my life," he now recalls. "It was like fighting with windmills."

By 1993, it was time to leave. He, his wife Svetlana and their two children joined members of her family in Ann Arbor. Here he worked at several jewelers, learning more technical details of jewelry and learning English.

In March, he opened Alex Gulko Custom Jewelry in a turn-of-the-century house. Only one room with a workshop in back, it nevertheless feels quite large, as Gulko designed neat, square cabinets to exactly fit the space, building them from light instead of dark

wood and lighting the whole space with halogen fixtures.

Many of his designs are sleek and contemporary, but a number are classic art nouveau. Russians missed the art nouveau period, as Lenin blocked European influence during the early 1920s, says Gulko. Now, though, Russians have discovered the period's waves and curls in a big way, and art nouveau has become very hot.

Several cases contain Gulko's most recent work: art nouveau curves mixed with contemporary angles. Most recently, he's noticed a trend to mix elaborate leaves and filigree of late 19th- and early 20th-century jewelry (think estate jewelry) with smooth contemporary lines. Several cases of rings, pins and earrings reflect what he's noticed.

If you visit Gulko's studio, don't miss the framed holographic pictures. Amazingly realistic, they include an elaborate collar made by an ancient Ukrainian tribe. The actual version, all 5 pounds of 14-carat gold, hangs in the Ukrainian Museum of Historic Treasure.

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