

# Paul Michael Design Blends Love of Art, Technology, and Pop Culture

By Jennifer Brozak

Photography by Greger Erickson

If there's any place in Pittsburgh where art and technology intersect, it's at Paul Michael Design in Lawrenceville.

The jewelry-design company's founder and lead designer, Paul Michael Bierker, has gained global recognition for his customized "geek" jewelry, which includes rings, pendants, bracelets, and earrings inspired by sci-fi, superhero, and fantasy pop culture.

"We've become world famous for our geek work, particularly because we focus on the needs of our customers," says Bierker. "We understand that there's an emotional attachment to what we do, and we appreciate people's passion for these items."

Bierker, 47, is a trained goldsmith and technologist with a BFA in jewelry design and manufacturing from the SUNY College at Buffalo. He started his business in 1988 in a home studio and then worked for Grafner Brothers, the legendary Liberty Avenue jewelry store that has since moved to Wexford.

In 2011, Bierker began sharing a space in Shadyside with two other designers. After a few years there, his business began to outgrow the shared space, prompting him to take the leap and venture out on his own. He opened his Lawrenceville store in the spring of 2015.

"Lawrenceville is just one of the coolest, most innovative, up-and-coming, and independent areas of Pittsburgh," says Bierker. "The neighborhood is a cornerstone of Pittsburgh's 'maker movement.'

I'm proud to be a part of this movement. We're innovators. We're entrepreneurs, not just sellers. This helps us give people what they want."

In addition to his "geek" jewelry, family crest rings have been growing increasingly popular at his store, notes Bierker. "Everything is so impersonal and homogenized these days, and I think that there's just a void in people's lives right now," he explains. "These rings allow our customers to hearken back to the traditions of family and honor both their past and their future."

As with all of his other pieces, Bierker collaborates with each customer to design the heraldic rings. He'll research a family's specific coat of arms and present a computerized design so that customers can visualize the finished product. From inception to completion, each piece takes about 10 days to create, and can cost anywhere from around \$300 to \$3,000, depending on the materials used. No matter what he's creating, Bierker makes it a point to work within customers' budgets, giving them firm pricing up front.



“Each ring is unique, and the best way to create a product is to collaborate with—not combat—the customer,” he explains.

He’ll design and create anything a customer wants, as long as it’s not offensive or derogatory, he says. He estimates that he’s sold his jewelry to customers in 38 different countries. “No one should have to settle for what they don’t want,” he adds. “Our creativity and our technology can bring any design the customer wants to light.”

Using a mix of old-world craftsmanship, computer-aided design, and 3D printing technology, Bierker is able to create one-of-a-kind jewelry that inspires passion and evokes emotion among his customers. He says he’ll work with any metal but enjoys 18- and 22-karat gold the most: “Gold is a metal that just talks to you when you’re working with it. There’s nothing like it.”

His bridal business is booming, as are his Star Wars pieces, thanks in part to *The Force Awakens*, the seventh installment in the Star Wars movie franchise. A typical engagement ring can cost anywhere from \$1,000 to \$20,000, although he’s sold pieces priced anywhere from \$50 to \$50,000. An R2D2-inspired engagement ring in 14-karat white

Paul Michael Bierker

gold with a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -carat diamond costs around \$4,500, for example.

Bierker, who lives in Gibsonsia, says he wants to pull back the curtain on his industry—literally. His 1,500-square-foot store is wide open, allowing customers to witness the entire design process from start to finish.

“The jewelry industry has always been shrouded in mystery,” he says. “But we’re disruptors. We’re a high-tech studio, but we want this to be a personal experience for the customer—not just a transaction. It’s our customers who keep our business alive, and we’re grateful for that.”

Paul Michael Design is located at 3453 Butler Street in Lawrenceville. For more information, visit [paulmichaeldesign.com](http://paulmichaeldesign.com) or call 412-486-2016. 📍

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