

SECOND PLACE
BIG STORE DIVISION



IOWA CITY, IA

M.C. GINSBERG: OBJECTS OF ART



QUICK FACTS

URL: www.mcginsberg.com

Owner: Mark Ginsberg

Founded: Purchased from family in 1985

Opened feature location: 1987

Architect: William Nowysz

Tagline: "Desire defies reason"

Employees: 7 full-time, 4 interns

Top Brands: Roberto Coin, Mark Patterson, Steven Lagos, Jewels by Star, Spark, M.C. Ginsberg, Patek Philippe, Tag Heuer

Mark Ginsberg has a problem: traditional jewelry retailing. "I hate the retail jewelry industry," he says, "but I love the world of art."

Ginsberg, a fourth-generation jeweler, grew up as a self-described "retail circus freak" in his family's Midwest store. When his father died, he had the opportunity to purchase the store from his uncles, scrap what the store had been doing for 90 years and start over.

He left the mall and moved into a three-story brownstone in downtown Iowa City with a store founded on three principles: art, discovery and ingenuity. Customers treasure-hunt through drawers on the first floor while jewelers, artists and professionals of all kinds utilize the state-of-the-art technology upstairs. As Ginsberg says, "People don't really need anything we sell, so why not theater? Why not drama?"



STORE HIGHLIGHTS

Jewelry Drawers

Every piece of jewelry at M.C. Ginsberg is considered to be a treasure, and as such, each is hidden, seemingly randomly, in a series of cherry-wood drawers. Rather than peering through showcases, customers must search through the drawers for the item they want. Each drawer includes a small diorama, with props like fishnet stockings or a small violin, depending on the mood of the drawer.



"It seems to me that we've all forgotten what it was like to be a virgin," Ginsberg says. "To that point, I want to raise the anticipation level back to where it's palpable. If you come into our store and get excited, or your heart beats a little faster, that's a good thing." As a bonus, the drawer system puts the sales associate on the same side of the showcase as the client.

Upstairs Studio and Classroom

The second floor serves as an exhibit space for student work and the creations of working artists from around the world, including jewelry, ceramics, photography and metals. The space is also a classroom.

Last fall, Ginsberg became an adjunct professor, partnering with the University of Iowa to develop an MFA student practicum — the first of its kind in the nation. Students were allowed access to the \$500,000 worth of high-tech equipment used by the store's staff, and were mentored along the way by Ginsberg on business principles. "It's not a typical co-working environment — it's open, where you have medicine interacting with studio arts, or film studies, or physics," Ginsberg says.

Cosmopolitan Experience

In keeping with his penchant for drama, Ginsberg takes everything up a notch for customers. “You’re not renting a video here, you’re going to Broadway,” he says. Customers are treated to espresso, wine or champagne, and they are encouraged to sit down and have a conversation — possibly on the walkout patio on the rooftop overlooking downtown, which also features a gas grill. First-time customers will receive a full tour of all three floors. “It’s a much more cosmopolitan experience than you’ll find in traditional retail stores,” Ginsberg notes.

Musical Connection

Like the jewelry and art displayed inside the store, music is M.C. Ginsberg’s mouthpiece to the world outside the showroom. Every Friday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., live musicians perform outside the store. Ginsberg also has five pianos bolted to the sidewalks around the downtown area from March through November. “The music seems to hit people’s radar whether they come into the store or not — but generally, people eventually come in and walk through the space,” he says. “It’s the common language of the globe. And it gives me a chance to have my own bully pulpit. I’m paying for the stage, I might as well use it.” Ginsberg also co-founded the Iowa City Jazz Festival, now in its 20th year, which attracts an audience of 50,000 and features some of the world’s biggest names in jazz.

Full Health Insurance for Staff

While some employers pay partial health insurance, not many cover staff health insurance costs completely — and M.C. Ginsberg also provides 401K matching. It’s not cheap, but there’s a method to Mark Ginsberg’s madness: “I hate turnover. I don’t mind people passing through on their way to another state and wanting to learn something, but our staff of seven hasn’t turned over in 20 years.” Ginsberg says health care is a persuasive tool that helps him attract high quality people who are creative, motivated and willing to disagree with him on behalf of the business. “Most businesses are trying to get off on the cheap — ‘let’s try to attract the highest quality for as little as we can.’ It’s a healthier environment when you don’t always have to worry about where you’ll find food, shelter and clothing.”

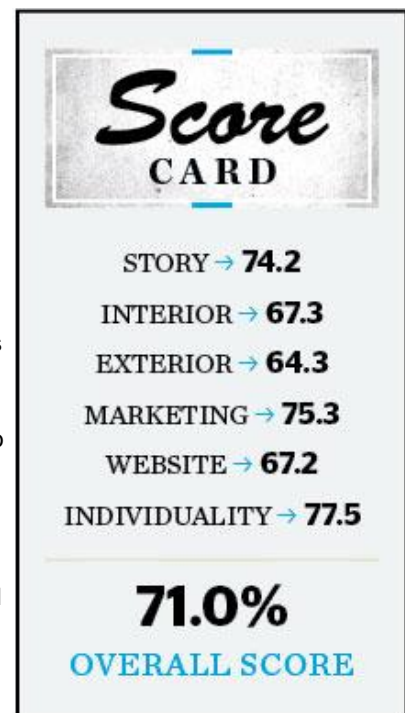
WHAT THE JUDGES SAY

Bruce Brigham: A totally unique entry exterior that is at once inviting and artistic. The drawer idea inside is unique, and it’s hard to believe it works so well! The store also has brand consistency. The space is filled (but not crowded) with lots of art, which gives it a lot of class.

Curtis Bennett: The name says it all. The store is an object of art filled with objects of incredible art, both from a sensory perspective as well as an opportunity to buy. Additionally its unique display cases showcase the art wonderfully and are themselves works of art.

Robin Rotenier: This is a technologically advanced and traditional store that is very much community-oriented. Very little pretension here except for what transpires most: a fierce desire to excel in design and service. The artist in residence program is one of the very innovative approaches the store seems to be breeding.

Glenn Rothman: Mark Ginsberg has elevated jewelry from the generic, to objects of art. He has set himself apart from the traditional retail jeweler by engaging local artists in his artist in residence program, providing business and creative mentorship in his retail space for young local artists. Using his second floor as a gallery and incubator for the artists, he houses original works for



viewing, for sale, and for specially curated exhibitions. M. C. Ginsberg leads the community through fun and cool projects.

Miho Koshido: Defying conventional rules, M.C. Ginsberg hides merchandise in a series of drawers and encourages customers to explore and seek out their own objects of art. The entire store appears to be the objects of art, from its cabinetry to exposed brick walls and conduits to displayed antique jewelers tools. It is truly a unique sensory experience. Their involvement in local community is also exemplary!

TRY THIS

Jewelry As Art

Advertise on the back cover of your local performing-arts venue program. Ginsberg started with a 10-year contract to advertise on the back cover. The move worked, slowly but surely attracting increasing numbers of customers who viewed jewelry not as a commodity, but as artwork.

SHOP TALK

True Tales

The M.C. Ginsberg staff had been working with a young couple who were going to be engaged. The boyfriend let staff know he wanted to do something over the top to make his proposal a surprise. The staff made notes so he could secretly order the ring. The couple came in again and the staff pretended to show a sample ring, when it was in fact the custom-ordered ring. Fitting perfectly, the boyfriend knelt down and proposed. The couple's families were on the second floor, watching on a big screen. Staff popped champagne and everyone toasted their engagement.

Play List

Cotton Fields by Lead Belly Turn, Turn, Turn! by Pete Seeger Crazy by Patsy Cline Knockin' on Heaven's Door by Bob Dylan

"Music should trip you emotionally," Ginsberg says. "I want it to be welcoming yet push the boundaries. Art is not meant to be wallpaper, it should provoke discussion."