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There's So Much More to Neil Lane Than 'The Bachelor'

From Brooklyn to Paris to Beverly Hills, the most recognizable jeweler in America is an artist at heart.



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The latest "Bachelorette," Michelle Young, received this Neil Lane ring from fiancé Nayte Olukoya. Designed by Lane and made by hand, the platinum and diamond ring features a pear-shaped diamond center stone with tapered baguette side stones and 46 round brilliant-cut diamonds for a total 3 carats.

Los Angeles—Amid the holiday hustle and bustle in December, Season 18 “Bachelorette” Michelle Young got engaged to contestant Nayte Olukoya.

Olukoya popped the question in time-honored “Bachelor” franchise tradition—with a Neil Lane ring, picked out on camera with the help of the designer.

If “The Bachelor,” “The Bachelorette,” and spin-off “Bachelor in Paradise” are America’s favorite (reality television) pastime, then Neil Lane is arguably the most well-known jeweler in the country, popping up reliably on television screens for more than a decade.

The recognition has garnered the Beverly Hills jeweler a mass brand via a partnership with Kay Jewelers, so brides- and grooms-to-be around the United States can incorporate Neil Lane into their own love stories.

But as Lane says himself, there are many facets to his career (pun not intended), and despite his widespread popularity, he still identifies most as an artist—just as he has since childhood in Marine Park, Brooklyn—working in the world of jewels.

He chatted with National Jeweler about his latest “Bachelorette” ring, his authentic relationship with the show contestants, and his journey from Brooklyn to Paris to Beverly Hills.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

On the latest “Bachelorette” engagement ring

Neil Lane: Nayte was particularly fascinated with the ring he chose because he loved the shape. The guys don’t know so much about rings [when I meet them on the show].

When I grew up, my mom had a pear-shaped ring. When I started making collections, I wanted to do an homage to that ring. When I lived in Paris, my early years in business were looking at wonderful old stones and settings, so my aesthetic was formed years ago. From vintage inspiration, I ask myself, “How do I bring that to the contemporary [era] and the future?”

That’s basically how I design—going back to the past, bringing it to the present, and figuring out how do I make it [last] in the future.

You don’t usually see pear-shaped diamonds in the Edwardian era, maybe the early 1920s but they became popular mid-century, [typically] as a [solitaire] pear shape. They were out of fashion in the 1980s.

I wanted to take something mid-century and make it more Art Deco or Edwardian-feeling with the tapered baguettes. I really love this ring. I managed to do a double row of diamonds [a halo from above with second row of diamonds visible in profile]. It harkens back to a little bit of the Jazz Age.

On the popularity of pear-shaped diamonds on recent “Bachelor” and “Bachelorette” seasons

NL: I can’t force [contestants to choose a ring] but I found by introducing pear shapes it’s really caught on. It’s like an almond shape so it mirrors people’s faces. Some of the greatest historical diamonds are pear-shaped, like the [Dresden Green](#).

Based on my mom, it has a sentimentality for me. The pear shape is one of the most popular shapes now for years, and it’s something I introduced into the show and Hollywood. [I’ve tried] to give an audience to different shapes and different designs. There used to be only one or two popular shapes—princess or round.

There's an opportunity in these different kinds of fancy shapes for people to find the ring of their dreams.

On his favorite “Bachelor” ring

NL: The one right now is my favorite. If you ask me about [Sean Lowe's ring](#) with the cushion that might be my favorite.

I'm attracted to the cushion shape because it has a romantic shape and harkens back to the 19th century. I like things that have meanings.



A view of the Neil Lane ring the most recent “Bachelorette” Michelle Young received from fiancé Nate Olukoya

On his Brooklyn and Parisian beginnings

NL: I grew up in Marine Park, Brooklyn. I went to school in Coney Island.

It was an amazing time for me as a little kid. It was open and free and exploratory, and people would throw things out in the street, and I would find them.

Vintage jewels are my teachers. I never went to school or the GIA or a guild to study design. I'm an artist. I've always been studying and collecting art and am inspired by multiple things before the rings come alive.

At 16 or 17, I started finding trinkets people threw out in the street in my neighborhood in the '70s and started going to thrift shops and Chinatown and looking at old jewels from the 1920s.

When I had money, I went to Paris and was riveted by everything I saw. That's when I really saw jewelry, in the windows in the Place Vendôme. That was mind boggling and I was really hooked. I had no idea about jewelry. I didn't know what I was looking at. Very few people would even give it to me in my hand to look at when I was 18 or 19. I would drool in the window.

I named my line [Neil Lane Couture](#) because I understood Parisian fashion and the act of putting things together by hand, [like my bespoke jewelry].

On working his way up

NL: I guess I still think I'm an artist. I don't think I'm a jeweler. I never understood the word jeweler. Jewelers are like people who sell work from other people or sell a gold chain. I always brought an element of creativity to what I did. Even my humble beginnings behind the counter—I was just doing my thing, selling at flea markets. I couldn't really make or design jewels. I didn't know how, and I didn't think I could. I just wanted to be an artist.

I've never not worked in jewelry. In my teens and twenties, I was selling bits and pieces of silver and enamel. It took me a while to grow up to diamonds and other things.

"Vintage jewels are my teachers." —Neil Lane

I was always in the world of jewels. People would come to me to design things and bring me their ancestral diamonds from the '20s and '30s that their parents or grandparents left them, and the original settings were all destroyed filigree platinum pieces, or maybe in the '70s or '80s they put them in gold. I redesigned those pieces for them.

On finding his niche in Hollywood

NL: I never watched TV when I started doing "The Bachelor." TV is a luxury for me.

[Prior to "The Bachelor"] I worked a lot with young Hollywood, like with Reese Witherspoon before she was Reese Witherspoon and Charlize Theron. So many people got their engagement rings from me. They were young starlets and they had good taste and it was a great time designing for them.

The rings and things I was selling were different from what was in the general public at the time. It was a very sort of small group of people shopping from me, mostly Hollywood. I didn't know much about American bridal then.

As I became more well-known, I started designing for De Beers and was one of their first designers when they opened retail shops in America. I had a desire to share what I was doing and share this aesthetic. I did lots of long diamond sautoirs and diamond chains, very Old Hollywood glamour.

On his partnership with Kay Jewelers

NL: My relationship with Kay Jewelers was wonderful for me because I took what I was doing exclusively in Hollywood to the masses. I wasn't selling big rocks; that wasn't my thing. It's more about design and details.

"Very few people would even give [jewelry] to me in my hand to look at when I was 18 or 19. I would drool in the window." —

Neil Lane



Neil Lane and Nate Olukoya

On his own “Bachelorette” and “Bachelor” drama

NL: I try to make [these engagement rings] as effortlessly streamlined as possible, but there’s a great deal of angst and perfectionism and heart and soul that goes into them. They take weeks to make and it’s fraught with decisions. It’s a job in itself, and a creative job.

On being the right fit for the television franchise

NL: I think they wanted someone who was a real person rather than a brand and could speak to the rings. I don’t think we knew what we were getting into at first because I didn’t know my role.

[It’s transitioned to me] helping [contestants] through their crises and helping them choose the ring. I become more of a father figure to them.

On having hunches on the winner

NL: Yeah, I do [get a feeling about which contestant will be the final one]. Sometimes I’m surprised.

Just like some of them are so disappointed when they aren’t chosen, sometimes I was rooting for them, too.

There’s definitely an intuition. It’s just subtle; sometimes you see the glint in their eye or the way something about the ring resonates. They might look at a ring and think of their mom’s ring.

A lot of it brings up difficult moments, too. A lot of them come from divorced families. I’ve met with guys who really had commitment issues because of coming from divorced families. Everything that I film doesn’t go on TV. There’s an intuition and an empathy [to the process].

“I guess I still think I’m an artist. I don’t think I’m a jeweler.”—Neil Lane

They’re going through the gamut of emotions. I see them at their best and their most vulnerable. They’re really in love and some of them do get really heartbroken.

It’s a little more glamorous, but it mirrors real relationships.

On couples shopping for engagement rings together vs. solo

NL: In the beginning of my career there were many more men shopping [for engagement rings] on their own, but a lot of couples shop together today. I don’t think any person can buy a ring for their significant other without having an inkling of what their beloved wants beforehand.

You can’t surprise people. People are stylish and their rings mean everything to them. Fashion, style, and a sense of oneself is all tied up in that ring. No more are the days when I first got to Hollywood and people would come to the counter and say, “I love my husband, but I hate my ring.” They wouldn’t think of redesigning it because they didn’t want to hurt their husband’s feelings, but they didn’t like their rings, they really didn’t.

Now they’ll let their beloved know: “I want a Neil Lane ring.”



Ashley Davis is the senior editor, fashion at National Jeweler, covering all things related to design, style and trends.