

Zúñiga with his one-of-a-kind aquamarine, diamond and 18K gold necklace (\$2,703).



Spanish Charm

Antonio Zúñiga's designs dazzle at Castilla y León Fashion Week

BY EMILY SASO

The showroom at the four-star Hotel Abba is packed with hundreds of buyers, journalists and fashionistas from all over the world. They have gathered here in the medieval city of Burgos, Spain — a hilly, quiet place two hours from Madrid — to view firsthand the design talent held within the region of Castilla y León. Spanish rolling gracefully and excitedly off their fast tongues, they talk loudly in anticipation of what they expect from this catwalk. Then the lights dim and the voices quiet. Only the hum of a single remaining spotlight can be heard and then that too goes out. Something beautiful is about to happen.

As the lights come on and the first statuesque model makes her debut all eyes are immediately drawn to the art gracing her neck. It sparkles and dazzles as its wearer strides down the runway. On a seat in the crowd a man smiles at the audience's oohs and ahhs. With his quiet gaze and almost shy demeanor, one would never guess that he was the designer behind the biggest jewellery hit of the opening show at Castilla y León Fashion Week.

This short necklace made of aquamarines and 18K gold (\$1,064) was a hit on the runway in Burgos, as was the long necklace made of grey quartz and gold plated silver (\$1,470 or \$1,740 with silk) and the aquamarine earrings with small diamonds in 18K gold (\$460).

It's not easy to get an interview with Antonio Zúñiga. However that's a good thing, at least for the man himself. During Castilla y León Fashion Week, which took place between October 7 and 9 in Burgos, the jewellery designer was flocked by international buyers all vying for a piece of his latest collection. Not bad for a man who never really intended on working in jewellery design in the first place.

"I actually studied law," says the handsome and quietly charming Zúñiga, surrounded by the bright lights of his display cases. "I didn't go to school for jewellery design at all. But it has been all around me since I was a child. My entire family has been in the jewellery business for many years — my father has been a jeweller for over 50 years."

While jewellery has always been familiar territory to Zúñiga, it wasn't until several years ago that he became interested in it as a profession. This interest, while certainly heavily influenced by both nature and nurture, was brought to the surface when Zúñiga decided to leave the law, which he found uninspiring and dull, and turn his love for diamonds and quartz into a career. That was over eight years ago, and he hasn't looked back.

Since that time, the designer developed a taste for other precious stones as well, which are everywhere in his collections. "My other favourites are aquamarines and tourmalines," says Zúñiga. "I also work with sapphires and I have another line that is a bit more commercial where I use stones like amethysts and semi-precious stones." The designer also uses onyx and silver in a line characterized by bold colours and even bolder design.



“I would like my brand to be recognized all over the world and for the work to just speak for itself.”

As far as the stones themselves, most come from Brazil, especially his aquamarines and tourmalines. “My diamonds come from Belgium,” he adds, “but are sourced from South Africa. My sapphires and rubies come from all over Asia.”

Zúñiga is devoted to keeping originality at the core of his pieces, and for now enjoys working with a small but industrious team that helps bring his visions to life. “I have four people who work with me to actually handcraft the jewellery. The pieces are exclusive and handmade. The design is the most important thing to me. My work is not for the masses but for a very small number of people. Each piece is unique and has its own personality just like the woman who wears them.”

While his whimsical, elegant styles certainly appeal to any woman with a discerning yet creative eye, middle-aged women are Zúñiga’s target market. “I sell to women in their 40’s and 50’s that dare to be a little more colourful and are willing to wear jewellery that is not so typically classic and traditional. My trademark is designing pieces with strong character, but that are also discreet at the same time. Bold but not ostentatious.”

Since the majority of the pieces range in price from \$300 to \$15,000 these women are also looking to invest in a little bit of luxury, even in times of economic uncertainty. “Spain has a good market for jewellery. Only lately, because of the economic crisis, has it become a bit more difficult. But even now it is still a good place to sell and to do business,” smiles Zúñiga. “The only part that is not quite as developed here as it could be is the marketing aspect. That can still improve.”

In good or bad economic times, it takes a great deal of effort for a burgeoning Spanish jewellery designer to make his mark, especially on an international stage dominated by renowned brands. “I was just in Moscow to see if there was a market for my jewellery and it was very challenging. I found that the Russian market is a bit too focused on established, famous brands,” says Zúñiga, shaking his head. “There’s not a lot of room for new talent.”



18K white gold, diamond and 48cts aquamarine necklace (\$10,727).



Necklace made of 18K gold and Australian opals (\$2,741).

As far as other markets for Zúñiga's wares, the designer is looking to branch out. Although he has his own shop in Valladolid, Spain, and his designs are sold in other boutiques in France, Hungary and Miami, he wants to continue to expand. "Of course, I would like to open a shop in Madrid. But I'm really focused on going international right now. I want to have more continuity in more fixed places such as Paris, for example. I'm interested in going to Eastern Europe because it's a growing market and there is a lot of interest in luxury jewellery there. I'm also interested in Germany but I'm being cautious because it's hard to break into that market because there is so much competition in that part of Europe."

When asked about Canada, his eyes grow large at the thought. "Of course! I would like to be in Canada soon as well, especially since the country has its own sources of diamonds. That would be wonderful. Really, I would like my brand to be recognized all over the world and for the work to just speak for itself."

To get things moving in these ambitious directions, Zúñiga is spreading the word about his line by attending as many fairs and tradeshow as he can. "Having the chance to meet with buyers in person is really important — it helps to form a personal relationship, which is good for business." Zúñiga has started to attract a great deal of attention from Spanish media as of late, which helps draw in buyers as well. "It takes some pressure off of me. I have had many articles written about me and the jewelley. Little by little people are starting to hear about what I do and they're coming to me, which is nice."

Before Zúñiga can move on to his next thought, a sophisticated looking woman rushes into his exhibition stall in a panic. She is about to go on air she says, and needs something beautiful to wear. Zúñiga rushes over to his display case and pulls out a dazzling gold and tourmaline creation, an ideal accessory to play up her tanned skin and purple dress. The woman is elated, throws Zúñiga and all in his midst a kiss and is gone in a flash. "She is the biggest fashion journalist in Castilla y León," he says, unfazed but laughing at the scene that just unfolded. "And I guess she really likes my work." [CJ]

"Having the chance to meet with buyers in person is really important — it helps to form a personal relationship, which is good for business."