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chains of command

No longer mere vehicles for displaying gems, chains are now insinuating their way into the spotlight.

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Photographs by Mike Diver.

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Clockwise from above: Lucie Heskett-Brem Gold Serpent necklace, £18,500. On upper arm: Bulgari Bulgari gold and onyx necklace, £1,790, and gold and opaque stone necklace, £13,170, both by Bulgari. On neck: Elsa Peretti diamond mesh collar for Tiffany, £10,000. Left little finger: Lucie Heskett-Brem gold Troubadour ring, £450. In hand: Gucci rose gold bracelet, £4,100. Right little finger: Carolina Bucci gold Moon Chain ring, £330. Forearm and through fingers: Roberto Coin Chic & Shine necklace and bracelet, £705-£3,150.

We all know how valuable connections are. But now they're worth their weight in gold as fine jewellery makes the most of its current links to fashion by celebrating the chain. So often regarded as jewellery's worthy workhorse – mere scaffolding from which to hang a jewel or gem – the chain itself has become a high-profile decorative feature incorporated into shoes, bags and belts and into the very structure and ornament of jewels themselves. Gems are wrapped in them, necklaces are draped, layered and fringed with them, earrings dangle with them and luscious drop pendants now have to share star billing with them.

Texas-based duo Anthony Nak has caused a sensation by pushing the boundaries of convention and blurring distinctions between jewellery and fashion. The designers encase intensely coloured, finely faceted gemstones in rock'n'rolling chunky chain frames, tangles of fine gold chain or cascading curtains of mixed chain links, creating contrasts in form and texture that are tactile and soft but with a contemporary edge – a perfect mix of salon and street style. Anthony Camargo, one half of Anthony Nak, explains, "Fluidity is important in our jewellery. Using chains in multiple sizes, shapes and metals frees it so it doesn't have a hard, 1980s look. We incorporate chains into all our designs, as our goal is to create jewellery that behaves like fabric. It moves with the body so it is a part of the person and not a piece of hardware." There is also something strangely emotive about Anthony Nak's pieces. Intensely jewel-like, yet fresh and unexpected, they conjure up images of lost treasure locked in a padlocked chest.

In the UK, the chain is one of the strongest themes in designer-jeweller Kirt Holmes' repertoire. She also uses the fluidity of links to make jewellery fabric-like, focusing on swooping chain "ladders" and draped loops. "Whereas with most conventional jewellery, the stones are the focus and the chain acts as a frame, I wanted to turn the concept on its head so that the stones highlight the chain's beauty. I've pushed the boundaries further by hand-oxidising the chain, resulting in a graduating rainbow of petrol blue, coral pink, burnished gold and gunmetal silver tones."

Chains ripple with associations