

Caught between two cultures

A woman who has her roots in East and West, she has refined her aesthetic sense and her business acumen, designing jewelry that links two worlds.

Dorotea Liguori remembers handling fistfuls of coral as a child, finding it in her pockets and in tin boxes around the house, playing with it as if it were a toy. The omnipresence of this unique gem-like material was due to her father, the charismatic Gennaro Liguori from Torre del Greco in Campania. Following in his own father's footsteps, he traded in coral, exporting the pink Italian variety to Japan in exchange for the larger, dark red Japanese variety so underrated in its home country. Gennaro Liguori was also the first man to bring cultivated pearls to Europe in the early 1920s--the so-called Mikimoto pearls named after the fisherman who developed them. As a child Dorotea did not see her father very much, since her parents never married, and she was not known as Dorotea, either, but as Yaeko, Japanese for "eight petals of wild cherry". Born in Kobe and raised by her mother, a simple country woman, and at various boarding schools around the country, Dorotea spent the first eighteen years of her life in Japan, seeing her father only sporadically and living a solitary life with a heightened state of awareness of her difference. "The mirror revealed to me indefinite traits. I was neither yellow or white. I was gray. Maybe I was truly ugly," she writes in self-doubt in her autobiography, *Yaeko-The Wild Cherry*.

In the book she refers to herself countless times as a "bastard daughter" and wonders how her father, mother or others can love her. When her father finally brought her back to his hometown of Torre del Greco, just outside Naples, her first impression of Italy was "dreadful," she recalls. "Everything was in ruins, it was 1946, the first of December," she continues as if it were yesterday, and "everyone was looking me up and down from my head to my toes. Who is this animal, they were thinking?" Dorotea says she did not buckle under the pressure and tried to be strong despite suddenly having to share a large house and entirely new customs with a father and uncle who, though exceedingly fond of her, were stiflingly overprotective. As Dorotea writes with insight in her autobiography, "Too little or too much love, these are two facets of the same selfishness."

The book, which is searingly honest, poetically describes her sense of bewilderment during her childhood, her failed marriage, her long periods of solitude, thwarted love stories and physical imperfections, and seems to have been an exercise in catharsis. Dorotea says she felt the need to write it because despite it all she is thoroughly "in love" with her past. As we talk, seated on the terrace of her villa in Capri (once pied-à-terre of German chancellor Bismarck) with its oriental-inspired garden and stream and its full-on view of the Bay of Naples, it seems evident that this at once tough and fragile Italo-Japanese woman is immensely privileged yet has endured a great deal of pain.

In her twenties, Dorotea fell madly in love with a man from Bologna, and would have had relationships or friendships with other men, including an American, but her demanding father and uncle thought "none of my suitors were good enough". In the end her uncle Amerigo and father decided that Dorotea should marry a man from a good traditional local family. She accepted without enthusiasm. The marriage brought two children but was "hell" for Dorotea. "I was not in love. I did not like anything about him." She says he married her for money, but sensing her rejection her husband became more and more irascible and the two lived separate lives, albeit under the same roof. When she finally found the courage to separate from him in the early 1970s she took over the pearl and coral business and found she could manage it not only well, but exceedingly well.

She was talented at other business dealings too: She opened the famous Sakura hotel in her home town of Torre del Greco in the 1970s and subsequently built a series of prestigious hotels in California and Arizona with her eldest son. Along with these successes came other difficult moments. Eight years ago, her eldest son died. She does not say how but the feeling of waste is palpable. "He was big and strong and had a huge collection of cars and boats," and also a keen business acumen. Now she lives with her younger son, who has a far softer nature. "He is calm, almost too calm," she says. When asked if he will continue to run the business his great-grandfather set up and his grandfather and mother have so tirelessly expanded, she says "That I would not know," turning away and curbing further discussion of the matter.

Aside from importing coral and pearls from Australia, Japan, China and Hong Kong, two years ago Dorotea set up her own line of jewelry, called simply DL. She creates opulent jewels with large semiprecious and precious gems and stones—including jade, amethyst, kunzite, onyx, lapis lazuli, turquoise, chalcedony and amber--and combines them with 18-karat gold and vintage brooches and other pieces she finds around the world. Prices start relatively low but can go as high as 250,000 euros for a necklace of large and unique naturally yellow pearls from Australia. As she shows us round her recently opened shop in Capri (she has another one in Torre del Greco) she explains that her decision to branch out into semiprecious and precious stones was based also on a business consideration: "Pearls cost a great deal of money, semiprecious stones cost less. They are more colorful and people tend to buy them more readily. And," she pauses with a slight smile, "they are fashionable--today you need to follow fashion." While we are talking she receives a call on her cell phone, and what seems like an amiable conversation soon reveals itself to be otherwise. "I will not pay...You made the mistake, you swindled me." She ends the conversation with a pleasant enough "Thank you" and "Goodbye," but it is clear that Dorotea Liguori does not suffer fools gladly and it is no surprise to discover that in 2000 she was voted one of the top forty female managers in the world by the US Star group.

Today Dorotea prefers China to Japan ("Japan has been so modernized, China still gives me a sense of the Orient") though she still goes to the latter for business, "but only business". She is very matter-of-fact about the sacrifices that being the great Gennaro Liguori's daughter have induced her to take. "I was the only heir, the only daughter," she says. "I had to take over. No one obliged me, but it was my duty." She now divides her time between New York ("for investments"), Torre del Greco ("the mother house," where her father first brought her in 1946) and Capri ("for holidays"). The rest of the time she travels the world to find stones and pearls.

In her autobiography she writes, "When I first arrived from Japan it was easier for me to move between my two cultures. Now not even I know which is the more important one. Often I find that my thoughts, actions, judgments are confused." However, at seventy-six, Dorotea seems to have found some sort of balance. She says she feels she "has shown my worth" and is "very pleased". And undoubtedly if Gennaro, the strong-willed and ingenious businessman, the most important man in Dorotea's life, the larger-than-life personality ("he was a great worker and a great smoker") were alive today he would be impressed by his daughter's achievements. The diminutive but forceful Yaeko-Dorotea has more than done him proud.