Jose Hess, 1933-2021,
CIBJO President and Jewellery Industry Giant

MILAN, ITALY: FEBRUARY 10, 2021 — CIBJO, the World Jewellery Confederation, pays tribute to Jose Hess, the world-renowned jewellery designer and beloved industry leader, who served as the organisation’s first American President from 1997 through 2000. He died peacefully at his home in St. Augustine, Florida, on February 9, 2021, at age 87.

He was born in 1933 into a Jewish family, which left Nazi Germany in 1938, settling in Colombia, South America. It was on arrival there that, on his identity papers, an immigration official replaced his birth name “Josef” with “Jose,” and it was by the Spanish name he would be known for the remainder of his life. Jose got his start in the jewellery industry at age 14. Having left school temporarily to help his parents, who had both fallen ill, he found employment with a Viennese goldsmith who had also fled Nazi Germany. Jose would later tell of learning his craft the old-fashioned way, from melting gold through creating sheets or wire and making jewellery by hand, and learning how to set precious gems.

Jose immigrated to the United States at age 17 and worked at a series of jobs in the jewellery industry. Graduating high school, he took gemmology courses at GIA, and obtained a degree from the Mechanics Institute of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York.
After four years service in the U.S. military, Jose became a full-time jeweller, making models and handmade pieces for the renowned American designer David Webb.

In 1958 he set out on his own, enjoying early success with store owners who loved his designs. But few were prepared to sell the jewellery under his name, and Jose made it a mission to forge a new path in the industry, where branding and designer-driven products are key components.

The name Jose Hess became synonymous with fine jewellery design. In 1963, he won the first of his De Beers Diamonds International Awards, for a gold and diamond leaf pin. Over the years he was recognized many times, among them winning seven De Beers Diamonds International Awards, eight De Beers Diamonds Today Awards, two International Gold Corp. Certificate of Merits and an American Gem Trade Association Spectrum Award. His jewellery was often spotted on celebrities at red carpet events, and was featured by consumer magazines such as Modern Bride, Elle, In Style, Vogue and others.

Jose’s sense of devotion to jewellery extended beyond his craft to the people of his industry, to whom was devoted. In the United States he served on the Board of Directors of the Manufacturing Jewelers and Silversmiths of America (MJSA) and as President of both the Plumb Club and the 24 Karat Club of the City of New York.

In 1996 he was elected President of CIBJO, beginning the first of two consecutive two-year terms at the start of 1997, ending in December 2000. During this period he worked hard to nurture a new generation of leadership for the international jewellery business.

Jose’s commitment to the future of jewellery was absolute. He was a founder of both the American Jewelry Design Council and the Contemporary Jewelry Design Group, and was a guide to emerging young designers and a consultant for jewelry companies around the world. He taught at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, where helped create a framework course for jewellery students that is still offered today.

Jose was married for 33 years to Magdalena “Maggie” Hess, a renowned designer in her own right. She survives him along with four children – Lawrence, Francine, Aaron and Josef— and four grandchildren.

“Jose is a one of a handful of people that one can truly describe as having changed our industry, and he left it a better place,” said Gaetano Cavalieri, CIBJO’s current President. “In so many respects I owe my position to him, for it was he that more than 20 years ago insisted that, if I really wanted to make a mark, I needed to devote myself to public service. I succeeded him as president, but he never left my side. He was my role model, my mentor and my friend.”

“Jose was compassionate and generous, with a keen sense of humanity and community,” Dr. Cavalieri continued. “In so many ways he embodied the cosmopolitan industry of which we are all part, with a strong feeling of pride of where he came from and remarkable degree of comfort in all the places that life had taken him, from Europe to South America and then to the United States, which he loved dearly. He also was a brilliant jeweller, raising the level of our craft to fine art. Our thoughts are of him, and with Maggie and his family.”

May his memory be a blessing.

CIBJO is the international jewellery confederation of national trade organisations. CIBJO’s purpose is to encourage harmonisation, promote international cooperation in the jewellery industry and to consider issues which concern the trade worldwide. CIBJO’s chief mission is to protect consumer confidence in the industry.