



THE goldsmith

Editor Gordon Hamme

This month I am giving over the editorial section to Ute Decker who has reported on the ethical debate at IJL and given a great deal of thought to her own position and the way forward for our industry. Ute and I would really appreciate feedback especially on her 10 point plan of action. If there is support for her ideas the Goldsmith magazine will facilitate forums and meetings.

THE GREAT DEBATE – WORKING TOGETHER TO DELIVER AN ETHICAL SUPPLY CHAIN

7 September 2009 at the International Jewellery London Fair, report by Ute Decker.

As a studio jeweller striving to work in a sustainable way I was looking forward to the “Great Debate – Working Together to Deliver an Ethical Supply Chain” at IJL.

I was quite impressed with the momentum the undertaking to offer certified fair trade gold and silver has already gained.

The debate was hosted by the Birmingham Assay Office and chaired by Liz Barclay, presenter of BBC Radio 4’s flagship consumer programme “You and Yours”.

Testimony to how serious this issue is being taken across the jewellery sector was the wide range of top level participants in the forum. Champions of sustainable jewellery, charities, the Fairtrade Foundation and several ethical jewellers, were joined by the BJA, Birmingham Assay Office, Cookson, academics and representatives from some of the major mining companies such as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and AngloGold Ashanti.

Three points stood out for me.

Firstly, I was surprised that the debate opened with a discussion on whether it was possible to keep the supply chain of ethically responsible mined metals separate from the so called dirty gold/silver to guarantee traceability – since as a studio jeweller I am already working with 100% recycled silver. I can appreciate that it will be a mammoth task to do this on a large scale due to the continual gathering of metals from different sources around the globe into one homogenous product.

Yet, one might easily argue the opposite. At my ripe old age of 40 this argument sounded familiar: A few activists raise the alarm, awareness in the general public rises slowly to a critical point until industry is compelled to act.

As long as we think something is impossible – it will be. As this is a man-made problem, it is also within our power to change unsustainable ways of doing business. We have choices and can take small steps at a time towards progressive improvement.

Willie Hamilton, who recently joined the jewellery industry as Chief Executive of the Company of Master Jewellers after a career as senior executive at the Co-operative outlined this approach very eloquently when he reminded the forum that ten years ago the food industry was facing the same problems which many thought were impossible to overcome but the trend towards conscientious consumption leaves the jewellery industry no option but to find a solution or suffer the consequences.



Reticulated cuff in 100% recycled silver
by Ute Decker

A second topic raised in the debate was particularly encouraging to me. Proof that advances are being made was the progress report by Greg Valerio from Cred Sources and founding member of the Alliance for Responsible Mining who confirmed that third-party verified and certified Fair Trade gold is expected to be available from 2010.

To complement this major achievement, Greg Valerio then presented the first gold ring with the new “ethical” hallmark by the Assay office in Birmingham, said to be officially available to jewellers working with fair traded gold as of next year. This unveiling represented for me the accomplishment of a major milestone for the sustainable jewellery movement extending it from a small group of passionate activists into the realm of officially recognised mainstream.

The third major point that stood out for me touched upon the challenges ahead.

When a member of the Council for Responsible Jewellery talked about the development of their own certification standard, which seems less stringent and does not include traceability of metal I shared the concerns raised by several participants about the potential danger for consumer confusion with different certification standards and labels.

I could not agree more with the general consensus shared in the room on the need to educate consumers as well as jewellers and to avoid consumer confusion resulting in a loss of trust.

I came away from this debate wondering, with Fair Trade Certification and an “ethical” hallmark expected for 2010, how long it will take before awareness will have passed a critical point and consumers will ask the same questions about their silver and gold jewellery as they are asking today about diamonds. This means suppliers and makers have to get moving not to be left out in the rain and possibly do great damage to the image of the jewellery industry as a whole.

My experience as a studio jeweller striving to work ethically

I am a self-taught studio jeweller and have been making jewellery for myself and a small group of private clients for over ten years. When I decided to start selling my work to a wider audience this spring and set up my jewellery business in earnest the learning curve was steep.

During my extensive research I started reading about the environmental and social issues of jewellery.

I was appalled to learn about the severe social or environmental damage gold and silver mining causes; the extensive use of toxic chemicals such as cyanide, mercury and arsenic contaminating nearby soil and waterways which can work their way into the food chain and sicken people and animals for generations. The displacement of local inhabitants to make room for mines so massive that apparently some can be seen from space. If not responsibly mined these vast areas remain toxic wastelands.

The scale of the damage is illustrated by the more fathomable example of a single gold wedding ring which leaves in its wake at least 20 tons of mine waste laced with toxic chemicals.

I try to be mindful about everything I do including my work and its wider implications for our society and environment. Understanding that even as a small studio jeweller my work can have both a positive and negative impact on environmental, social and economic issues, I strive to minimise these negatives and maximise the positive impacts within my sphere of influence.

Working ethically is not an inconvenience – rather it underpins the entire ethos and concept of what my jewellery is all about. I would like the beauty of my pieces not to be only on the outside but to be an integral part; from the mindful choice of materials through to the careful hand-crafting of each individual piece in my studio.

So I started to investigate so-called ethical precious metals. I read about jewellers who were using ethical silver but none of my suppliers could provide such ethical silver.

Information was very difficult to find but the persistence in asking every person in the jewellery industry I met paid off when Gordon Hamme from the Goldsmith Magazine kindly suggested to get into touch with Greg Valerio from Cred Sources who has been supplying me with 100% recycled silver ever since.



Emotional topography ring in 100% recycled silver by Ute Decker

The quality and workability of this reclaimed silver is equal to any silver I used to buy in Hatton Garden. On my first order I compared the price for wire and sheet silver against the day price Cookson publishes on their website and to my pleasant surprise Cred's silver was even slightly cheaper.

Since then I have found more useful information on less toxic studio materials and practices. Including less toxic alternatives for resin as well as for pickle by using citric acid and rather than oxidising silver with liver of sulphur – eggs (free range, from the local farmers' market, of course) work just as well.

I have to admit, the initial research was time consuming and often frustrating, but now, harnessed with the relevant information, the way I work has changed little – only the provenance of the materials I use has.

Initial steps are not that difficult. Many steps are easy and did not require a lot of initial investment and links on my website share my research findings including suppliers and studio alternatives in the hope to encourage fellow jewellers.

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For me it is a perfect win-win situation. While quality and costs have remained equal, everybody wins; the environment, my customers' and my conscience as well as my own health by working with less toxic workbench alternatives.

From my own experience sharing a studio with several other jewellers, there are still a lot of toxic materials being poured down the sink. If only an optimistic 10% of workshops in London dispose of their hazardous materials down the sink this way – the pollution we cause is extremely worrying.

Jewellers who strive to work in a sustainable way are passionate about what they are doing – the greatest challenge I see is overcoming the initial apathy and having information about alternatives easily available.

But committed as many of us are, there are still plenty of gaps for jewellers striving to work ethically; chain, findings, cut stones – precious and semi-precious – as well as castings are a particular challenge. For me this has thus far not been



Sculptural bracelet in 100% recycled silver by Ute Decker

an issue as I hand-craft most of these myself. And yet I am still desperately looking for 100% recycled silver tubing. I have asked ethical suppliers in the UK, US, France and Germany without much luck. This is my current challenge.

I believe in progressive improvement, adopting what is possible while lobbying our suppliers, and through them the mining companies, to provide more sustainable supplies. As a creative person, I have started looking into making my own tubing, should supplies of tubing from recycled silver remain unavailable.

Whenever I am about to buy or use a new material or process, I stop to consider whether this particular material is produced in a fashion that is compatible with my personal values. This extends beyond the actual pieces of jewellery: my post cards are printed on recycled paper with biodegradable ink, my packaging is recycled, my energy comes from Good Energy who generate power from 100% renewable sources. I am no saint, I do, within my humble sphere of influence, however, try to contribute my part to a more mindful presence rather than be part of the problem.

I am working as sustainably as possible because for me it is the right thing to do while the connected business advantage is a welcome side-effect.

Customers & colleagues

Since the film Blood Diamonds, awareness about the problems surrounding diamonds has become mainstream. Yet there is hardly any awareness among customers and jewellers about the environmental and social issues connected with the mining of precious metals and the manufacture of jewellery. Even myself, and I would consider myself environmentally mindful, knew little about these issues until relatively recently.

However, I believe awareness is slowly growing and is gaining momentum. Already over 100,000 people have signed on to the No Dirty Gold campaign's consumer pledge, calling on mining companies and jewellery retailers to clean up mining practices and produce gold in more responsible ways.

Consumers are increasingly concerned about what is behind the goods and services they are buying. This is particularly true for non-essential, emotive luxury items such as jewellery.

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Each individual shopper is, with every shopping decision, voting for one product over another, and the sum of these votes alone will determine the activities of suppliers to the market and we jewellers as intermediaries hold the key to offer consumers this choice.

On my website I do not shout about my use of recycled silver as I believe working ethically should not be one of the major selling points but rather an integral part of my jewellery.

At Treasure this June, my first selling exhibition, there was little opportunity to talk to visitors in more depth about the issues other than mentioning that my jewellery is made in 'ethical' silver. People appreciated this information but as the time did not allow further explanation, I suspect most people walked away wondering what this might mean.

Because my jewellery does invite attention, strangers in the theatre, in a gallery or even in cafés, approach me and from the initial compliment arises the opportunity for a dialogue which often expands into what it means to work ethically and the current practices of precious metal mining.

And without fail, people are just as appalled as I was initially. Especially the wedding ring illustration makes people think. I am absolutely positive, these people will not buy a piece of jewellery again without asking questions.

Jewellery is a largely emotional product and it is important to an increasing number of consumers that the story behind a piece is a positive one.

Clients sense how passionate I am about the integrity of my work which creates a human connection and trust. I like building relationships with my patrons – as I feel a strong connection to my finished pieces – each piece is a mindfully handcrafted labour of love – somehow I am sharing part of myself. It gives me a wonderful contentment to know the pieces have found a good home.

I particularly enjoy when the relationship extends beyond the moment of purchase, such as when one private collector invited me for dinner; another customer came to my home to make a small change to her commission, and another patron contacted me two months after Treasure to buy a piece she saw there – we talked over coffee for an hour.

People who buy directly from studio jewellers enjoy this relationship with a craftsman and are proud of their patronage of the arts and crafts. And certainly from the patrons who have bought pieces from me I sense that extra bit of contentment of giving patronage to a craftsman who works in an environmentally conscious manner.

Ethical jewellers and activists are working hard to raise awareness. Personally I feel not only the responsibility but also the honour of making a contribution to make a difference.

Several fashion and style journalists, trend forecasters as well as bloggers have asked me to send further details on this issue of responsible jewellery.

“Consumers are increasingly concerned about what is behind the goods and services they are buying.”

I believe it will not be long before customers will ask the same questions when buying silver or gold jewellery as they are now asking about diamonds.

For this reason I believe it to be essential to have the supply chains in place and certified for when the demand for these products will be more mainstream.

Let's think of a scenario of what it might be like in 10 years time if we start or rather continue taking positive steps today – what this future might look like – and then start working towards this outcome.

Yes, we can!

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Next steps

While sustainable jewellery is a global issue which needs to be tackled from mine to retail globally, I believe, there are several steps we as small studio jewellers can take to inform and provoke thoughts and action to advance the jewellery industry towards a more sustainable craft and business proposition at home in the UK. This is the beginning of a long-term project. Some of the points outlined below are already well-advanced while for other points I would love to garner support and cooperation from fellow jewellers and organisations in the next few months.

1. Lobbying of suppliers to offer an increasing choice of ethically-responsible sourced metals including chain, findings and casting services.
2. Officially-recognised third-party verified certification standards such as the one Greg Valerio is working on with the Fair Trade Foundation.
3. An "Ethical" Hallmark for gold is a fantastic boost for the trust in ethical jewellers and will help to reduce the possibility of diluting genuine efforts through "greenwash". A hallmark for ethical silver would be a welcome next step.
4. An ethical jewellery award. There are several awards or innovative design but an ethical retailer, ethical designer, ethical innovation, ethical champion award would encourage jewellers and raise general awareness.
5. Free Education, training and short courses for jewellers on practical steps on how to make one's practice more environmentally friendly.
6. Information exchange, depository of information and a place to network in the form of a website dedicated to the practical side of responsible jewellery making – providing know-how, tips and a list of suppliers plus events and exhibition listings, a blog/forum where members can ask and share suggestions covering issues from the jewellery studio & office to the showroom. Such an undertaking would benefit from the support by the major organisations such as the BJA, Goldsmiths' Company, Assay Offices, Crafts Council, etc, etc. not only for funding but also for the collective expertise and for the simple yet important show of support.
7. A quarterly round-table where ethical jewellers can meet, share information and support each other as well as plan events.
8. A high-profile show of ethical jewellery at the Coutts London Jewellery Week 2010 to raise awareness and support those pioneering ethical jewellers accompanied by a week of events, talks, discussions, practical workshops all around the subject.
9. A detailed list on what to do with hazardous studio waste, including storage, alternatives and regional addresses of where to bring this waste – distributed by all major organisations involved in jewellery and freely available on the websites of these organisations.
10. One tip per week in benchpeg on how to 'green' up your jewellery practice. The "Ethical" section so far has remained conspicuously empty, but it is there – ready for when we are. ■

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Twisted arm band in 100% recycled silver
by Ute Decker

