

## ARTISTRY

# More with modest materials

‘People used to scoff at wood or glass or bronze in fine jewelry, but now it’s more accepted,’ one gallerist said

BY SARAH ROYCE-GREENSILL

As creative director of the Parisian jewelry house Boucheron, Claire Choise has been on a quest to elevate mundane materials like pebbles and petals, a far cry from the diamonds and emeralds traditionally seen in Place Vendôme’s vitrines.

The latest substance to emerge from her innovation department was Cofalit: an industrial byproduct from asbestos waste, rendered inert through vitrification, the transformation of a substance into a glass. Commonly used for highway embankments, it has appeared, faceted and polished like glossy obsidian, in three new Jack de Boucheron Ultime designs, another entry in Ms. Choise’s efforts to, as she has said, “redefine what is precious.”

Boucheron is not alone. The German house Hemmerle is renowned for combining rare gemstones with humble materials such as iron, shells and wood — echoing the earliest forms of bodily adornments, albeit with five- or six-figure price tags. The Brazilian jeweler Silvia Furmanovich has championed Indigenous crafts by juxtaposing gold and gems with miniature carpets made by artisans in Uzbekistan, woven bamboo and wood marquetry by Amazon craftspeople. And Francesca Villa, who is based in Valenza, Italy, adds flair to little objects that she buys at flea markets and online marketplaces.

In an industry where pricing traditionally has been dictated by the cost of raw materials, these designers’ approaches are more akin to those of contemporary artists. And the recognized value of such creations, industry observers say, is derived from their distinctive artistic impact rather than the monetary cost of their components.

“The objects I incorporate are not traditionally considered valuable, but in my opinion their sentimental and historical value is worth more than gold or gemstones,” Ms. Villa said. The drawers in her atelier are full of vintage stamps, buttons and casino chips, handwritten letters and toy soldiers, which she upcycles into one-of-a-kind fine jewelry that retails for 4,000 to 12,000 euros (\$4,110 to \$12,330).

Each piece is sold with a certificate detailing the history and provenance of its materials. The more expensive designs feature rare found objects that required lengthy negotiations to acquire, Ms. Villa said, adding, “Sometimes it is difficult to persuade collectors to sell their unique possessions. I have to convince them that I will do justice to the object’s past.”

There are many more contemporary examples. Artist jewelers like Wendy Ramshaw and Adam Paxon used materials that are not considered precious and “there is a very serious market for their work, which commands high



prices,” the jewelry historian Joanna Hardy said. “In the 1970s and ’80s houses like Van Cleef & Arpels used a lot of wood; those pieces are highly sought-after on the secondhand market. Now, more mainstream brands are looking beyond traditional materials.”

In London, Louisa Guinness Gallery collaborates with contemporary artists to create limited-edition jewelry, continuing the concept of art jewelry as established in the mid-20th century by the sculptors Alexander Calder and Claude Lorraine.

Ms. Guinness’s gallery sells their own, along with pieces in silver, copper, porcelain, polyamide, glass and

crystal as well as in gold and diamonds designed by the likes of Cornelia Parker, Yinka Shonibare and Ron Arad.

“People have become less concerned about the raw materials as long as a piece is beautifully made,” Ms. Guinness said. “People used to scoff at wood or glass or bronze in fine jewelry, but now it’s more accepted.”

She likened the market for artists’ jewelry to that of contemporary art; she recalled a silver necklace by Calder that sold for \$2 million at Sotheby’s New York in 2013. “The cost of the materials is inconsequential,” she said. “Canvas and paint aren’t expensive, but a Pi-



caso is hugely valuable.”

Since Ms. Guinness established the gallery in 2003, advanced production techniques such as laser sintering and 3-D printing have enabled artists using commonplace materials to achieve finishes that could not have been achieved in the past. “A piece made in bronze might sell for a little bit less than the same design in gold — but not a lot less,” Ms. Guinness said.

Jane Collins, senior editor for accessories, footwear and jewelry at the trend forecasting organization WGSN, said that even outside the world of artists’ jewelry, designers were more frequently reaching for unconventional materials. The trend is driven partly by the public’s increasing desire for uniqueness, she said, and partly because of concerns about sustainability.

“The price of raw materials no longer has a huge impact on the perceived value of jewelry — the value is all in the design and craftsmanship,” she said. “I don’t think it matters if a designer is using wood, sea glass or even asbestos. It’s what they combine it with and the labor involved that make it valuable, especially when it comes to limited-edition or one-of-a-kind pieces.”

Meaningful design is the most powerful purchasing prerequisite for jewelry, Ms. Collins said, especially as customers want pieces that mark life events or relationships to reflect their own emotions. “Connecting to consumers through storytelling adds value and plays into the concept of an heirloom,” Ms. Collins said.

While houses like Boucheron and Hemmerle have used creative design to elevate materials traditionally considered trash into valuable treasures, other brands have found ways to extract literal treasure from the trash.

Two British brands, Lylie and 886 by The Royal Mint, are among the handful of jewelry businesses using gold recycled from electronic waste — a challenge when it comes to convincing customers of the emotional as well as the intrinsic value of discarded SIM cards and outdated laptops.

“The language needs to be developed,” said Sean Millard, chief growth officer at The Royal Mint, the enterprise owned by the British government that historically made coins and commemorative items. Acknowledging the less-than-luxurious connotations of the word “recycled,” he said that the Mint uses the

term “reclaimed gold.”

And Eliza Walter, the founder of Lylie, uses “salvaged.” (The Mint’s 886 line — its first jewelry collection, which debuted earlier this year — also sells jewelry made from AgAIN Silver, recovered from medical X-ray films by its manufacturer, Betts Metals.)

Just as other industry experts say that jewelry buyers now focus more on design than on the cost of a piece’s materials, Ms. Walter said young consumers perceive great value in the use of recycled gold.

She said that one potential Generation X investor in her brand had said that “if he was buying his wife a gift, he wouldn’t think about sustainability because it’s a treat and should be luxurious, with the inference that luxury means brand-new. Whereas for Generation Z, sustainability is the ultimate hallmark of luxury.”

## New creations

Clockwise from top left: Claude Lalanne necklace made of galvanized copper, seed pods and leaves; Francesca Villa necklace made with a flat German toy soldier; Silvia Furmanovich miniature carpet earrings; Lylie bracelet made with gold recycled from electronic waste; and Silvia Furmanovich marquetry earrings.

## Brands are looking beyond traditional materials.

## THE CHANGEMAKER

# Forging a new path

Through her consultancy, Christina T. Miller is working to make the jewelry world more sustainable — one step at a time

BY VIVIAN MORELLI

When Christina T. Miller was 18 and on a trip with her uncle, who knew she was interested in making jewelry, he asked if she knew anything about the origins of her materials. “At that age, I didn’t have an answer,” she said. “I didn’t even know I should be asking questions, but it stuck in my mind.”

And since 2015, Ms. Miller has been operating her own consulting agency, based outside Philadelphia, that tries to ensure that jewelry businesses are asking those kinds of questions in every corner of their operations.

“We call ourselves a sustainable jewelry consultancy,” she said. “We are supporting the jewelry industry in as many ways as we can as it becomes more sustainable, through a variety of ways — from direct one-on-one work with clients to supporting nonprofits that are working on on-the-ground improvements.”

No one can say with certainty that Ms. Miller’s agency is one of a kind, but some industry figures said they were not aware of other operations with such a broad scope. “Christina is quite unique,” Morgane Nzelemona, head of sustainable markets at the Alliance for Responsible Mining, wrote in an email. “She is clearly a front-runner in the U.S. and globally, and has a very special connection to this subject as she has been visiting the mines.”

Ms. Miller’s agency works with designers, suppliers and others within the jewelry industry’s supply chain, as well as with nonprofits and other organizations.

For example, her agency is involved with Zahabu Safi (in English, clean gold), a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo that is funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The goal of that project is to establish a conflict-free supply chain for gold, centered on miners in the east-



HANNAH YOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ern part of the country working manually or on a small scale.

“My consultancy’s work is developing the market among jewelers for this gold,” Ms. Miller said, in order to help those miners achieve a responsible business model. “The project is being developed in such a way that the supply chains should continue” once Zahabu Safi comes to an end, she added.

Ms. Miller’s clients have included brands such as Bliss Lau of New York and Barrio Neal of Philadelphia, as well as retailers like Robert Goodman Jewelers of Zionsville, Ind.

The designer Emily P. Wheeler, who runs her own jewelry company in Los Angeles, found Ms. Miller on Instagram

and began consulting with her a few months ago. “There is an overwhelming amount to learn around ethics and sustainability in the fine jewelry industry,” the designer wrote in an email. “I wanted help defining our goals and standards, so that we could implement better practices moving forward.”

Through Ms. Miller, Ms. Wheeler found out about Moyo Gems, a project that works with women miners in Tanzania and Kenya — where much of the mining is predominantly done manually, with limited equipment — tracking gemstones from miner to market.

“I created a version of our signature Chubby Rings with one of their garnets,” Ms. Wheeler wrote, adding that, “At the



moment, Christina is more focused on helping us source responsibly ourselves, rather than sourcing stones on our behalf.”

Ms. Miller’s background, however, certainly qualifies her to source gemstones. After that conversation with her uncle, she went on to earn a BFA in jewelry and metalsmithing from Millersville University in Pennsylvania and an MFA in jewelry and metals from East Carolina University in North Carolina. She also studied at the Le Arti Orafe jewelry school in Florence, Italy.

Ms. Miller spent much of her graduate career doing research, especially on the relationship between the mining industry and metal objects made by artisans. That led her, in 2004, to co-found Ethical Metalsmiths, a nonprofit promoting responsible jewelry practices.

But 11 years later, Ms. Miller stepped down from her leadership role at the organization and established her agency. “It was time to hand it over to someone else,” she said.

The consultancy now has two full-time staff members and one part-time worker. “It’s really been in the last five years that we’re making progress. For all sorts of reasons,” Ms. Miller said, noting that the agency has had more than 15 clients over the years. “I think the pandemic had also had a major impact, as we were all faced with the reality of how interconnected we are and how sensitive we are.”

She said she lost clients in early 2020 because some jewelry makers were worried about their income. “But at the

same time, we gained these nonprofit N.G.O. clients who weren’t traveling and had to allocate their budgets differently,” she said. “And that made an opportunity for us to be able to work with impacted communities and do webinars and bring their story more into mainstream.”

In April 2020, Ms. Miller started a program called Living Room Sessions, monthly conversations on responsible sourcing and sustainability that are held on Zoom and archived on the agency’s website, along with written summaries, allowing free access by the public.

A session in February 2021, for example, drew some 45 participants — including Toby Pomeroy, a jeweler and responsible jewelry advocate in Corvallis, Ore., and Danielle Keller Aviram, a writer and designer in Berlin — to discuss recycled gold, including the many meanings of the term, and the ways that using recycled gold creates its own impacts.

And in September, Ms. Miller introduced a six-part course, offered online for a \$97 fee, that includes a look back at how the jewelry industry developed, the origins of the materials that it uses and the ways in which individuals, businesses or organizations could become more sustainable moving forward.

Between working with individual clients and maintaining its online programs, the agency has been very busy, Ms. Miller said. (She declined to disclose the agency’s annual revenue, noting that its charges vary, depending on the type of client and the services that are required.)

“I would like to grow a little bit more, but I don’t want to be a huge company,” she said, although she added that she wants to develop more tools like the course, to make the agency’s work more broadly accessible.

“We’re not going to have the impact we need to have if all we’re doing is working one-on-one,” she said. “We can never reach enough people.”

## The road ahead

Christina T. Miller, far left, spent much of her graduate career researching the link between the mining industry and metal objects made by artisans. She founded a sustainable jewelry consultancy in 2015. One of her clients, Emily P. Wheeler, created a chubby ring featuring a responsibly sourced garnet, near left.