

FINANCIAL TIMES

How To Spend It Jewellery

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The new gold standard: meet the creatives making jewellery as diverse as it is dazzling

Social activism has stirred up new initiatives in the industry. It's well overdue



Victoria Woodcock DECEMBER 7 2020



After 15 years as an advertising creative director, a stint as a food stylist and recipe developer, and starting a family, [Lauren Harwell Godfrey](#) launched her eponymous line of fine jewellery three years ago. Today her designs, inspired by her African heritage, can be found on e-commerce platforms such as Farfetch, Goop and MatchesFashion; this month she has also launched on Net-a-Porter and Browns. It's not surprising her fledgling business is taking flight; her "colourful, geometric, maximalist" pieces stand out from the crowd, combining rainbow gemstones with bold forms.



Mateo New York gold and pearl Semi Circle earring, \$1,595, and Half Moon earring, \$575

The San Francisco-based designer says her work has been increasingly visible since the Black Lives Matter rallies prompted businesses to question their stand on diversity and inclusion. “I’ve had a lot more attention recently, and it has been a really amazing time for me professionally,” she explains. But her reaction is complex: “It’s the result of something really tragic, because of people dying.” As a result, she says, “It felt important to me to take all these eyes that I have on the work and do something positive, to give back.” Her gold and black onyx heart pendant, engraved with the words “We are One”, gives all profits – more than \$100,000 to date – to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).



Harwell Godfrey gold, diamond, emerald and onyx ring, \$10,800

Hers is a sentiment shared by many across the industry. The [Fifteen Percent Pledge](#) was created by Aurora James, the designer behind fashion label Brother Vellies, to help shine a light on other black-owned businesses. “Black people in the US make up nearly 15 per cent of the population,” states her campaign. “So, we are calling on major retailers to commit a minimum of 15 per cent of their shelf to black-owned businesses.” Consumers too are urged to look at their spending habits. “Buy black” is James’ message. “We believe that applying a measurable metric is critical to accountability.”

The response has been encouraging. Brands including Sephora and West Elm have taken the pledge, while magazines such as *Vogue* responded with articles like “29 Black Jewellery Designers who Deserve your Support and Investment” – a list that included Lagos-born Thelma West, Georg Jensen collaborator Jacqueline Rabun and New York’s TenThousandThings.

It meant a boost in visibility, but the long-term benefits are still a work in progress. In July, following a spike in interest, London-based ethical jeweller [Kassandra Lauren Gordon](#) said: “It’s nice, but what happens at Christmas time? What happens a year from now?” Earlier this summer, Gordon had written an open letter to the jewellery trade that suggested the business was “not welcoming to black people”, citing her own experiences in Hatton Garden.



Melanie Eddy gold faceted rings, from £1,600



Melanie Eddy gold, lapis lazuli and yellow-diamond drop earrings, POA

Looking to provoke practical, proactively antiracist action, she subsequently set up the Cassandra Lauren Gordon Fund with the aim of giving a £1,000 grant to 10 black people working in the jewellery industry who have faced financial hardship, especially in light of the current crisis. “The jewellery-designer community all over the world really showed up,” says Gordon, who raised more than £25,000, allowing her to extend the support to 21 jewellers, chosen by an independent panel that included jewellers Melanie Eddy, Satta Matturi and Alex Monroe, with the project administered by The Goldsmiths’ Centre. Her hope is that the initiative will garner sponsorship in the future. “It would be great to make the fund a yearly thing and have jewellery companies sponsor it – not only me fundraising,” says Gordon, who has also conducted a research project into the experiences of black British jewellers.

In the US, the BIPOC jewellers’ network penned a similar open letter to the industry to “demand equity in the jewellery industry”. At first and second place in its list of “long-term commitments to racial equity” were “invest in education and new/inclusive curriculum in schools and jewellery design programmes” and to “create more educational opportunities in both technical and artistic training for BIPOC designers”.



Mateo New York gold, multicoloured-sapphire and topaz Somewhere Over The Rainbow earrings, £1,595, from matchesfashion.com



Cassandra Lauren Gordon 22ct-gold vermeil and diamond-cut pink sapphire lo Moon ring, £249

“I don’t have any statistics but it’s pretty clear the BIPOC community is historically underrepresented in the fine-jewellery industry,” says Randi Molofsky, jewellery writer and co-founder of New York- and Los Angeles-based brand agency For Future Reference, which represents Harwell Godfrey. “It’s not only designers, but also salespeople, bench jewellers, stone cutters. [The situation] is abundantly clear walking around any industry event, whether it’s a trade show or a cocktail party. In our showroom, we represent six fine-jewellery brands and two of them are black women. That’s a rarity in this industry.”

In June, Molofsky and jeweller Brent Neale Winston set up the [Art Smith Memorial Scholarship Fund](#) – named after black midcentury jewellery designer Art Smith and aimed at supporting black students on the jewellery design course at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology. “It was good to see how quick and excited the response was,” she says. “We did the fundraising in about two days.” Fifty jewellery brands – including Harwell Godfrey and [Mateo New York](#), founded by Jamaican-born Matthew Harris – responded and together raised \$50,000, the threshold for opening an endowment. “It has now nearly doubled thanks to the support of other industry colleagues and donors.”



Matthew Harris of Mateo New York

“It’s a brilliant step in the right direction towards inclusivity and diversity,” says Harris – a self-taught jeweller who launched his line of modern, minimal jewels in 2009. “I’d love to see a true mentorship programme established, to help foster long-lasting businesses.”

For Bermuda-born, London-based jeweller and Central Saint Martins lecturer Melanie Eddy, the desire for better representation and such long-lasting change is the driving force behind the launch of a UK-based scholarship- and grant-giving body, the Jewellery Futures Fund, in collaboration with fellow jeweller Emefa Cole and jewellery editors Rachel Garrahan and Annabel Davidson – for which they are currently securing seed funding. “The main areas we are looking at are recruiting more students from black backgrounds into jewellery-design programmes and vocational courses, and setting up paid internships,” says Eddy, who creates her bold gold and gem-set pieces at The Goldsmiths’ Centre in Farringdon.



Emefa Cole silver and gold-leaf Vulcan ring, £1,400, and silver and gold-vermeil Shield ring, £1,100 © Casey Moore



Emefa Cole gold-leaf and bronze Erosion 1 ring, £1,850 © Simon Armitt

Also part of their collective vision is working with secondary-school-age children, raising awareness of career options in jewellery and metalwork. This is an area Cole, who was born in Ghana and is now based in London, is keen to be involved with. “The age of 11-16 is vital, but it’s also when you are not allowed to be an apprentice,” says the mother of two, whose work has just been added to the V&A’s collection. “Master jewellers can’t wait to be involved, to help to grow a future generation of craftsmen and women and change their direction in life.”

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This kind of systemic adjustment will, of course, take time. But for black jewellers already in the industry, how they are being represented now is something that should be addressed immediately. “I just wish to be treated like any other jeweller and not part of a subcategory,” says Cole. “The colour of our skin should not be the main reason to look at our work. I think it should be based solely on quality.”

Harris would like to avoid being referred to as a “black designer” altogether. “I am just a fine-jewellery designer or an artist. End of. I believe my talent supersedes my race or background.”

For Harwell Godfrey, identifying as a black jeweller has its benefits. “I like to show pictures of myself on my Instagram – not because I think I take such a great selfie, but so that people can see there’s a black person behind the brand. If other black people see that, then maybe they will think they could do this too.”