

Why museums bring more than kudos for jewellers

Designers have enjoyed both critical and commercial success from having their work on show at prestigious institutions



Designer Anna Hu at her Moscow State Historical Museum exhibition

For Taiwanese jewellery designer [Anna Hu](#), giving jewellery away proved unexpectedly lucrative.

In 2018, she donated her Red Magpie brooch to Moscow's State Historical Museum for its permanent collection. She then noticed a reaction in the market: sales to Russian clients increased by 20 per cent, Hu says, including to art collectors, entrepreneurs and philanthropists — “the top 2 per cent of the most important clients in the world”.

As these Russian collectors often travel to Monaco, Hu now plans to expand her European clientele to their friends — by setting up a salon in the principality's fabled Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo this year.

And Hu is not the only jeweller whose business has been boosted by having work in a museum's collection. According to Pierre Rainero, Cartier's director of image, style and heritage, having pieces in institutions such as the British Museum or the National Gallery of Australia gives “an emphasis to the artistic and cultural dimension of our [contemporary] production”. Before the pandemic, the millions of visitors these museums attracted would bring international exposure and fresh audiences to jewellers and their work.



Anna Hu's Red Magpie brooch was donated to the Moscow State Historical Museum

Consider the 3.7m visitors in the year to March 2020 to London's Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, where a peony brooch by [Cindy Chao](#) will make its debut in the permanent collection when the museum reopens. Then there are the 7m visitors a year to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), where a 1910 sapphire necklace by Louis Comfort Tiffany is on display.

“That doesn't mean that [people] are going to come and buy a piece of jewellery because of it,” says [Stephen Webster](#), whose Jewels Verne [fighting fish bracelet](#) has been in the V&A since 2014. But “it probably makes sense over a period”, he adds. “I could have sold it or I could have had it in my store, but I'd much rather have a piece that people can look at completely differently in among other treasures.”



Stephen Webster's Jewels Verne fighting fish bracelet

For Parisian jeweller [Lorenz Bäumer](#), having a bejewelled gold sword among Claude Monet's paintings at the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris "means that you are collectible", he says. "It totally changes the perspective of my clients and they are willing to spend more money because they think [my work] is a good investment." Bäumer also has pieces in Paris's Musée des Arts Décoratifs, including two *Camélia* rings made for Chanel.

Museums also discover jewellers by accident. [Emefa Cole](#)'s work, for example, was spotted by a V&A curator at the Handmade in Britain contemporary craft and design fair, and the museum now holds one of Cole's rings. Designer Shaun Leane's spiked silver mouthpiece *Repression* (1996) was put in the Fashion Museum Bath's permanent collection on the recommendation of Isabella Blow, the late magazine fashion editor.



Emefa Cole's Vulcan ring

Museums apply various criteria when selecting jewellery for their collections. Abraham Thomas, the Met's curator of modern architecture, design and decorative arts, takes a wide perspective on artistic merit. Alongside craftsmanship and use of materials he looks for "how this example of jewellery might relate to examples of sculpture, architecture, furniture", he says, as well as "jewellers who are responding to historical context or a broader cultural context".

Meanwhile, Cynthia Trope, associate curator of product design and decorative arts at New York's Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, focuses on innovative techniques or materials, rather than fabled names. Consider the two butterfly brooches from 2007 designed by Japanese lacquer artist Junichi Hakose for Van Cleef & Arpels, she says. They appealed as Hakose was "using these very old techniques and applying them here in western form by a western maker, so you get a very interesting combination of materials, different working techniques", says Trope.

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The vastness of museums' collections means not all pieces can go on display. Bäumer sees this as “a total waste of time and money”. Leane is sanguine that his pieces in the Met's archive have at least been in buzzy blockbuster exhibitions. His [Crown of Thorns](#) headpiece, for example, made it into the 2018 “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” show, which drew nearly 1.7m visitors, and the “Jewelry: The Body Transformed”

exhibition later in the year.

But American jeweller [Tess Sholom](#), who has works from the 1970s and 80s in the Met, as well as Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, says online collections have kickstarted her year-old gold jewellery business. “People are looking up who I am on the internet and coming across all these pieces in the Met,” she says, which “gives them the encouragement to venture forward with my things [now] because they are rather bold”.

While jewellers are not allowed to profit commercially from their museum pieces, there are subtle ways to exploit the link. Webster says having a bracelet in the V&A helped his application to exhibit at the annual Design Miami fair, where he has broadened his clientele.