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MAY 19, 2021

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The hunter-gatherers
making a living
from the land





Gold is the new green

One of the most sought-after metals in the world is at an all-time high, but there's a murkier side to all that mining. Sarah Royce-Greensill investigates and profiles the designers helping consumers to become more accountable for their purchases



ANCIENT Colombian civilisations covered the bodies of future kings in it; the Greeks used it in burial masks; Spandau Ballet devoted a song to it. Gold has entranced humankind for millennia: the earliest gold artefacts are believed to be 7,000 years old. Last year, the price of gold reached an all-time high, proof of our implicit faith in the precious metal. But the process of extracting it from the earth and refining it into its familiar lustrous form isn't always pretty.

Dangerous working conditions, child labour, pitiful pay and chemical poisoning still plague the industry. Illegal operations are rife and even regulated mines have environmental pitfalls, including pollution and deforestation. An estimated 20 tons of waste are generated to produce enough gold for one plain band and the livelihoods of an estimated 100 million people worldwide depend on artisanal and small-scale mining, which typically occurs in unsafe, illegal mines. Great efforts have been made to eliminate blood diamonds from the jewellery supply chain and, now, consumers are turning their attention to the provenance of their gold.

‘One ton of electronic waste yields 300g of gold, compared with less than 30g in each ton of ore’

Certified Fairmined and Fairtrade gold comes from artisanal mines that adhere to strict environmental standards, including the safe use of chemicals. Miners receive a fair price for the gold, with measures in place to protect their health and safety, eliminate child labour and create a positive impact on the wider community. Both organisations offer online directories where customers can find jewellers who work with Fairtrade or Fairmined gold. ‘It’s wonderful to know that a purchase of jewellery handcrafted with Fairmined gold makes a difference on a humanitarian level, improving the lives of so many people,’ says one such jeweller, London-based Thelma West.

Fairmined Ecological gold goes one step further by guaranteeing that no mercury or cyanide is used in the mining process. Currently, only two mines (in Mongolia and Peru) produce certified Fairmined Ecological gold. Arabel

Gold never loses its lustre or its strength, however many times it is refined and remade



Ancient methods meet modern standards: gold is increasingly judged for its provenance

Lebrusan, founder of ethical-jewellery brand Lebrusan Studio, offers Fairmined Ecological gold. ‘We know it’s possible to embrace the beautiful materials that come from the earth without harming our planet or compromising those who inhabit it,’ she says. However, she acknowledges its limitations. ‘By its nature, Fairmined Ecological gold is produced on a much smaller scale, so it’s often not as readily available. Sometimes, we find ourselves unable to source it at all. It also carries the highest price tag of all our gold options; it is by no means the cheapest way to produce an ethical jewel.’

As do many brands, Lebrusan Studio also offers the option of recycled gold. Gold has been recycled for generations—it can be repeatedly refined and re-used without sacrificing strength or lustre. Goldsmiths collect the tiniest scraps from their benches, as well as gold dust from carpets and surfaces. Previously, these morsels would have been melted and recast with newly mined gold, but, now, refineries offer 100% recycled gold. Tiffany & Co has pledged that, by 2025, 50% of its

precious metals will come from recycled sources. ‘It is a measure of the changing market that, only six years ago, sourcing recycled gold was a challenge,’ says jeweller Liv Luttrell, who works exclusively with recycled metals. ‘The ecological and ethical benefits of recycled gold are clear. There is a magical quality found in working with this ancient material that can be used and celebrated again and again.’

British brand Lylie’s crafts its jewellery from gold recycled from electronic waste. One ton of electronic waste yields 300g of gold, compared with less than 30g in each ton of ore. ‘Discarded e-waste is a literal goldmine,’ explains founder Eliza Walter, whose pieces are stamped with a specially created Salvaged Gold hallmark. ‘We are in the midst of a climate emergency; the environmental ramifications of built-in obsolescence are concerning and unsustainable. Finding wealth in our waste has to be the future.’

Lylie’s also offers customers the option to recycle unworn gold jewellery in exchange for credit towards new pieces, a practice that designer Bibi van der Velden, who also works with recycled gold, hopes will become widespread. ‘As an ambassador for sustainable gold, I have visited small-scale mines in the Amazon and witnessed the impact of mining first hand.

You travel through the beautiful rainforest and, all of a sudden, you arrive in a moon-like landscape, where the trees have been chopped down and the fertile ground has been replaced by sandy nothingness. It’s depressing,’ she says. ‘It’s great >





Above: Melted down, gold could be new or old. Below: A Chimu burial mask from Peru

to see artisanal miners working in a safe and sustainable way, but they're still chopping down the rainforest to access the gold. There is enough gold in circulation already, which is why we primarily use recycled gold unless a client specifically requests Fairmined.

Through extensive research, van der Velden located a recycled-gold supplier in New Zealand that she believes offers the 'greenest' solution. She combines it with other sustainably sourced natural materials, such as scarab-beetle

wings and 60,000-year-old mammoth tusk. However, not all recycled gold is necessarily eco-friendly. 'You can make no claim about the provenance of recycled metal, when or how it was mined. Simply because gold is recycled doesn't mean that nobody was harmed when they mined it,' points out Charlie Betts,

managing director of The Betts Group, a 200-year-old family-run gold-bullion smelter and refinery. As the UK's only registered Fairtrade and Fairmined gold refiner, he describes these as 'fantastic initiatives, but fraught with issues in terms of the price premium and supply consistency. Artisanal mining makes up only about 10% of global gold production and audited Fairtrade comprises a tiny percentage of that. It can never be a mass-market solution.'

In 2017, the Betts Group, together with Hummingbird Resources, launched Single Mine Origin gold (SMO), which originates from the responsibly managed, mercury-free Yanfolila gold mine in Mali. Refined separately to other precious metals and traced from mine to jeweller, Mr Betts calls it 'responsibly sourced gold without compromises'. The company now supplies SMO gold to thousands of UK jewellers, including G. Collins & Sons in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, and Hamilton & Inches in Edinburgh.

Earlier this year, Boodles announced it now exclusively uses SMO gold, too. Each piece comes with a QR code that reveals where the gold was mined, together with details on the environmental and social programmes in place, which range from investment in local schools and healthcare to planting vegetable gardens and

teaching skills, such as beekeeping and forestry, providing alternative livelihoods that will last long after the mine has closed. 'Mining is seen as an inherently damaging process, but, when it's done properly, it has a hugely positive impact on communities,' adds Mr Betts's brother Dan, managing director of Hummingbird Resources. 'Rather than be ashamed about mining, we want to showcase the good that mines can do when they are managed properly. If there is gold in the earth,



‘If there is gold, it will be mined, so we may as well do it in the most responsible way,’

For your jewellery box

Nine-carat salvaged-gold Madonna & Child Pendant, £475, Lylie's (right; 020-3654 5972; www.lylies.com)

18-carat SMO gold, morganite, moonstone and diamond Woodland ring, £3,500, Boodles (020-7493 3240; www.boodles.com)

18-carat Scottish-gold, ruby and diamond earrings, Hamilton & Inches, £7,995 (right; 0131-225 4898; www.hamiltonandinches.com)

18-carat Fairmined white and rose gold and diamond Ariel Marquise necklace, £14,000, Thelma West (020-7267 7953; www.thelmawest.com)

18-carat Fairtrade white gold and diamond Persephone ring (Fairmined Ecological Gold available on request), price on application, Lebrusan Studio (right; 07946 942350; www.lebrusanstudio.com)

18-carat recycled-gold and diamond Twist hoop earrings, £5,500, Liv Luttrell (right; www.livluttrell.com)

18-carat recycled-gold and diamond Lion ring, £5,344, Bibi van der Velden (right; 00 31 20 626 9095; www.auverture.com)

somebody will mine it, so we may as well do it in the most responsible way.'

The company aims to accredit more mines with SMO status in order to increase the supply and, ultimately, transform the industry. SMO gold has emotional as well as environmental benefits. 'When people know where the product comes from, they feel connected to it,' notes Mr Betts. He cites Enefa Cole, a Ghanaian-born, London-based designer, who uses SMO gold: 'She was excited about the fact that this West African gold has cultural links to the influences behind her jewellery.' There are examples of SMO gold closer to home, too. Hamilton & Inches is one of only two jewellers with a licence to use Scottish gold, the first spoils of which were extracted from the Cononish mine north of Loch Lomond in 2019, under strict environmental and ethical standards, with measures even put in place to protect the resident bat.

Ultimately, no single solution is perfect, but the more we know, the more we can make an educated buying decision. 'There is not a one-size-fits-all solution,' explains Miss Luttrell. 'It's in the power of individual consumers to ask questions that will drive the market to become more accountable.'

