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Making a difference

Following the second Flux: Fair Luxury conference, **Rachael Taylor** *asks what can be done to speed up the pace of change in the ethical jewellery market*

Ethical jewellery has long been an artisan pursuit: small-scale miners selling to individualist designer-makers creating for a pocket of socially aware shoppers. Yet the recent slew of principled initiatives from companies with higher profiles and production numbers suggests that after years of abstract debate, something has finally shifted. Is the jewellery industry on the precipice of real change?

In a small echo chamber within the Birmingham Assay Office last month, the mood was one of positivity and frustration. A group had gathered – some delegates from as far as Australia and South America – to attend Flux, an ethical jewellery conference, now in its second year, founded and run by a collective of jewellers dedicated to trading in fair luxury.

By and large, its delegation is a similar professional demographic. However, this year there were some new players in the room, including representatives from Kering (the luxury conglomerate that owns Pomellato and Gucci) and Pandora.

Videos of trips to Colombian gold mines were aired, emotionally charged stories were shared and debate was sparked. Following each presentation during the two-day conference, questions from the audience would flow. This seems to be the real draw of Flux – it provides a chance for those engaged in ethical practices, or those interested in how it all works, to ask each other for practical advice.

Flux was created for this reason – to share knowledge of a sector of the industry in which there is often too little guidance on how to deal with highly complex issues. One speaker, Guildford-based jewellery designer and Fairtrade gold licensee Jon Dibben, raised knowing laughs from the audience with a comic portrayal of "the grieving process" he went through when he realised the lack of resources out there. "A lot of people who signed up to work with Fairtrade [gold] were quite shocked when they realised that Fairtrade didn't have a great budget or a great plan to promote it," he said, after a bout of mock weeping. "They are not a commercial organisation, and they'll tell you that. They used to work with the supermarkets, which had their own brands and marketing. There is a tension. Do they help the smaller people [like designer-makers and family businesses] or do they go and look for the big brands that might drive change a bit quicker?"

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Jon Dibben

It seems both is happening. Support is improving for independent jewellers. The Fairtrade Foundation announced the launch of an online training course for sales staff during Flux, while the Scottish Goldsmiths Trust recently used its own ethical jewellery symposium in Dundee to share plans for an online resource that will collate practical information for ethically minded jewellers.

And, crucially, there have been advancements made by a small number of large, influential companies. Last year, Argos launched a range of affordable Fairtrade gold wedding bands and jewellery brand Clogau, which now has a global reach, has been steadily introducing the metal into its collections.

(Above) De Beers' diamond brand Forevermark has a transparent supply chain

The Flux conference; (left) speakers included jeweller Harriet Kelsall

Forevermark, the nine-year-old De Beers diamond brand that charges a premium in exchange for the assurance of a transparent supply chain, has continued its global expansion and now has 2,000 doors in 25 countries. The diamond bourses also stepped up, with the London faction appointing Katherine Chappell as an ethical issues advisor, while the Israel Diamond Exchange became the first to make members adhere to an Ethical Code of Conduct.

One of the most high-profile ethical jewellery stories of the year so far has been the opening of Pandora's eco-friendly factory in Thailand. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-approved site uses 18% less energy and 45% less water than conventional facilities. While Pandora has said that last year 91% of the silver and 86% of gold used at its Thai facilities was recycled, the brand's vice president of group ethics, Claus Teilmann Petersen, told delegates at Flux that it would not yet consider using a certified metal such as Fairtrade or Fairmined because it was deemed too expensive.

At the top end of the jewellery market, where price sensitivity has less of an impact than in the mass market, Chopard has been a bastion for change. Since launching its Green Carpet collection of jewellery made with Fairmined gold and traceable diamonds in 2013, its financial support has helped artisanal mines in Colombia to achieve certification. Chopard also uses the metal in its L.U.C watch collection and its Palme Verte jewellery line. At Baselworld in March it launched a reboot of its 1990s Ice Cube collection of minimalist commercial gold jewellery designs set with small diamonds. The entire Ice Cube range, including limited lines designed and fronted by singer Rihanna, is being made in Fairmined gold.

Marcin Piersiak, deputy director for the Alliance of Responsible Mining (ARM), the nonprofit organisation behind Fairmined gold (a similar scheme to Fairtrade, which also delivers a premium to miners), travelled to Flux to take part in a panel discussion on the supply chain, during which he spoke of the impact Chopard has made. "Chopard took the risk and invested, and they have really been advertising it well," he said, adding that the brand's decision to create the Palme d'Or trophy for the Cannes film festival in Fairmined gold has led to the metal being used for other prestigious prizes, including the Nobel Peace Prize medal and the Olympic Laurel trophy. "They've done a whole campaign about it, and we do have much more interest these days from large brands that are seeing that it can actually work, and that it's not very expensive and that you can make money from this," he said.

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Marcin Piersiak
Alliance of Responsible Mining

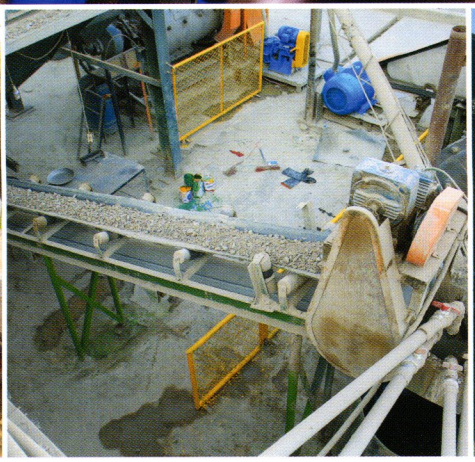
(Top left) Chopard's Ice Cube Pure collection and Green Carpet range (below) use Fairmined gold

Ethical sourcing is steadily ingratiating itself within retail corporate culture. For some, the need to tick a box that shows willing to a new generation of consumers, who expect transparency and a social conscience from the companies they spend with, is starting to override the desire for the fattest possible margins.

Cred, which operates a store in Chichester and a wholesale brand, as well as acting as a global distributor for Fairtrade gold, is on the verge of signing a deal with a department store to stock its ethical jewels. Managing director Alan Frampton says the retailer approached Cred as part of a wider initiative to demonstrate sustainability in each of its product categories.

While retail in general seems focused on delivering plans of sustainability, jewellery is most definitely behind the curve. You will not find any Fairtrade or Fairmined products stocked in the major UK high street chains. H Samuel, Ernest Jones, Mappin & Webb, Goldsmiths, Fraser Hart and F Hinds have no certified metals for sale, while Beaverbrooks offers just two plain court wedding bands on an online-only basis.

So while green and socially aware practices have infiltrated the boutique ateliers and the blue-sky marketing meetings of major brands, has the mass market actually woken up to ethically responsible jewellery? "I would say ▶



(Top left and above left) ethical diamond brand Forevermark helps support De Beers' Zimele hubs, which create job opportunities in South Africa; (top right, above and above right) the Macdesa Fairtrade mine in Peru

not," answers Andrew Sollitt, sales and marketing director at Domino, which offers all of its designs in Fairtrade gold. "We've been offering Fairtrade gold for several years now and while sales have increased over that time, we are not seeing what I would call a game-changer. Compared to standard alloys, it is still a very small percentage of our business, and we sell the most Fairtrade alloys into London. At some point it will come, but we're not seeing that acceleration yet."

Hockley Mint bought 10 kilos of Fairtrade gold last year and is hoping to increase that figure this year, but sales here, too, have been subject to a slow, steady rise rather than an enormous sea change. "There has been a mind-shift somewhere, but not a huge one," says managing director Gary Wroe, who adds that more retailers have started to buy into certified metals. "It's still an uphill battle to push that message out there."

While there are accessible trusted sources for ethically sourced metals and diamonds, as well as some emeralds (Muzo and Gemfields lead here), there are also black holes in the market. Designer-makers often complain of being unable to find components. At Flux, jeweller Anna Loucah described the lost hours spent making her own chains in Fairtrade gold as pre-made ones aren't easily available. Peter Crump, managing director of casting house Vipa Designs, where sales of certified metals have increased three-fold over the past year, describes being "unable to get anywhere" in his battle to find an alloy provider that can guarantee the other metals being mixed in with ethical precious metals have been similarly mindfully mined. And while Stuart Pool of ethical gem supplier Nineteen48 believes there is a "place for optimism as organisations with different initiatives all move steadily in the right direction", he admits that, right now, finding coloured gemstones with a solid supply chain story is incredibly difficult.

The system is clearly not perfect, and what is needed to move it forward will change depending on who you speak to. Piersiak of ARM believes governments need to do more, while ethical jeweller Harriet Kelsall says that each individual business has a responsibility to become steadily more sustainable in whatever ways it can. Others put the onus on educators to inspire the next generation – something the new Fairtrade Gold Design Awards organised for the first time this year by Ingle & Rhode aimed to do; and it seemed to work, as a tearful Angela Gillies of the University of Dundee picked up the top prize during Flux, promising that she'd "love to work with Fairtrade gold, so all the [prize] money will be reinvested in Fairtrade gold, and maybe Sri Lankan sapphires".

Yet no matter how engaged the industry becomes, the shift will only tru happen when the mass consumer mar is switched on to ethical jewellery and demand drives production. Frampton of Cred has recognised this, and while he has in the past been a vocal figure within the trade, he has switched his focus to talking to the consumer in the past year by exhibiting with Cred at a steady stream of wedding fairs.

"[The change in the industry] is not happening fast enough, so I'm going direct to consumers," he says. "I've been talking to hundreds of consumers in this way and when you tell them the story [of Fairtrade], they love it."

Talking to individuals is one thing, but creating a campaign that can reach the masses will take cash, and with ethical jewellery having been dominat by small businesses and charities in its infancy, that sort of large-scale campai just hasn't happened yet. Until it does – whether led by a multiple retailer or an international brand with deep pockets, an independent marketing body akin to the Diamond Producers Association, or perhaps jolted by coverage of a humanitarian scandal – i seems the ethical jewellery industry is stuck for now with a slow and steady approach to changing the world.