22. Ethical Section:

22.1 Introducing Ethical Gold by Peter Oakley

Ethical gold has become a hot topic. Though high-profile ethical campaigns affecting the jewellery industry are not new (think diamonds, coral or ivory), gold has become a new target for ethical and environmental campaigners. Gold mining is a strong theme in 'Unearth Justice' and the sole focus of the 'No Dirty Gold' campaign. The Fairtrade Foundation's recent announcement of a fairtrade gold initiative during Fairtrade Fortnight has pushed the issue further into the public consciousness. Anyone actively researching the issues beyond these public campaigns runs into a bewildering host of organisations: the Association for Responsible Mining, Conservation International, Earthworks, Ethical Metalsmiths, the Global Reporting Initiative, the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance, the International Council on Mining and Metals, and the Responsible Jewellery Council.

For working jewellers running a business, recent developments bring new anxieties. Many, whilst not being active social campaigners, want to 'do the right thing' but are not sure how to go about it. The practicalities of keeping a business afloat and moving forwards is the short-term priority, particularly in the current difficult trading situation. At the same time potential customers are being subjected to repeated claims about the immorality of the jewellery they intend to purchase, and the intensity of this pressure is increasing.

In the UK the ethical sourcing approach is currently the provenance of a small group of designer-led businesses that use ethical sourcing as a unique selling point. The same owner/managers are also often involved in specifically targeted ethical advocacy activities above and beyond promoting their own products. But in the US consumers now have the opportunity to buy ethical jewellery from any of the 1400 Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores across the country or online. The Wal-Mart corporation has used its significant retail clout to develop partnerships with miners and manufacturers, enabling them to identify the sourcing of all the materials used in their 'Love, Earth' range. While researching the jewellery industry, I have found 'ethical gold' a recurring issue. I was discussing the ethical gold issue at a recent meeting with benchpeg's editor and the suggestion was made I should write something for the newsletter on the topic. After discussing what would be the most useful for readers I offered to write a series of related reports, each one either focussing on one of the main themes or explaining the background issues behind current campaigns. I don't expect these reports to be the last word on each topic: I intend to give all organisations featured in depth a right to reply, to be published in the newsletter either at the same time or soon afterwards.
I think it is important to state here why I think adding yet another input to the debate is worthwhile. As a full-time industry researcher I have had the time to attack the mountain of outputs and undertake background research, including attending trade events and making field visits. I have also been fortunate enough to be invited to industry meetings focussing on ethical issues. As someone with experience of jewellery manufacture, precious metal analysis and mining and refining technologies I can understand and interpret the technical elements of the debate. As an observer I am not overly biased towards any specific perspective or affiliated to any specific campaign. Importantly,

my research is fully funded by an external body, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who do not have any specific agenda in relation to ethical gold. I hope these reports will provide an outline to each of the elements of the debate for the practicing jeweller. The intention is to help jewellery practitioners develop their own viewpoint on each of the major issues and be able to support this with information in their discussions with clients and customers.

So what is Ethical Gold?

Though it is a well-used and apparently simple phrase, 'ethical gold' (like ethical jewellery in general) is inherently problematic. The first issue is that 'ethical' is an attribute that comes with an inevitable negative shadow: To state something is ethical is to imply other things, actions or people are potentially unethical (the same happens with other abstractions, such as sustainable or authentic). Nothing can escape this duality. The appearance of the term ethical gold immediately created 'unethical gold', a material we suddenly found we were buying, using and selling.
The second issue is that 'ethical' is a bundle of qualities, which together give the definition. Who decides what these qualities are, and the criteria that will be used to assess them, is a complex social process. In the case of ethical gold a relatively simple starting definition could be: gold that has been mined and processed by willing workers, who received a fair payment for their labour, with the minimum harm being done to local ecosystems or the wider environment. Even this apparently uncontentious definition quickly runs into problems. How do you define willing? Beyond direct coercion do you include the number of alternative opportunities for employment? Without adequate education or financial support people can be restricted to a limited range of equally dispiriting activities; is this willing in the intended sense? The phrase 'fair payment' is equally arbitrary. Is subsistence level in the local economy enough? Should you take account of the high risk nature of mining activities? Or give workers enough to save for retirement? Paying miners far more than local wage levels in developing countries is itself potentially socially disruptive and divisive.

> "To state something is ethical is to imply other things, actions or people are potentially unethical"

The second part of the sentence, covering environmental concerns, is, if anything, even more problematic. Mining is an inherently destructive process. Initial processing technologies (usually carried out at the minehead for economic reasons) are also inherently disruptive. 'Minimum harm' is only really achieved by not mining at all. An often cited alternative is to return the site to its original condition after use, though in reality 'original condition' is an aspiration rather than possibility (how exactly do you repair a mountain range?). As to wider impacts, even identifying everything that is impacting on the wider environment is difficult, let alone identifying minimum or even acceptable levels. As CFCs have taught us, even apparently innocuous materials may have environmentally destructive properties. These underlying uncertainties make apparently definitive statements, such as the 'Golden Rules' from the No Dirty Gold campaign, much more ambiguous in practice.

In reality any campaign which does not advocate complete abstinence has to define a set of achievable and assessable criteria and the benchmarks for assessing them. To date, which criteria are chosen or ignored tends to be a reflection of the organisation's own reason for existence. This has led to alternative definitions of ethical gold that are divergent or even contradictory. For example, Conservation International emphasises retaining biodiversity, fresh water conservation (through the strict management or complete prohibition of toxins such as mercury or cyanide) and carbon offsetting in projects which engage with mining and retail corporations. In contrast the Fairtrade Foundation's definition requires small scale mining by local communities and reluctantly tolerates the use of cyanide and mercury under 'artisanal' conditions. Fairtrade explicitly excludes large corporations from its criteria. Both systems claim to produce ethical gold, but neither would pass the other's benchmarks.

A completely alternative approach to ethical gold has also been taken. Arguing that extraction is inherently unethical, it advocates only recycling current 'above ground' material. This resonates with the recycling of other materials, such as paper, glass and plastics, where reduced waste and energy use are significant factors. It is, however, not too far from what as being going on for centuries with precious metals, though in the industry it was termed recovery rather than recycling. But the expectation is that ethical refining will utilise only scrap gold and that the refining process itself is non-polluting, including being carbon-neutral. The US refiner Hoover and Strong identifies their product as ethical gold and is supported by some ethical campaigners on the basis of these criteria.

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There is a third core issue to ethical gold. Its physical properties are identical to unethical gold. Unrefined gold contains traces of other metals which can provide a 'fingerprint' that indicates an approximate source or refining location (though even this is a very unreliable science). But once refined to 999.9 fineness, the standard for most commercial gold bullion, there is no scrutiny or material analysis that can identify its provenance. Ethical properties are essentially intangible attributions and stand or fall on the trust placed by consumers in the individual or organisation making the claim. In a distinctly Machiavellian turn of events, it is essential that any ethical certifier has to be thought of as moral by the general populace to sustain a position.

> "As opportunities to source different types of ethical gold expand, jewellers will be faced with some difficult choices"

The attributive nature of ethical properties is perhaps best illustrated by considering two alternative ethical perspectives. In an ethical-through-recycling system (such as Hoover and Strong's), gold becomes ethical only once it has been recovered from a destroyed object. In an ethical-through-producer system (such as Fairtrade), the gold ceases to be described as ethical once the made object is destroyed. As before, competing definitions of ethical gold are essentially incompatible.

As I hope this sketch of the issues shows, anyone expecting to be handed a neat and simple solution to the issue of how to obtain ethical gold is inevitably going to be disappointed. On the surface ethical gold seems to be about sourcing a material, but it is really about which attributes makers and consumers will adopt as most important. In order to make an informed decision, you need to be informed. In addition, ethical gold can only be created by a trusted certifier, rather than a miner, a factor that has led to a shortage in supply to date. In the UK either claims have been found to carry limited ethical validity or certifiers have created a supply primarily or solely for their own use. As opportunities to source different types of ethical gold expand, jewellers will be faced with some difficult choices. It is supposed to be G.K. Chesterton who said, "Art, like morality, consists in drawing the line somewhere". In the near future jewellers will be expected to be experts in both types of line-drawing.

Arts & Humanities Research Council

Peter Oakley has a background in analytical chemistry, art and design education and practice and regional skills development. He is currently reading for a PhD at University College London. His research is focusing on the influence gold has on the perceptions and technological choices of professionals working with the material. Preparation included training as a precious metals assayer at the Birmingham Assay Office. Other institutions that have assisted in his research include the Goldsmiths Company, the London Assay Office, the British Museum, Tate Britain, the Portable Antiquities Scheme, the British Jewellers' Association, the Fairtrade Foundation and CAFOD.

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23. Feature:

23.1 Brand New National Occupational Standards for Jewellery Manufacturing, Silversmithing & Allied Trades

creative & cultural skills

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills has approved the new National Occupational Standards for Jewellery Manufacturing, Silversmithing and Allied Trades. National Occupational Standards provide a clear description of what people need to know and be able to do in order to perform a particular job role. The development of these brand new Standards was led by Creative & Cultural Skills, the Sector Skills Council for the creative industries, in collaboration with a panel of partners from the jewellery industry.

Helping your business to succeed

The idea of National Occupational Standards can seem rather removed from creative practice. However, companies and individual makers alike can use the new Standards in a number of ways to make sure that they or their employees are as skilled and productive as possible, and thus that their business flourishes. For example, the National Trust used the National Occupational Standards in Cultural Heritage, launched in January 2010, to develop a 'skills passport' for their staff. The passport helps teams to rank their skills against their competitors and highlight where they need further training.