

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2013

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THE NEXT GENERATION

The leading lights in the contemporary jewellery scene
create wearable miniature art for today's collectors.
Emma Crichton Miller has the insider's guide

Today, at the very highest level, there is a handful of outstanding artist-jewellers whose work is increasingly sought out by collectors. Originally from India and the Far East, from Mumbai to Hong Kong, the work of these jewellers now features in exhibitions and auction sales alongside the great names of European Haute Joaillerie; their one-off pieces are valued as much for their distinctive, expressive designs as for the clusterings of rare, precious stones.

Foremost among them is Michelle Ong. The designer has been making one-off pieces since 1985 under the name of Carnet, her Hong-Kong-based label. Consciously modelling the way she works on the great jewellers of the past, but infusing that tradition with a distinctively Chinese aesthetic, Ms Ong finds inspiration all around her: 'It could be a beautiful flower, the pleasing continuity in an abstract pattern or a wonderful gemstone that demands a certain presentation.' Particularly striking is her subtle and unexpected use of colour and the originality of her forms. In the catalogue for Ong's 2011 retrospective at Asia House, eminent jeweller Joel Arthur Rosenthal (known as JAR) acknowledged: 'Madame Ong's jewels are mouth-watering. There are Chinese clouds, utterly different from ours, in scrolls of diamonds; unexpected blackness with reds and greens making ferocious, billowing dragons we will remember; geometry, monsters, flora, colour, a free hand making things we have never seen and will keep seeing forever.'

Hong-Kong born Wallace Chan, by contrast, is renowned as much for his large-scale Buddhist sculpture as for his miniature wearable art. In 1973 he became apprenticed to a sculptor, specialising both in Chinese sculpture and in the European tradition of intaglio gem-stone carving. As he has said, 'Jewellery-making combines the experiences of sculpting and painting, going back and forth between two-dimensions and three-dimensions to depict the interaction of light, colours, shapes, and sounds in the natural world through materials and craftsmanship.' Eager always for his work to forge new directions he created 'The Wallace Cut' in 1987, a way of translating the medieval tradition of intaglio carving into three dimensions, creating a multitude of reflective surfaces in each gemstone. He has also pioneered the use of titanium in jewellery. Even jade, that most traditionally-revered of materials in China, is given new life through his techniques. Chan has also invented new setting methods, ensuring that

the metal claw does not impinge upon the beauty of the carved stone. The designer was honoured in 2012 with an invitation to appear at the Paris Biennale des Antiquaires, in recognition of his perfectionism.

Taiwan-born Cindy Chao owes the originality of her intricate, densely jewel-studded pieces to her love of architecture and sculpture. She cites her grandfather as her primary influence, the well-known Taiwanese temple architect Xie Zinan: 'It was he who taught me to see things outside of the box, to view every side of a building as the front, and to be meticulous.' Because of the complexity of her pieces, designed to be viewed from every angle, Ms Chao only makes 36 of her one-off Black Label pieces a year. With butterflies a favourite motif, her exquisite Royal Butterfly Brooch (2009), built from clusters of rare and unusually cut diamonds, sapphires, rubies and garnets, is now on display in the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

Edmond Chin, born in Singapore but now based in Hong Kong, was a collector before he became a jeweller. From the age of fourteen he collected the jewels of the Straits Chinese, admiring their fusion of Chinese and Malay traditions. It was during the early 1990s, while working in Christie's Hong Kong, that Mr Chin began to produce his own designs. His first piece was a green jade Huaigu necklace made, at his request, by Bulgari. Since setting up his own design firm in 2,000, Etcetera Ltd, his sophisticated combinations of fine gemstones and lightweight woods and metals have earned him an enthusiastic following.

Viren Bhagat has legendary status among collectors (his family has been in the jewellery business for around 100 years). He is resistant to commercial pressures, making between 60 or 70 one-of-a-kind pieces per year, always his own, hand-drawn, creations. He has been known to take as long as ten years to find the right stones to finish a particular piece. Mr Bhagat's designs are rooted in Mughal tradition – the architecture, ornament, sculpture and painting as much as the richly-coloured Mughal jewellery – but he also acknowledges a love of art deco, especially pieces by Cartier. However, this dual inheritance does little to explain the originality of his work, for besides his preference for antique cut stones and lightweight platinum, his designs reveal an exquisite sensitivity to nature alongside a passion for geometry.

