

A UNIVERSE OF JEWELLERY IN INDIA

„ABHUSHAN – Design Dialogues in Jewellery“

A Symposium organized by the World Crafts Council (WCC) and the Crafts Council India in New Delhi – 4. - 6. 2. 2011

Report for WCC-Europe by Martina Dempf (Berlin/Germany)

In February 2011, India was hosting a universal event on jewellery from around the world in Delhi. Jewellers, members of Arts organisations, collectors and curators from several museums such as the MAD New York were invited for “ABHUSHAN – DESIGN DIALOGUES IN JEWELLERY” to meet each other at the “SEED TO SILVER” exhibition and discuss at a three days symposium the future perspectives and challenges for the survival of jewellery art – an age old cultural good worldwide.

What is jewellery today? Do we have a global understanding of jewellery – or is jewellery a medium for our diverse cultural languages and concepts? Do we have to discuss ecological and ethical values of jewellery along with its artistic and economical importance?

„ABHUSHAN – Design Dialogues in Jewellery“ organised by the World Crafts Council International was a challenge to make ends meet and discuss important topics around the creation and use of jewellery, from the maker of jewellery to an object of desire for the wearer.

International Design Workshop

The first and important focus of WCC was a design workshop for Indian jewellery makers – a number of around 60 craftsmen and -women, which took place in New Delhi the week before the symposium.

Different workshop groups focusing on a modern design interpretation of traditional craft techniques with materials like seeds, fibre, beads, paper, wires and recycling materials were organized with the co-operation of international artists such as Paola Leal (Chile), Keith Andrew (Sri Lanka), Tasso Mattar (Germany/Spain), Charmian Imman (Spain), Akwele Suma Glory (Ghana) and Helen Britton (Australia/Germany). The presentation of the results of the workshops were impressive and innovative, a good documentation of creativity. The Indian government sponsoring the workshops had the intention of assisting the artists in getting ready a selection of their best new pieces for an international market.

„Seed to Silver“ Exhibition

Along with the symposium an international jewellery exhibition was organised through regional curators, mainly focusing on artistic jewellery of non-precious materials.

North America (curated by Ursula Neuman, MAD New York) and **Europe** (curated by Anne Leclercq, Belgium, Nina Linde, Denmark and Martina Dempf, Germany) focused their selection on one-of-a kind pieces of jewellery artists. The diversity of the pieces showed the individualistic approach of each artist more than a general idea of what jewellery is today. The materials and concepts of the pieces were as diverse as the origin of the artists. Artists like Majorie Schick, Thomas Gentile and Bruce Metcalf showed an already long tradition of studio jewellery in the United States, younger artists like Lisa Gralnick and Iris Eichenberg completed the picture. Europe was presented by a number of young “wild” artists like Yorge Manila, Tobias Alm and Katharina Dettar in context with “old masters” like Ramon Puig Cuyas and Tasso Mattar.

Africa (curated by Paola Manfredi), a vast and diverse continent, presented jewellery from individual artists as well as ethnic groups and traditional jewellery art made by unknown artists. The exhibition showed contemporary silverwork from Egypt (by Azza Fahmy), modern beadwork from Ghana (by Akwele Suma Glory) or Southern Africa (by several art groups promoted by NGOs) and other parts of Africa. Natural materials like grass (Rwanda), ostrich egg shells (Namibia), wood and recycled materials reflected a crossover of styles, ideas and concepts on the African continent, including Madagascar (Annie Prebay-Ranarivelo).

Kevin Murray, curator of the **Asia- Pacific Region** asked his invited artists to create garlands – welcome signs to visitors all over the region. A really wonderful collection of garlands emerged from this idea, contemporary in expression and material, but highlighting a great tradition of hospitality through jewellery. Katheryn Leopold (Australia) presents a garland of left over cups from the Christian sacraments in a poetic association of beauty and waste. Used containers of plastic fish for soy sauce inspires Niki Hastings-McFall (New Zealand) to a garland called “To much sushi lei”. Also toilet paper makes an extraordinary garland through the hands of Sam Thuo Dong (Vietnam/Germany).

Cultural heritage and its contemporary answer was presented by **Latin America**, curated by Alberto de Betolaza. Within the selection was a great variety of pieces by artists of Red Indian origin, like the silver jewellery of Lorenzo Cone, a Mapuche from Chile, traditional but innovative with its modern design. Latin America shows a great variety in materials and techniques, including weaving, filigree or woodwork. A number of young designers as well as organized art groups presented unusual modern one-of-a kind jewellery with individualistic concepts.

The special presentation of **India** selected by the Indian Crafts Council showed exquisite traditional-tribal Indian silver jewellery from all over India. It gave a fantastic insight of the cultural richness of Indian peoples over the centuries and their religious aspects of jewellery, deeply connected with the wearer and its background.

In general the exhibition showed us the richness of cultural tradition and contemporary aspects of jewellery in different parts of the world. Jewellery artists and craftsmen have proved the importance of keeping up their culture of making products by hand in our over-mechanised world.

An exhibition catalogue has been published by the World Crafts Council.

Symposium “Design Dialogues in Jewellery”

The three-day symposium with a great number of lectures on jewellery was as diverse as the exhibition. Speakers from India and all over the world gave detailed and exciting insights into their world of jewellery to the audience.

Ursula Neuman (MAD New York, USA) opened the symposium with a lecture on American studio jewellery with recycled materials.

Lectures on living cultural traditions of Indian jewellery as well as modern Indian design jewellery were presented by specialists like Jasleen Dhamija, Umesh Ganjam and others.

Elaine Kim (Korea) discussed the complicated relationship of traditional craftsmanship and modern design, a theme which was also highlighted by Azza Fahmy (Egypt) and Martina Dempf (Germany). Kevin Murray (Australia) focused his lecture on the question of ethical and ecological aspect when designing and producing jewellery.

Helen Britton (Germany/Australia) gave us an insight into the making of contemporary jewellery through the perspective of practice, and Tasso Mattar (Germany/Spain) presented his studies on jewellery and nature.

The symposium was accompanied by a jewellery fair of makers and companies, which showed us the most unusual luxury Indian ornaments from gold and precious stones, as well as temple jewellery, tribal jewellery and jewellery from non-precious material. Many other countries outside India took the chance to present their latest jewellery products to a big public of buyers.

The wonderful modern Indian dance show “Varja” of the Stem Dance Company, Bangalore, ended the symposium after the three days.

Conclusion

The event was a true platform for “design dialogues in jewellery” and gave visitors, exhibitors, speakers and organisers a chance for learning and discussions, networking and making new contacts in jewellery.

One of the central questions discussed during the symposium was the perception and value of jewellery. In many places of the world jewellery is mainly perceived for its monetary value, strongly connected with expensive materials. Gold, diamonds and precious stones seem still to rank at the first place.

Cultural values are strong in places where a public of buyers is still able to connect certain aspects and designs of jewellery with a local cultural and religious background, not known to outsiders.

It is remarkable that this was also true for the individual artistic value and aesthetic reception of a piece. If the context and background of the artist is not known to an outsider, it seems quite difficult to appreciate the artistic and aesthetic expression in a piece of jewellery.

The diverse aspects of ethical and ecological values of jewellery are world wide getting more into the focus of jewellery making and wearing. Non-precious material or even waste is turned into aesthetic objects of artistic value or “Art-to-Wear” jewellery. This kind of jewellery does less harm to the environment than gold or precious stones, and gives local communities a chance to survive without a big material investment. In this context design gets more and more important, together with fair production conditions (e.g. ban of child-labour) and fair-trade marketing.

It became clear during the symposium that it is a big challenge to communicate jewellery in its local and global aspects and values to a broader public of consumers, so that they are willing to appreciate the uniqueness of a handmade piece, let it be a creation in gold or made from waste.

The symposium and exhibition was really exceptional in its diversity and proved a felt need worldwide to protect this age-old art and its makers against an over-mechanised world of mass production.