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FAIR TRADE GOLD AND JEWELLERY

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Tweet

When I think of jewellery I think of earrings, necklaces, rings and all the bling bling I can think of. I love jewelry, my necklace from my son for mother's day 2 years ago and my diamond earrings are my favourite pieces which never come off my body. I don't think I've ever thought of where my jewelry comes from, but with all the talk of fair trade, I got to thinking about fair trade jewelley. I came across Fair Trade Jewellery Co. which is located in Cabbagetown in Toronto, Ontario. North America's first certified fair trade jeweller, Ryan Taylor, has a relationship with artisanal miners in Colombia and brings gold straight into his workshop to make "guilt-free" luxury jewellery. Sounds interesting enough to me, and Fair Trade jewellery sounds even better. Everything I wanted to know was on the website which was confronting.



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While Fair Trade Jewellery Co. looks like every other jewellery store filled with gleaming engagement rings in their display cases, there's one difference. The gold and diamonds here have an invisible but ethical difference — they're traced all the way from mine to finger. "We're purpose-built to eliminate all the worst abuses that occur in mining, from gold that fuels conflicts to the mines that use child labour," said the shop's co-founder and lead designer Ryan Taylor. "We work directly with mining communities to improve their practices. We want to lead by example in this industry." Not everyone is preoccupied by the origins of their engagement rings, but as awareness of the dangerous conditions and toxic chemicals in mining grows, ethical jewelry is emerging as an alternative. While using recycled gold was an option, once they found Fair Trade Jewellery Co, they were thrilled to learn that their rings would be beneficial to Latin American miners.

At a time when the Canadian government is funding development partnerships with mining companies to ensure that the profits from mining make it back to local people, fair trade gold provides a distinctly alternative path.



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Ryan Taylor, Chief Designer (Production) and Co-Founder, of The Fair Trade Jewellery Company, poses with one of his rings at the Cabbagetown store, September 10, 2014. It is North America's first certified fair trade jeweller. (Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star via Getty Images)

The Fair Trade Jewellery Company is the first shop of its kind in North America to visit mines and work directly with miners' co-ops. But finding and certifying gold isn't as easy as selling fair-trade coffee. It all started in 2006, when a couple commissioned Taylor to fabricate their engagement ring they asked him a seemingly simple question: "where does the gold

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come from?" That inquiry ended up sending Taylor on a half-dozen trips around the world to find out where gold was being mined, and how to make sure that the miners were getting a fair deal. Most jewellers get their gold from a few massive refineries that purchase ore from sources all over the world and cannot guarantee its origin. Gold from industrial mines is mixed in with gold mined by small-scale — or “artisanal” — miners, often in dangerous conditions and using toxic chemicals. Once it’s all melted down, there’s no saying where it came from and how it was mined. ARM now has a certified “fairmined” standard that guarantees gold is mined following a set of environmental standards and that miners are fairly compensated for their work. Taylor’s business has been at the forefront of that process every step of the way.

North America’s first certified fair trade...



Gold from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia is brought here, where computers and 3D printers are employed to produce custom-made rings on site. But when the rings come out of the digital kilns and moulds, they’re polished by hand with the same tools that have been employed for generations. Taylor and co-founder Robin Gambhir offer a choice of jewelry made from recycled or ethically sourced gold that’s doubly-certified: both “fairtrade” and “fairmined.” They also use Canadian diamonds, steering clear of any of the complications around “blood” diamonds from conflict zones. While critics point out that mercury is still allowed by the fairmined certification, Taylor says that outright elimination of the dangerous neurotoxin is impossible in the short term, and in the meantime miners are receiving training in responsible handing. Like other fair-trade certifications, there remains some doubt over whether environmental and labour standards are maintained at the mines between inspections, but Taylor says he works with the most rigorous third-party

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auditors and has personally witnessed improvements on the ground. And yet, after a decade, fair-trade gold is still not a very well known or understood commodity.



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His company is set up to cut out all the middlemen, so that only people directly involved in producing the ring get paid. If, on the other hand, you buy your jewelry from a regular jeweller, which buys its gold from an industrial mine, huge amounts of money are spent on building and running the mine and profits are funnelled to shareholders. “We provide an outlet for artisanal mining communities who are committed to eradicating child labour, improving environmental practices and investing in the future,” Taylor said. The miners make more money when they get certified, and instead of scraping out a meagre existence, they’re now sending their children to university to become the next generation of mining engineers, he said. While Taylor and Gambhir have found success, ethical jewelry remains a tiny fringe of the international gold market. Along with small groups of miners, they’ve have staked their future on the hope that as awareness grows of the environmental impact and social disruption that come from large scale industrial mines, so will demand for another way.

So the next time you get a ring, ask “Where does the gold come from?” You might be surprised at your answer if you even get one.

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