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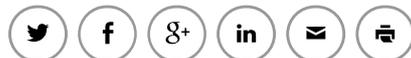
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The quest for clean gold: why you should seek ethical-gold jewellery

Panna Munday

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From prosperity and positivity to prestige and power, gold has several grand associations. Historically, it was linked with water, the precious commodity near which it was first found. The metal went on to gain currency status and replaced the barter system.

Culturally, it is considered a good-luck charm, adorning tombs, temples and minarets, and is an enduring symbol of love. Socially, owning, wearing and gifting gold denotes prestige and has aesthetic value, while economies rely on it as a stability benchmark. Science lauds it for its healing properties, and even the protosciences – alchemy in particular – consider gold as the key to the elusive elixir of immortality.

It seems as though little can tarnish the yellow metal's shine. Scratch a little under the surface, however, and correlations with trafficking, child labour and other human-rights violations begin to raise their ugly heads. Dig deeper, and be prepared to be hit by some truly horrific statistics: 900 Peruvian farmers poisoned by a mercury spill; 40,000 hectares of the Amazon forest destroyed; indigenous people from Ghana forced from their ancestral forest homeland.

Surely your innocuous wedding band can have no links to these atrocities? Those family heirlooms could not be responsible for a child's compromised future? The cogs that make up your mobile phone, laptop and watch have no part to play in the cycle of mass environmental destruction? Turns out, they might well do. For irresponsible gold mining is one of the most destructive activities on the planet, contributing to both environmental and human degradation.

"The ways in which most gold is mined and processed has sizeable negative consequences," says a representative from Solidaridad, a civil-society organisation that facilitates socially responsible, ecologically sound and profitable supply chains. "Unacceptable working conditions, the threat of toxic poisoning and lack of safety equipment are a part of many miners' daily lives. Irresponsible mining also affects water supply and contributes to deforestation."

It's not all gloom and doom, though. In one sense, gold is lagging behind in the sustainable-luxury endeavour – the United Nations-backed Kimberley Process to prevent conflict diamonds has been in place since 2003, and consumer awareness of ethical diamonds has been on the rise ever since, aided by films such as *Blood Diamond*. While there is no equivalent framework for gold mining, international bodies such as Solidaridad, the Alliance for Responsible Mining and the Fairtrade Foundation, encourage and support mining organisations that seek to reverse the damage they might cause.

A growing number of conscientious jewellers and luxury brands are also

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playing their part by sourcing gold from responsible mines. Even the 2015 Noble Peace Prize was fashioned from Fairmined gold. And the results – from the stunning pieces in [Chopard's](#) green collections, to the engagement and wedding rings from United States-based [Brilliant Earth](#), online store [Amalena](#), and British jeweller [Stephen Webster's](#) Bridal Collection – are all the more precious for it.

[See more: Jewellery made from ethical gold – in pictures](#)

Chopard, which has partnered with the Alliance for Responsible Mining, is "the first bigger high-end brand to source Fairmined gold from artisanal and small-scale mining", says Siri Teilmann-Ibsen, communications coordinator at [Alliance for Responsible Mining](#), the developer of the Fairmined certification – a global benchmark, along with its Fairtrade counterpart, for ethical gold mining.

In 2013, Chopard initiated The Journey to Sustainable Luxury project. This led to the Green Carpet Haute Joaillerie collection, featuring Fairmined gold and ethically sourced diamonds; and Palme Verte, a jewellery line in ethical gold, which was inspired by the design of the Palme d'Or trophy.

The jewellery house also unveiled a Fairmined gold watch at Baselworld last May, in collaboration with PX Précinox SA, a Swiss gold refinery company. Last October, two mines in Bolivia and Colombia reached Fairmined certification, and Chopard has pledged to buy 100 per cent of the gold extracted by those mines.

According to Teilmann-Ibsen, ethically mined gold has a positive social and economic impact, and is obtained by respecting the environment. It reduces or eliminates the use of toxic chemicals and protects the water supply. Safe working conditions, strict policies against child labour and the protection of women's rights are some of the other parameters.

There are currently 10 Fairmined-certified organisations in the world, while two mines are Fairtrade-certified. This is a startlingly small figure, considering that about 100 million people across 80 countries depend on gold mining for their survival. However, the reception of "clean" gold has been resoundingly positive. "The supply of Fairtrade and Fairmined products is relatively small within the jewellery industry, and the awareness is still quite low. This is much more about the future," says Stephen Webster. The celebrity jewellery designer travelled to Peru in 2011 to "witness first-hand the difference Fairtrade certification was making to the lives of miners and their families".

He adds: "However, once the consumer knows there is an ethical alternative to the materials used in their jewellery, the response is always positive." Webster, who hopes for "Fairtrade to be 100 per cent of the gold we sell some day", offers ethical gold in his Bridal Collection, and buyers can also commission many of the brand's core pieces in Fairtrade gold.

The certification process is made up of a long list of requirements – and benefits – and can take between one and three years. Not only must a mining organisation ensure environmental protection and safe working conditions, it must also raise the quality of life of its mining communities, from providing job stability and medical benefits to promoting education and gender equality.

Certification, however, does not come without its loopholes and legal tangles. For one, while Fairmined and Fairtrade certification are unequivocally deemed ethical, elsewhere in the industry, many organisations that claim to be ethical, self-regulate their mining and sourcing decisions. As Stephanie Boyd, a Canadian writer, filmmaker and activist who has been working in Peru for the past 16 years, puts it: "Certification is one of the those good ideas in theory, but there are problems in practice. For one, who decides the standards? Do the major gold mining companies – most of whom are responsible for human-rights abuses and environmental destruction – set them? Who checks to make sure companies are following the standards? Certain environmental groups fail to include local stakeholders and activists in the process. A lot of programmes rely on 'self-reporting' from a lot of companies, which seems to be very naive."

Boyd, is currently writing a book, *The Price of Gold*, about her experiences with indigenous communities in South America who are standing up to the mining industry. Her award-winning film, [The Devil Operation](#), exposes the link between mining corporations and private security firms that specialise in espionage, kidnapping and torture. Boyd concedes, though, that "Fairmined gold miners are in a better position than they were before certification – most have better equipment, safety standards and higher wages".

See the trailer for Stephanie Boyd's upcoming film, *Karwara*, [here](#).

Finances pose another arena of exploitation in the precious-metal minefield. Middle men and corporate houses infamously make away with the enormous profits to be had, while the men, women and children risking their lives over 18-hour days are left with unfair wages and unsound living conditions. When it comes to Fairmined gold, on the other hand, miners

receive a guaranteed minimum price, which is higher than unmonitored wages. A system of premiums on all profits made is also in place.

Responsible mining means higher operational costs, too, which are then passed on to the jewellers – some absorb it, while others add it to their retail prices. "We currently don't pass onto the consumer the premium we have to pay for Fairtrade gold, but it definitely is something that needs to be taken into consideration," says Webster. "A client is happy to choose Fairtrade gold and support the miners, but the decision can be more difficult if the price jumps by 15 per cent."

And therein lies the end-user dilemma – how many of us would be willing to shell out more for a piece of jewellery because it comes with an ethically mined tag? And why, then, should you as a buyer actively seek out such gold? "A clean conscience," states Boyd simply. "The knowledge that you're helping to preserve, rather than destroy our planet for generations to come."

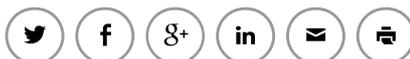
Kathryn Money, vice president of strategy and merchandising for Brilliant Earth, which uses recycled gold, adds: "You can feel good knowing that you are getting exactly the same quality product, but with a much lower environmental and human cost."

For Teilmann-Ibsen, symbolism plays a big part in the buying decision. "Jewellery is usually attached to emotions of love, commitment and friendship. It should have a positive story from the beginning, when the gold is extracted from the mine, until it's on your finger or around your neck."

And, concludes Boyd, as if that were not enough: "Clean gold is going to be the trend of the future, it's a better investment in the long run. Dirty gold is going down the same road as fur and ivory."

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