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# THE goldsmith

## TOWARDS AN ETHICAL JEWELLERY INDUSTRY

I've had a remarkably busy September kicking off with the IJL fair in London and scaring myself silly, having volunteered to give a speech on ethics in front of a large audience and Lord Digby Jones. The feedback I had afterwards was that I'd got people thinking about the issues based on the research I'd done.

The part that interested me most was the role of the mining companies who are doing great damage to the environment both on a physical level by despoiling the mining site, carving out huge areas of rock and earth, destroying fauna and flora and also chemically by using industrial processes which pollute the ground and rivers through irresponsible practices.

Interestingly, a couple of days after the debate (I'm sure not because of it) the Norwegian government sold its investment in one of the largest mining companies, Rio Tinto, having failed to persuade the company through internal campaigning to change mining practices they now want to campaign publicly.

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I've had a lovely e-mail from an old friend, Shelby Fitzpatrick, who I first met when she was a mature student at the Kent Institute of Art and Design. Like a great many jewellers and silversmiths, she thinks carefully about her work and its context in art and society. She might be called part of the 'lifestyle' group of artist-craftsmen who care deeply about every aspect of their craft including the materials they use.

'I have been meaning for ages to write to you to congratulate you on your articles on ethical sourcing of materials. This has certainly helped to bring the issues before the public, and especially before the jewellery world,' she wrote to me.

A few years ago the Association for Contemporary Jewellery had a conference in London, CARRY THE CAN, which focused on the many problems of legal but unethical sourcing, with Susan Kingsley and Christina Miller coming over from the USA to give the keynote address. They had set up ETHICALMETALSMITHS as an organization and gave a powerful presentation to the conference. They are linked to EARTHWORKS and OXFAM. [www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org](http://www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org).

To me the issues for ethical sourcing of diamonds and ethical sourcing of gold are parallel, and both subject to abuse even within the parameters of the Kimberley Process. A couple of years ago I went to a presentation at IJL which attempted to reassure retailers that they could safely answer questions by customers about blood diamonds. The exercise was an attempt to preempt a great fear around the release of the film, Blood Diamonds. When the speaker was questioned, he had to admit that even the Congo had signed up to this agreement and been accepted. There was not much

reassurance that the plan would be working, and more of an indication that the trade was running scared.

You have regularly aired discussion on these problems and searched for ways to rectify the greed and social dysfunction of mining companies, which is so important in an age of accountability. Hopefully, we will get there in the end with measures to guarantee the ethical sourcing of our precious materials,' emailed Shelby Fitzpatrick.

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With the concerns of artist craftsmen still on my mind, I took the opportunity to talk to two bullion company directors, Derek Lassetter of Argex and Tony Baird of Baird & Co. At the offices of Argex in Birmingham, Derek kindly agreed to become a sponsor of British Silver Week 2009 where Argex will sponsor the Craftsman of the Year Award.

Argex is the UK distributor for one of the world's largest manufacturers of silver sheet and wire products. Derek explained the difficulties of creating an audit trail within the manufacturing process as the refiners who supply the "good delivery bars" used in the production process collect raw materials from all over the world which includes silver from the mines as well as recycled scrap. 'As a first step towards an ethically labelled final product we could consider processing the scrap separately as this would imply no further environmental damage, however it would take a great deal of preparation to create and maintain a credible audited product trail,' Derek says.

At the brand new factory of Baird & Co in Gallions Reach near Canary Wharf in London I spent the morning watching the machines being wired in and saw the skeleton of the new gold refinery which is at the centre of the Baird operation. The new plant will have a greatly increased capacity with a facility for producing .9999 pure gold on a regular basis. This will come fully on-stream in a few month's time, explained Tony Baird.

Baird & Co has grown to become one of the largest bullion products factories in the UK with over 50 staff. As a member of the LBMA (London Bullion Metals Association) Baird has been receiving enquiries on a daily basis for physical delivery of significant quantities of gold in the form of investment bars, made in the factory, and coins, which has always been a speciality of the company.

His recent acquisition of Renoir wedding rings has added to the already large range of wedding ring patterns made in the factory. The company processes gold, silver and platinum scrap and bars through to all precious metals products for manufacturers and craftsmen including grain, sheet, wire, stampings, brazing and soldering products and a line of 'executive toys' which includes a puzzle cube, dominoes and dice all in gold, silver or platinum. The platinum dice he claims are for 'heavy gamblers'.

With a large percentage of the company's gold products made from gold processed through the refinery, Baird is in an ideal position to offer an ethical recycled range of products.

'Yes we could in theory do this but at the moment we don't have an audit trail in place that would satisfy me at this time,' says Tony Baird. 'We definitely couldn't

do it with silver or platinum as we buy in these metals on the open market to meet demand,' explains Baird. 'Yes we would consider doing something on gold but it will take a great deal of work to make sure that we meet everyone's expectations,' says Baird.

Neither Argex nor Baird & Co get many enquiries for 'ethical' bullion products. They both need to have a dialogue with companies and craftsmen who are willing and able to commit to product lines which will use these specially audited products. Recycled precious metals should be the first step in creating an ethical supply chain. Once the mines see themselves losing out in the market place they will have to change their obnoxious practises – if companies and the public first create the demand.



DAY 3 OF SETTLING INTO THE NEW BAIRD & CO PREMISES. TONY BAIRD AND HIS TEAM MANNING THE TELEPHONES.

### *And finally .....*

A very fine jeweller with a shop in Hampshire had a woman spend an hour being served by one of the sales assistants. After trying on much jewellery and gaining the confidence of the assistant she stole a £40,000 ring.

The police took DNA samples, fingerprints and studied CCTV footage, later pronouncing that they knew the name and address of the thief. They then explained that they were too busy to go and arrest the woman but might be able to make some time the following Monday. ☹