

# FOOTPRINT

‘A lot of jewellers don’t know where their products come from’

# Enviro bling

Ethical, sustainable jewellery can be beautiful, after all



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Sense & Sustainability

A few years ago, the term “hippie jewellery” generally referred to hemp necklaces with dolphin pendants, peace-sign earrings and friendship bracelets. Now, thankfully, retailers are beginning to offer eco-friendly designs that have a clean, contemporary aesthetic.

When it comes to engagement rings, Brilliant Earth is without question the best high-end option. The online retailer offers stackable diamond and sapphire rings, wedding bands in gold or platinum with options for pavé and halo settings, as well as solitaire engagement rings with a variety of stones — all identical to anything sold at Birks or Tiffany & Co.

The advantage here, though, is that the diamonds are Canadian and conflict-free, the gold is all recycled, and 5% of the company’s profits go towards charity initiatives in Africa.

“When I got engaged, it was really important to me that my engagement ring didn’t have any tragedy embedded in it,” says Beth Gerstein, who co-founded Brilliant Earth with a friend she met while doing her MBA. “What I found, though, was that a lot of jewellers didn’t know where their products came from. That was eye-opening for me because I’d read quite a bit about the social and environmental issues in the industry.”

Indeed, almost everyone who saw the Leonardo DiCaprio film *Blood Diamond* in 2006 suddenly became aware of the debilitating conditions in which many diamond miners operate. Meanwhile, the production of a single gold ring usually leaves 20 tonnes of waste, including cyanide and mercury, which can end up in local waterways.

“*Blood Diamond* definitely helped to raise public awareness and shed some light on that issue,” says Gerstein, “but even just hearing about Fair Trade coffee or the political problems in the Congo, people are being influenced by that when it comes to their purchasing habits. ... They may not know the specifics of the trade, but I’m always impressed by how much self-education customers do when they’re buying a diamond.”

Of course, hardcore greenies will insist the most sustainable jewellery purchases are those made from thrift stores or vintage retailers: Used rings and necklaces mean that no new metal or diamonds are required in the first place.

The only problem with this is that it rules out any contemporary styles.

Brooklyn designer Mollie Dash understands this, which is why she offers something a little different: old jewellery with a new look.

She begins the creative process with vintage pieces but reassembles them — for instance, stringing different chains together to form a single bracelet, grouping strands of rope together for a layered effect, or using a brooch as a pendant on a necklace — so that the end result is something one could easily find on the runway.

“I look at trends in clothing and accessories,” says Dash, “at shapes, lines and silhouettes, and then I just incor-



PHOTOS COURTESY MOLLIE DASH; BRILLIANT EARTH

From Mollie Dash’s reconstructed necklace, centre, to Brilliant Earth’s classic pieces, jewellery shoppers now have an increasingly wide range of ethical and tasteful options.

porate that into the design, mixing and matching different elements.”

The result is stuff that’s strikingly modern but assembled entirely from pre-existing material, with no mining required. Dash, a 43-year-old former graphic designer, is very much aware of the eco-friendly aspect of her products and her marketing reflects this.

“It’s not just a selling point, it matters a lot to me,” she says. “I’ve always been conscious of not wasting things, I’ve been carrying a canvas bag forever and riding a bike and all that, so it’s important that what I make reflects that value system.”

Of course, no matter how successful Dash and Gerstein are with their green-but-stylish jewellery lines, some people are incredibly attached to big brands. Ever since *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* came out in 1961, for instance, women have swooned over the jeweller’s classic diamond engagement ring. But do major companies with secure demand for their products care about ethical and environmental impacts?

“The industry is definitely moving forward now, but it’s still in the early stages,” Gerstein says. “I think it would be great if big retailers started to care more about tracing their jewellery and sourcing their origins, and in fact some of them are making baby steps, but I think Brilliant Earth really goes all the way with it.”

That said, Susan Kingsley, who started the nonprofit organization Ethical Metalsmiths four years ago, says Tiffany is actually a leader when it comes to these issues.

“There’s a website called NoDirtyGold.org, which has a list of responsible jewellers, and Tiffany is definitely on there,” she says. “In their case, the CEO [Michael Kowalski] is an avid outdoorsman and is concerned about the sourcing of gold, so he’s been a leader with that. Often, it’s the consumers who drive these changes in ethical business practices, but other times it’s just someone within the company that holds those beliefs.”

Indeed, a visit to [Tiffany.ca/sustainability](http://Tiffany.ca/sustainability) can be overwhelming with information about what the firm is doing on an environmental, ethical and social level to effect change throughout the industry.

Finally, as both Gerstein and Kingsley point out, while wearing vintage pieces is the ideal no-impact option, realistically, there will always be a market for those wanting new rings and necklaces crafted from virgin materials.

“As working metalsmiths, we need metal,” Kingsley adds. “It’s true that we can make jewellery without gold and diamonds, but a lot of people want these materials and we depend on them for a living. You can’t just stop using these resources if that’s what you know, what you do and what your family relies on as a source of income.”

At least now, it seems, there’s a new trend toward sustainable jewellery that doesn’t necessarily incorporate dolphins, tree-motifs or Celtic etchings into every piece.

“Can I confess something?” says Gerstein. “We’re designing a Celtic ring now.”

Clearly, I spoke too soon.

“But we have to respond to demand,” she adds, with a chuckle, “so if you look at the styles on our site, you’ll see all the pavé halo rings and diamond solitaires, but there might be a couple of leaf-shaped earrings, too.”

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Where fire and brimstone is sustainable fuel

## THE GREEN BIBLE

BY CHARLES LEWIS

The Bible has now become an environmental handbook. It was inevitable, what with all the references to sheep and pastures and mustard seeds and sowing and reaping and that sort of thing.

*The Green Bible*, published by HarperOne, has all the familiar characters of a regular Bible, but there is a twist. Taking a cue from the old red-letter Bibles — in which every word directly spoken by Jesus was in red ink — this version highlights about 1,000 passages that are supposed speak to the Bible’s environmental message of “God’s love for creation and the scriptural mandate for humans to care for, protect, and heal the earth.”

It was also printed with “soy-based inks, recycled paper and a 100% cotton linen cover” so no one would be tempted to cast stones at the project.

The first printing of 25,000 copies sold out in two weeks.

Dr. Matthew Sleeth, an advisor on the *The Green Bible* project, had the idea for such an edition about five years ago. Sleeth was an emergency room doctor in Kentucky when he had a deep Christian awakening. He decided to scale back his lifestyle, live in an eco-friendly way and give up his medical practice for a radically different calling.

“I believe I was called specifically to this,” he said. “The number of people doing what I’m doing now is relatively few and the number of people with medical training is enormous by comparison.”

Sleeth took his zeal for Christ and the environment on the road, teaching and preaching about the sacred point where Christianity, the environment and society all intersect.

Combining environmentalism with religion, he said, gave him an opportunity to speak about the Christian message to large audiences.

He said he first got the idea for a green Bible when he was preaching in a church. All the parishioners carried well-worn Bibles with all sorts of passages highlighted with coloured pens. But nowhere could he find anyone marking off points that spoke to the environment. (HarperOne was looking at a similar project separately and they eventually brought in Sleeth.)

Some of the passages marked in green make perfect sense; others not so much.

The first chapter of Genesis is all in green, lest anyone forget that God created all the Earth and all that is in it. And there are chapters in Deuteronomy, for example, that remind us to share our agricultural abundance with the aliens and orphans.

But then there is a highlighted passage in Exodus about God striking down the “firstborn in the land of Egypt” — not exactly an eco-friendly message, unless it was a metaphor for population control.

Sleeth said in future editions some obvious passages that were missed will be tinted green and passages in green that make no sense will be de-tinted. He wants to see Christ’s parables, such as the mighty mustard seed being compared to the Kingdom of Heaven, made green in future editions.

“A lot of people think there is nothing special about Christ’s agricultural language. They think he was just speaking in the vernacular of the time. But it was actually unique even to that time and something that was meant to be heard today as well.”

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