

A CUT ABOVE JEWELRY

Drawing inspiration from natural beauty and artistic mastery

KARLSRUHE, GERMANY

Otto Jakob, a craftsman whose baroque creations pay tribute to old masters

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

Ignoring the winter storm raging outside last month, Otto Jakob tended his collection of exotic cactuses from the Kalahari Desert, Saudi Arabia and Madagascar.

Winters can be harsh in Karlsruhe, a city in southwest Germany, but the plants are thriving on their shelves above the old-fashioned radiators of Mr. Jakob's workshop, where they play the role of muse and inspiration for his jewelry.

"On bad days, I fear no one will understand my work," Mr. Jakob said in an interview. "But so far, I have been lucky."

Mr. Jakob's output defies classification by style or period. A mix of medieval and modern, fantastical design and flawless technique, his jewelry raises ornament to the status of artwork.

Formally trained as an artist, he abandoned that vocation early but still stays closely in touch with the art world. For the past six years, he has been one of the handful of fine jewelers invited to exhibit at the annual European Fine Art Fair, Tefaf, in the Dutch city of Maastricht, an exclusive gathering of the world's top art and antique dealers and jewelry makers.

The fair is virtually his only public showroom. "Presenting my jewelry in a traditional shop is out of the question," he said. "It does not belong there."

Until this year, his booth, confusingly, was assigned to the fair's antique jewelry section: "Visitors used to walk in and ask what period a piece belonged to," he said. "People cannot believe this jewelry is modern and that I make it myself."

This year, he has moved to the contemporary section, alongside Graff, Hemmerle, Van Cleef & Arpels, Chopard and Buccellati.

"Otto Jakob was first selected as a newcomer in Tefaf Showcase, an initiative we launched in 2008 to allow recently established galleries to exhibit on a one-time trial basis," said Ben Janssens, chairman of Tefaf's executive committee.

"We chose him based on his striking designs and his crossover appeal to collectors of jewelry, antiquities, design and contemporary art. His pieces were so outstanding that the following year, we offered him a permanent stand."

Mr. Jakob's fare presented at Tefaf this year is true to his decorative vocabulary. Rock crystal and carved ebony, spinels, brown diamonds and vibrantly colored cloisonné enamel decorate styl-



ized figures of snails, dragons and chameleons — elements that define his lexicon of motifs.

Ever present are his cross pendants, including the Kristallkreuz, in rock crystals from Pakistan, embedded with golden-green inclusions of oil, tar and gas. The center, set with a red spinel, is held by ruby- and diamond-set tentacles and backed by a white gold relief.

"To mix unexpected elements with precious materials is to celebrate nature," Mr. Jakob said. "I like to show the fingerprint that nature's processes leave in the rock."

The Kristallkreuz cross is shown with a white gold chain of partially oxidized links, set with 252 brown diamonds alternating with a dense cluster of 1,275 micro pavé-set white diamonds, the meticulous settings executed, as in most of Mr. Jakob's pieces, using a microscope.

The Corona ear pendants combine Gothic shield-like elements with grayish blue Burmese spinels and diamonds — brown diamonds, diamond briolette beads, and micro pavé-set brilliants.

As with all of Mr. Jakob's pieces, both front and back are sculptured. On average, each one-of-a-kind piece takes nearly 100 hours to make.

His workshop, cluttered with high-tech instruments, is housed in an Art Nouveau building, typical of the city's early 1900s architecture, where he lives upstairs with his family.

He moved to Karlsruhe in 1977 from



Above, La Pietra II, from 2009, is a cross pendant of white gold with Pietra Dura ornaments of black, white and yellow jasper. Left, Hand with Chameleon, from 2006, is made of yellow gold and decorated with enamel and ornaments painted in liquid gold. Below, an ape head carved from Brazilian jasper sits on a white gold ring.



VOLKER KIRSCHNER/OTTO JAKOB (LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW)



Otto Jakob said that to mix unexpected elements with precious materials "is to celebrate nature." Far left, earrings made of Burmese jade quatrefoils mounted in white gold. Left, a gold fern-leaf amulet with enamel-filled engravings and pink spinels. Below, an ebony raven sits upon rock crystals in yellow-gold pendant earrings.

Munich to study at the local art academy with a star of the German art scene, Georg Baselitz; but after a three-year apprenticeship, "I realized I would never become an important artist," he said.

"It was a harsh truth — especially since I had no idea what else to do."

Still, within a few weeks, Mr. Jakob, then 27, found himself a new direction, turning a childhood hobby to practical use.

"I was always good with my hands and could twist metal into something very close to jewelry," he said.

His wife, Veronica, a high-school sweetheart, recalled a school trip to Rome at age 17: Mr. Jakob saw a hand-made ring being sold by a street vendor and promised to make one for her.

"He shaped a metal string into a flower and made me a ring," Mrs. Jakob said. "All my friends wanted one."

Drawn instinctively to his new career, Mr. Jakob said the reawakening of his youthful enthusiasm brought a burst of creativity that guided his hands for the



JOHANNA JAKOB (TOP); TAMARA IMBRIANI/OTTO JAKOB

next three decades. "Suddenly, I could imagine entire collections in my head," he said. "Ideas were rushing so fast, there was no time to sketch them, I had to jot them down."

Taking an unconventional learning route, Mr. Jakob set out to teach himself the jeweler's crafts by visiting museums and studying Etruscan, medieval and Renaissance techniques.

His preferences, he said, quickly went

to the work of Italian goldsmiths, from the Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini to Fortunato Pio Castellani, the 19th century designer.

On his own, he taught himself how to weave gold into chain and make rope-twist decoration. He mastered the technique of cloisonné enamel, and the art of gold granulation, an Etruscan practice dating to hundreds of years before the Christian era, in which tiny grains of gold are applied to a metal surface and heat-fused, one by one, with infinite caution, into place.

"I never feared failure," Mr. Jakob said. "I knew I could overcome any technical problem."

His creations from the outset bore the marks of his training as an artist, but also his personal and characteristic concern for microscopic details and his taste for the one-of-a-kind.

"Baselitz had taught me to paint fast and furiously on a large canvas," he said. "But in the end, I turned to hard discipline and microscopic work."

Early in his new career Mr. Jakob gained the attention of his former mentor, Mr. Baselitz, who acquired some of his pieces, and the financial support of one of Mr. Baselitz's dealers, Hans Neuendorf, who bought virtually all of his production for the first few years.

JAKOB, PAGE S4

Crafted in nature's image

JAKOB, FROM PAGE S2

Mr. Neuendorf would sometimes offer pieces of his jewelry as gifts to important art-collecting clients, he said. Helped by that exposure, Mr. Jakob quickly became a favorite with German artists, collectors and art dealers.

"Otto also got commissions from artists back then," said Daniel Blau, Mr. Baselitz's son and the owner of the Daniel Blau gallery in London and Munich, in an interview from London. "He would develop ideas with them and translate them into a piece of jewelry."

"Otto carved amazing jewelry in ebony and you could see he was an artist and sculptor," Katrin Bellinger, a long-time client and Old Masters drawings dealer, said in a telephone interview from London.

"His pieces were collected by those in the know," she said. "They were impossible to find, and that created his mystique. Otto became the jeweler to the German art scene in the 1980s."

Looking for greater access to the public, Mr. Jakob later ended his exclusive relationship with Mr. Neuendorf: "I had to know what others thought about my work and if my pieces would actually sell," he explained.

Helped by some timely exposure in a German fashion magazine, he obtained financing from a local bank.

"We only had four finished pieces at a time," Mr. Jakob said. "If a fifth customer came, there was nothing left to sell."

Today, Mr. Jakob, 62, employs nine craftsmen in his workshop, working up variations around what he calls 50 "new ideas" to produce about 200 hand-made pieces a year.



JOHANNA JAKOB/OTTO JAKOB

Of these, 70 percent are one-of-a-kind, usually more complex, designs, and the rest are limited series. Prices range from €6,000, or about \$7,800, into the hundreds of thousands.

Reflecting a penchant that he has for using wood and rock crystal, the value of his pieces often is derived less from the materials than from the craftsmanship and artistry.

"It is not jewelry that is in your face," Ms. Bellinger said.

For Mr. Jakob, it is often about making everyday, wearable things, exceptionally well: "A piece of jewelry is sophisticated when it leaves a thief indifferent but turns the connoisseur's head," he said.

Intense greenish-yellow diamonds decorate the center of these earrings, providing a base for petals carved in ivory and chrysoprase.