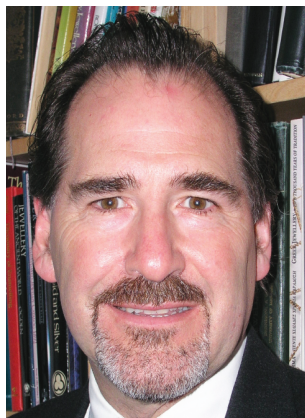


Behind the scenes

Ancient & Modern



**Jack Ogden,
Chief Executive
of Gem-A, asks
what is real...
or not so real.**

At a recent dinner party, I sat opposite a woman who wore a large, colourless stone ring on her finger – some six to seven carats by the look of it. Sad to admit, but from a few feet away I could not work out whether I was looking at a mega-bucks diamond set in platinum or a CZ set in rhodium-plated silver. I can use the excuse of the somewhat subdued lighting and the fact that her hand was continually moving as she ate, but I have to come clean; I caught myself using alternative gem-testing rule number 1 – judge the wearer; not the gem. Was this woman the sort of person who would own and wear a ring worth a hundred thousand pounds or so?

I agree this approach is flawed, but it is common and not applicable only to gems. Is that a real or fake Prada handbag? To answer that question, we look at who is clasping it, her make-up, her hair; her shoes and whatever else she is wearing. Because expensive jewellery has traditionally been worn to exhibit self-esteem, wealth or rank – though of course that only works if the audience recognises what is being worn. At another dinner party – an ancient Roman one described in Petronius's *Satyricon* – the hostess passed her gold jewellery around the table for her guests to admire, and her husband then passed round scales so the diners could weigh the ornaments and check how valuable they were.

I doubt that my modern ring wearer would dream of anything quite so blatant, but she might have fallen into another trap. If her ring was real, she could have done a semi-Petronius and got the piece, its cost, its valuation or its origin into the conversation; if it was a fake, she would have kept quiet. That is alternative gem-testing rule number 2: silence means fake.

OK, my comments are slightly tongue-in-cheek, but there is a serious side to all this that designers need to think about. As a designer you want to create something that the eventual wearer will be proud of – you don't want to set out to create fakes or to use materials for which you feel slightly apologetic.

Hence, with metals in particular, the challenge for many is to put a positive spin on the more economically-friendly ones. Take copper for example, a metal increasingly being used by jewellery designers. It suffers from low esteem – it is a base metal, used for plumbing and other mundane stuff. But so what? Gold is used in electrical contacts, silver has been significantly used in photography, and platinum is an auto-catalyst. Copper just needs better PR.

Most of the startling and beautiful jewellery and personal ornaments made over the last 5,000 years have been made of copper or one of a variety of alloys of copper. Some of the greatest artists throughout history have worked in copper or copper alloys. Freed from being shackled to costly materials, design and artistry can take wing and copper jewellery can become something to be proud of. Revel in copper's history and tradition, exploit its amazing colours and properties. Use its beautiful salmon colour (lacquered if you want to keep it that shade) or try one of the many ways of altering its hue, such as creating black copper by adding a couple of percent of gold, a gorgeous effect used both in ancient times and more recently in Japan under the name *shakudo*. Alternatively, try little gold or silver inlays against a copper background – they look amazing. Plus, make your gold work for its living – copper alloy jewellery can stain the skin or clothing, but gild their under-surfaces and the problem disappears.

I'm using copper as just one example. Aluminium was counted as a beautiful precious metal a hundred and fifty years ago, with top jewellery designers working with it. Just because it's now far easier and cheaper to produce, surely it hasn't lost its potential to be beautiful?

A final thought to ponder on. Trimalchio, the host of that aforementioned dinner party in Petronius' *Satyricon*, wore a gold-plated copper-alloy ring; he wore it because, as *nouveau riche*, he was not entitled to wear the gold ring that was a privilege of knightly rank. But surely after 2000 years we might hope that all jewellery wearers, even the *nouveau riche*, would have grown out of this need to flaunt or pretend value at the expense of design and taste.

Surely it is better to be proud of fine designs and workmanship in aluminium, copper, titanium, iron or any other metal – to be proud of them for what they are, rather than to pretend that rhodium plated silver and CZ are what they are not.

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