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Jewelry

A Cut Above

Heritage with a heart of gold

Modern machinery is allowing brands to expand on traditional handcrafted methods

VICENZA, ITALY

BY VICTORIA GOMELSKY

Earlier this year, the Italian gold jeweler Pope introduced its new collection of Flex'it necklaces by throwing an extravagant party for about 200 guests at a 17th-century estate on the outskirts of this city in the Veneto region, a UNESCO World Heritage site about 50 miles west of Venice.

To highlight the flexibility of its patented Flex'it gold mesh chains, the brand, founded here in 1928, had members of Urban Theory, a popular hip-hop dance troupe based in Milan, perform their signature tutting style — moving their limbs in dramatic angular poses. The gold necklaces they used as props glinted in the candlelight.

"A good performance is like a good piece of jewelry," said Valentina Bertoldo, Pope's content marketing manager above the din of the crowd. "You say, 'Wow' but behind it is all this research, skill, precision, technicality."

You could say the same thing about the jewelry industry around Vicenza.

Home to a goldsmithing tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, this city of 110,000 is best known among tourists for its concentration of buildings by the 16th-century architect Andrea Palladio, not to mention its jewelry museum, located in the palatial Basilica Palladiana that dominates the central piazza. It also is a hub for jewelry companies that continue to promote traditional handcrafts even as they experiment with cutting-edge techniques such as powder metallurgy — reducing precious metals to powder to be used in 3-D printing, or what the industry calls additive manufacturing.

It is the kind of advancement that will allow jewelers to execute designs that are impossible to achieve through traditional casting methods, ensuring both quality and consistent results.

Vicenza is, without any doubt, the technological core of the machinery production for the gold sector," Giovanni



Bertaglio, the chief operation officer at Berken, a supplier of plating equipment and chemical solutions for the jewelry industry, based in nearby Padua, wrote in an email. "The center has given thanks to close collaboration between jewelry companies and technology suppliers, cooperation that has always been seen as fundamental to the companies' evolution and growth."

That is especially true now, in the

wake of the pandemic, which saw demand for "Made in Italy" jewelry soar in step with demand for fine jewelry in general.

In 2022, exports of Italian gold and silver jewelry reached 9.8 billion euros (about \$13.8 billion), a 22.3 percent increase over the same period in 2021, and a 40.8 percent increase over the same period in 2019, according to Confindustria Federatara, a national association

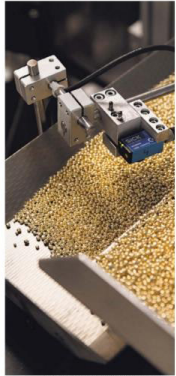
representing companies in Italy's jewelry manufacturing sector.

Daniuso Zito, the chief executive of Progold, which designs and manufactures jewelry in Trissino, a small town about 15 miles west of Vicenza, said the pandemic highlighted an issue that has plagued the Italian industry for the better part of the past decade: its dwindling number of skilled workers.

"After Covid, the demand for jewelry production in Italy totally exploded and now the biggest issue is to find people and goldsmiths that can help you make the orders," said Mr. Zito, who is considered a pioneer in additive manufacturing. "This has not happened in Italy since the early 2000s."

WEST-STAR
Vicenza is one of three cities in Italy

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CREATIVE MIND

A designer's helping hands

How 3-D printing is helping jewelers create new designs



MANUFACTURING

Heritage with a heart of gold

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famed for jewelry manufacturing. Valenza, in the Piedmont region south-west of Milan, is home to a cluster of high-end makers who specialize in gem-set jewelry (including Bulgari and Cartier, both of which operate multi-million-dollar high-tech factories in Valenza and in nearby Turin). Acrezo, in eastern Tuscany, is best known for its mass-produced gold and silver chains, many bound for the Middle East.

What separates Vicenza from the other two centers is the number of machinery and equipment suppliers based in and around the city, promoting the marriage of technology and tradition that has helped homegrown companies survive decades of globalization.

"In the '80s, there were so many people — not just in jewelry but everywhere — who decided it was cheaper to produce in the Far East or Eastern Europe," said Mr. Bertoldo of Pope, which has its factory just two miles west of Vicenza's central Piazza dei Signori.

"Some came back, some didn't, but we stayed," she added. "And by staying — production has always been here, crafts- men, machines, R&D, everything developed here."

Roberto Cini, whose eponymous brand produces its jewelry through a wholly owned subsidiary, La Quinta Stagione, took a similar approach. Its factory, established in Vicenza in 1998, adapted technologies from the automotive industry for use in making jewelry.

Carlo Cini, Roberto's son and the president and chief executive of La Quinta Stagione, declined to specify the techniques that the company uses.

"We're one of the most copied brands at

the moment," he said. "We have lawyers blocking Instagram sites on a daily basis. I don't need them to know how the jewelry is made."

But without technology, producing jewelry in volumes at a consistent quality level would be all but impossible, he said.

However, he also emphasized that the brand still finishes all of its pieces by hand. "Technology can be boring and cold," Mr. Cini said. "We want our jewelry to have life in it."

That mix of innovation and tradition is key to the continuing success of Italian-made jewelry, said Marco Carnalis, the global exhibition director of the Jewelry & Fashion Division of the Italian Exhibition Group. The business organizes Vicenzaoro, a twice-yearly event that is Italy's largest gold and jewelry fair by the number of both exhibitors and attendees.

"Now in Italy, we have 7,100 companies in the jewelry industry," Mr. Carnalis said during an interview at the Vicenzaoro fair in January. "It was more or less double 10 to 15 years ago. So now it's consolidating a lot, but the ones who are consolidating, they are full of creativity, they survive many shocks, they have strong ownership and they keep innovating."

As an example, he cited the fair's T-Gold pavilion, a 100,000-square-foot hall that was housing nearly 200 exhibitors selling laser welders, 3-D printers for resin and metals, and chain-making machines, among other heavy machinery. "It's the most powerful area we have," Mr. Carnalis said.

One of the most prominent exhibitors in T-Gold was the Leger Group, a supplier of metal alloys based in the small town of Brensanico, northeast of Vicenza.

Fabio Di Falco, Leger's marketing and customer support manager, said the company established a strategic partnership with the printer manufacturer HP five years ago and is now experimenting with a prototype version of its new binder jet 3-D printer.

"A binder jet works like a normal ink jet but, instead of ink, we have a roller that spreads metal powders layer upon layer," Mr. Di Falco said. "This technology allows people to create something different than with existing technology. It helps them think in a different way and create different shapes."

Mr. Di Falco said the biggest obstacle for Italian companies intrigued by the possibilities of 3-D printing directly in



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GOODMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

metal was the cost of the metal powders.

"These printers are really big and require a huge volume of powder: about 140 kilos," or about 130 pounds, to operate, Mr. Di Falco said. "Imagine with gold, it's not so cheap."

Despite the complex barriers, Mr. Zito, the chief executive of Progold, believes it is only a matter of time before additive manufacturing becomes mainstream in the jewelry industry.

"It's not tension, it's opportunity," Mr. Zito said. "Because when you are able to mix technology and artistry, you make something very unique."

"This is why Italian jewelry is different," she added. "Because we have our heritage, we know what is really special from us, and we also have technology to perfect the quality. But the last touch is always human."

MADE BY HAND

Holders, however, remain. Marco Bicego, a native of Vicenza, grew up in

the industry ("I was born with a bar of gold," he said). His father, Giuseppe, founded a wholesale jewelry company in Trissino in 1958. In 2000, the younger Mr. Bicego took the lessons that he had learned working on a bench for his father, modernized the designs and founded his own eponymous brand, now sold in upscale jewelry stores around the United States and Europe.

"We are taking advantage of new technologies like 3-D machines to make prototypes, laser machines to test diamonds, but still, 80 percent of our jewelry is made by hand," Mr. Bicego said.

He described a hand-engraving technique that relies on an ancient tool known as the ballie, which resembles an ice pick. "This artisan has to scratch the gold and create a line, and just to make a necklace it takes easily 5,000 movements of the hands."

That many Italian jewelers like Mr. Bicego insist on emphasizing their devotion to the past seems to suggest an inherent tension with the possibilities of the future.

But Claudia Piazzecchi, the product development manager at Pope and president of the jewelry manufacturers' association Confindustria Federatara, disputed that characterization.

"It's not tension, it's opportunity," Ms. Piazzecchi said at the Vicenzaoro fair in January. "Because when you are able to mix technology and artistry, you make something very unique."

"This is why Italian jewelry is different," she added. "Because we have our heritage, we know what is really special from us, and we also have technology to perfect the quality. But the last touch is always human."

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Far left, yet-to-be-engraved components of a Marco Bicego piece sitting next to a finished piece created with laser engraving. Near left, this process of working the gold by hand, gives it a sleek, organic look and satin sheen, as seen in this 18-karat yellow gold piece.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GOODMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES