

Black Magic

By David Federman



Etrusco

While the silver world discovers the joys of whitening using tarnish-resistant alloys, some are forsaking anti-oxidation for pro-oxidation. And no wonder. Blackening allows silver to shine with unique glints and gleams never seen with gold – ones that enhance almost any gem.

“I want you to close your eyes,” cross-country and craft show silversmith Jared Feltner instructs me during a brief stopover in Philadelphia. When I do, he asks: “Have you ever seen a rainbow on an oil slick?” After I nod yes, he says: “Then you noticed the soft suffusion of spectral colours, right?” I nod a second time. “That’s iridescence,” he proclaims. “Now open your eyes.”

Feltner dangles a trio of large silver bangle earrings in front of me. When he asks me what I see, I tell him: “The colours of an oil slick... only the colours are running riot.”

“Right,” he says. “There’s a rainbow riot going on in these bangles.” He hands me the group. Each is a distinctly different shade of colour. Amazed, I quip: “If this is tarnish, please give me more.”

Astonished by the different hues of the metal, I ask him how he trained tarnish to perform such tricks. “I unleashed the power of oxidation on silver,” he explains. “It is alchemy in reverse.”

Feltner has a ready retort when I wonder if customers get turned off by all the tarnish. “This isn’t houseware. You don’t eat off an earring. These are pieces of jewellery. Prettiness is

more important than practicality,” he insists. “The jewellery world is fighting against an inherent property of silver when it should be celebrating it. I am harnessing the full power of tarnish to make it an agent of beauty.”

Black on white

Blackening of silver jewellery – or what might be called controlled tarnishing – is not new, but it is news.

Accelerated oxidation to give silver jewellery various gradations of tarnish over time is steadily recruiting more advocates. As Jack Gualtieri of Zaffiro Jewelry, Portland, Oregon, puts it: “The gradual wearing away of tarnish in high-relief and close-contact areas of silver jewellery gives a kind of two-tone effect. But blackening is about achieving something far more visually stimulating.”

Silver is a latecomer at Zaffiro. Two years ago, after 18 years of gold jewellery designing alone, Jack and his wife Elizabeth decided to create a line of blackened silver jewellery called Etrusco. Since Zaffiro is known for 22-karat granulated gold jewellery, the company offered designs that combined blackened silver with their mainstay metal – plus the many fine gems like diamonds, rubies

and sapphires they love to use. The pieces, all handmade but duplicable, retail for anywhere between US\$200 and US\$6,000, with most of the sales falling in an enviable US\$1,000 to US\$2,000 range.

For the time being, the Gualtieris are sticking exclusively with blackened silver. Actually, “oxidised” would be a better word since their pieces have a distinctive colouration reminiscent, to these eyes at least, of certain Tahitian black pearls with eggplant-purple and peacock-blue overtones.

But overtones are only part of the magic. Pedro Boregaard of Narrowsburg, New York, has been blackening silver for as long as he can remember. At least 90 percent of his silver pieces are blackened to some extent, with subtle custom touches created by the deft use of thumb-spread Tripoli compound.

From a standpoint of texture and tonality, no two pieces are alike; nor could they ever be. And this, says Boregaard, gives silver an advantage over gold. “Endless textural variety,” he exclaims.

Likewise, the Gualtieris give the same final individuation of appearance to their silver pieces.

The rule of thumb

Most silver is blackened in a time-honoured way through immersion in a heated liver of sulphur solution. When



Etrusco

asked for a recommended water temperature of these chemical baths, Gualtieri laughs and says: “Whenever the tea kettle whistles, we’re at the right temperature.”

Although some manufacturers use high-speed chemical oxidisers such as Black Max, I could find none who did or had ever entertained the idea of doing so. To them, this is oxidation pushed to a needless extreme.

Although every artisan interviewed for this article used liver of sulphur, all had their own recipes and rituals as far as time and temperature went. Usually, dips were around 10 seconds, but these could vary, depending on the depth of colour and final overtone desired. What’s more, some designers do rapid repeat immersions.

Depending on the number and length of dippings, overtones can run a wide but gentle gamut from soft bronze to heathery blue and pewter-gray to eggplant-purple.

But there’s more to this technique than immersion. Both Boregaard and Gualtieri give each piece a final finish by applying Tripoli with their thumb to create custom hand-rubbed textures. “Silver has a drama which gold lacks,” Boregaard says. “Blackening, coupled with hand (or should I say finger?) finishing, allows the artist to heighten this drama.”

Although accelerated oxidation involves chemicals that give off an odour reminiscent of rotten eggs,

no one we talked to felt the process particularly noxious or hazardous. Yes, take care to have proper ventilation and keep gloves and goggles nearby. But there is no need for experienced craftsmen to be worried about danger to themselves or the environment.

Anything goes – gemwise

Blackened silver is becoming more and more associated with fine jewellery. By fine, I mean jewellery meant to scale price heights above US\$1,000 and, in Boregaard’s encouraging case, US\$5,000 – even US\$10,000 retail.

Not surprisingly, pieces in silver’s stratosphere often feature diamond melee and smaller precious stones (say around 3mm) such as ruby and sapphire, as well as tsavorite, tourmaline and aquamarine – no blue topaz, synthetics or cubic zirconia, please. Amethyst, citrine and rhodolite garnet are alright but stones must be well cut and high-grade.

“We use larger precious stones in our all-gold pieces which can command as much as US\$6,000,” Gualtieri says. “But so far we have restricted ourselves to smaller coloured stones in our silver pieces. Economics demand it.”

Looking at pieces by Gualtieri and Boregaard – almost all of them tinged, touched or trimmed with gold – one realises that blackened

silver is creating a very wide and wild vortex for gems. Both designers list an impressive multitude of precious, alternate and even ornamental stones that they have used in their pieces.

When asked why this is so, Boregaard answers that blackened silver projects such an aura of intricate, inspired artistry that it invites the companionship of a diverse number of traditional and non-traditional gems. Gualtieri feels that the infinite amount of texture and colour shadings possible with accelerated oxidation lends itself to experimentation with a wide variety of gems.

As for me, I think blackened silver represents a new crossroads between precious silver and precious stones. First, the technique allows silver to transcend its residual second-class status as a gold alternative and reposition itself as a new primary precious metal. As such, it has its own aesthetic properties and possibilities.

Feltner thinks blackened silver is the beginning of a new day for the metal. “Accelerated oxidation allows silver-makers to think in new ways about precious metal – ones not possible with gold or platinum,” he notes. “You might say that deliberate tarnishing will soon help silver put gold on the defensive.”

From the looks of the fabulous jewellery it has inspired, I’d have to say it has already put gold on notice that silver is now its equal among precious metals.

黑色魔法



Etrusco

在銀飾業內，有人忙著使用防暗啞合金來保持白銀光潔亮麗，那邊廂也有業者希望營造出氧化銀的效果。當然，黑化讓純銀散發獨一無二的特質，一種黃金無法展現的美態。更難得的是，黑化銀幾乎能令所有寶石變得更光彩奪目。

Jared Feltner是巡迴全國的銀飾工匠，經常出席大小展覽會，我在他短暫停留費城時訪問了他。「請閉上眼睛。」他對我說。當我閉上眼睛後，他問道：「你有看過浮油上面的彩虹嗎？」我點頭表示看過，他再說：「那麼你一定有發現它所展現的柔和光譜，對吧？」我再點頭。他說：「那就是虹彩。現在，睜開你的眼睛吧。」

Feltner先生拿著銀耳環在我面前晃動，他問我看到什麼時，我回答說：「就像浮油上面的色彩，只是，這些顏色美得五彩繽紛。」

「對了。」他說。「這些銀圈上的彩虹色彩可以說是喧鬧繽紛。」他把耳環交到我手上，它們都擁有獨特的色調。我感到十分驚訝，然後笑說：「如果這叫作暗啞，那請給我多些暗啞。」沒錯，那確是氧化銀的樣子。

這種金屬可以展現出不同色調，實在叫我目瞪口呆，我問他如何把暗啞“訓練”成這樣，令它們做出如此好玩的戲法。他解釋道：「我把氧化銀的力量釋放出來，這是逆向的鍊金術。」

當我懷疑市場會否被這些暗啞的顏色嚇怕時，Feltner先生早已準備好答案。「這不是家庭用品，你不會把耳環吃進口中。這些是珠寶，漂亮從來都比實用性重要。」他堅持道：「珠寶世界一直以來都意圖擊退白銀與生俱來的特質，但其實他們應該讓這種特質發揮美態。我所做的是駕馭氧化銀的力量，令暗啞成為美麗的代言人。」

黑白輝映

黑化銀飾又稱被控制的暗啞，它並不是新事物，卻是業內的新喜訊。

加快銀飾氧化以展露出不同調子的暗啞，已令產品越來越受歡迎。俄勒崗波特蘭Zaffiro Jewellery的Jack Gualtieri便這樣認為：「銀飾上突出的位置因為與皮膚緊密接觸，佩戴後便會慢慢出現暗啞，這現象為飾物帶來兩種調子，但黑化所達致的效果在視覺上要比這種自然出現的現象更為突出。」

純銀在Zaffiro是後起之秀。兩年前，Jack和太太Elizabeth在從事18年黃金珠寶設計後，決定創製一系列黑化銀飾，並命名為Etrusco。由於Zaffiro的招牌產品是22K黃金首飾，該公司便推出結合黑化銀和黃金的款式，再配以他們愛用的物料，如鑽石、紅寶石和藍寶石等。這些設計全部由人手製作，但可以複製。各地零售價約為200至6,000美元，最暢銷的產品定價為1,000至2,000美元之間。

Gualtieris先生現時繼續專心發展黑化銀飾。事實上，「氧化」會是一個更合適的用語，因為這是首飾獨有的色譜。我眼中所見，包括了大溪地珍珠的黑色，配以茄子的紫色和孔雀藍色等豐富調子。

這只是魔法的其中一部份，紐約Narrowsburg的Pedro Boregaard在很久以前已開始製作黑化銀飾。他的銀飾產品中，最少有九成擁有一定程度的黑

化，巧妙地運用拇指塗抹矽藻土合成物造出精細的特製效果。從質感和色調的角度而言，沒有任何一件首飾與另一件相同，而實際上也不可能出現完全相同的兩件首飾。這個特點，據Boregaard所說，能令純銀超越黃金。他驚歎說：「它可以做出無盡的質感變化。」

同樣地，Gualtieris先生也在他的銀飾產品中加上最後的個性化效果。

致勝之道

大部份黑化銀飾都採用一直以來的古法，就是把銀件浸泡在加熱的硫化溶液裡。我問到這些化學浴的建議溫度時，Gualtieri先生大笑道：「當茶壺要發出響聲，我們便知道到溫度對了。」

儘管一些製造商採用Black Max一類高速化學氧化劑，我卻沒有遇上曾經使用或認為值得使用這種方法的業者。對他們來說，這樣是把氧化過程推向一個不必要的極端。

雖然本文所訪問的每一位技師都採用硫化溶液的方法，但他們都擁有獨門秘方與習慣，以及特定的時間和溫度設定。一般來說，他們都會把飾物浸泡10秒左右，但具體時間卻有所不同，視乎他們希望得到的最終色深效果。此外，一些設計師會快速地重複浸泡，視乎浸泡的次數和時間長短，以達致不同色調，一般由淡銅色至藍色，或白鑽灰至茄子般的紫色應有盡有。

當然，這個技巧除了浸泡還有很多學問。Boregaard先生和Gualtieri先生分別都在每件飾品製作的最後步驟中，以拇指塗上矽藻土合成物來突出特別的手抹質感。「純銀擁有黃金欠奉的戲劇性。」Boregaard先生說：「黑化，加上手工

(應該說成指工嗎?)的最後處理，讓技師把這種戲劇性發揮得淋漓盡致。」

雖然加速氧化的過程中會使用氣味像變壞雞蛋一樣的化學物質，受訪人士中卻沒有人認為這個過程特別令人反感或有害。沒錯，小心保持空氣流通，把手套和護目鏡放在容易取用的地方當然要做好。對於經驗十足的技師來說，使用這些化學品時，實在毋須擔心它對自己或環境會造成危險。

搭配寶石

黑化銀已逐漸被認為是頂級珠寶的一份子，我所指的頂級，是指首飾的訂價高於1,000美元的檔次。以Boregaard先生的產品系列為例，便能賣得5,000美元甚至10,000美元，訂價十分進取。

當然，在這個高檔次的銀飾品一般都鑲有碎鑽和尺碼較小的寶石(直徑約為3毫米)，如紅寶石、藍寶石、電氣石和海藍寶石等。藍黃玉、合成石或鉻石嗎？太平價的便作罷好了。紫水晶、黃晶和玫瑰榴石也是可考慮的寶石，但必需要切割精良、質量上乘才配得上高檔次的設計。

Gualtieri先生指出：「我們在純金首飾中使用大尺碼的寶石，售價可高至6,000美元。但到目前為止，我們都很約束自己，只在銀飾中使用尺碼較小的有色寶石，經濟環境對這種設計大有需求。」

看著Gualtieri先生和Boregaard先生的成品，幾乎每一件都經黃金鑲邊做出裝飾。兩位設計師都列出了多種他們曾用以點綴作品的寶石、代用石甚至彩石。當我問到他們為何會選擇採用這些寶石時，Boregaard先生指出黑化銀能

投射出精緻的氣息，而且充滿藝術氣質，能夠與各式傳統或非傳統寶石搭配。Gualtieri先生則認為加速氧化令銀飾得出無窮無盡的質感和色調，自然是配上各種寶石的最佳飾品。

對我來說，我認為黑化銀代表了貴重純銀與寶石之間的全新交匯點。首先，黑化技巧讓純銀的地位把昇華，令其可以重新把自己定位為新的主要貴金屬。因此，它擁有獨特的美態和無盡的可能。

Feltner先生認為黑化銀將在銀飾業界創出另一片天空。他表示：「加速氧化令銀飾製作人以新的思維對待這種貴金屬，而這新態度是在黃金或鉑金領域中不可能出現的。你可以說，刻意製造的暗啞效果，很快便會令銀飾成為黃金飾物的強勁對手。」

氧化銀是這些耀眼奪目首飾的靈感來源，看到它們，我不得不說銀飾已清楚向黃金表明，白銀已跟黃金一樣，成為貴金屬中同樣舉足輕重的一員。**銀**



Etrusco