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SPECIAL REPORT: JEWELRY

Obsession With Golden Fleece Alive in Collection

By EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

Giovanni Corvaja, an Italian jeweler from the northern city of Padua, graduated precociously, age 21, from the Royal College of Art in London 17 years ago and has since pursued a strategy of radical experimentation, fueled by a love of his primary material, gold.

Adept at drawing precious metal threads out to the thinness of one-fifth of a human hair, he has become renowned for his exquisite geometric structures in which he hangs fine clouds of gold, niello or platinum wire, sometimes seeded with pearls or other metal beads. These brooches and pendants, priced from £10,000, or about \$16,000, up, have found their way into museum and private jewelry collections across the world.

For the past 12 years, however, Mr. Corvaja has been haunted by a yet more ambitious dream — to create gold wires so fine that en masse they become as soft as fur, a true golden fleece.

Visitors next March to the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht, the Netherlands, will see a startling realization of that fantasy: four pieces — a necklace with furry egg-shaped pendant; a fur cuff fit for a Snow Queen; a ring of gold fleece; and a circular brooch as sleek and soft as mink — which, together with a remarkable headpiece that will not be shown, make up Mr. Corvaja's "Golden Fleece Collection."

The mythic scope of his quest is not lost on Mr. Corvaja. "This has been a 10-year idea and a 2-year process," he said in an interview. "Jason's voyage, too, was 12 years."

In place of Jason's trials at sea with the Argonauts and on land in Colchis, where the fleece hung on a tree guarded by a dragon and the jealous King Aeetes, Mr. Corvaja has had technical difficulties to overcome.

"First I developed a system to draw down the wire to the size of a silk fiber," he said: "Then I designed a special alloy of gold that is particularly ductile and at the same time has a very beautiful color. Then I studied textile techniques and developed several looms to weave gold."

Weaving turned out to be one of the hardest tasks: "I made six different looms myself, one out of 22,000 different parts," Mr. Corvaja said. "None of which did work."

Eventually, he found "the easiest method was using some very ancient Japanese weaving techniques, in between braiding and weaving. The surface is like real soft fur. I am satisfied."

Mr. Corvaja's almost obsessive relationship with gold and other metals goes back to his childhood. "Ever since I was a child I found metals very interesting: the way they feel at the touch, the way they reflect the light, the way they absorb so quickly the warmth of our hands," he said.

Both Mr. Corvaja's parents were academics and chemists. His father was a professor of chemistry at the University of Padua, and he says that some of his romance with gold has to do with a sense of reverence for its chemical history — the billions of years and quantities of energy required to create it.

"When I hold in my hand a piece of gold, I can feel that energy," he said. "I am aware that I am in front of a moment of creation, a miracle of nature."

Accustomed as a child to handling scraps of metal, by the age of 11 he was asking for oxyacetylene welding equipment to melt silver and gold. By age 13 he knew that “working with gold and spending my life transforming it” was his destiny.

By chance, or fate, he had been born in the right place. Under the guidance of the master goldsmith Mario Pinton, the Pietro Selvatico art school in Padua had developed, in the 20th century, a distinctive and world-recognized tradition of fine contemporary gold art jewelry.

Mr. Corvaja began his studies there, at age 13, under one of Mr. Pinton’s most inspiring pupils, Francesco Pavan: “Pavan is a pure man. He doesn’t make compromises,” Mr. Corvaja said. “He says, ‘Don’t think about the market; think about the art.’”

Soon, in addition to school and art school, Mr. Corvaja was spending his afternoons in Mr. Pavan’s studio. By the time he was 18 he was a fully fledged goldsmith, with his own studio, and the certainty that he could make his way in the world.

His technical virtuosity and creative self-confidence caught the attention of David Watkins, then the head of goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork and jewelry at the Royal College of Art. Mr. Watkins admitted the 18-year-old to the prestigious post-graduate institution, waiving a requirement that students hold a bachelor’s degree. At the college, moving freely between departments, “I learned an awful lot of disciplines and techniques,” Mr. Corvaja said.

It was after he emerged from the college and began exhibiting and winning prizes that he conceived the idea of making golden cloth. At first in Padua, and recently in the central Italian hilltop town of Todi, while he continued to make exquisite one-of-a-kind pieces, the dream of the Golden Fleece held him in thrall.

So, it will be with some ceremony that his collection will be shown on the Adrian Sassoon stand at Maastricht. The brooch alone, the first piece to be made, consists of 250,050 gold wires — 4.8 kilometers, or three miles, of wire in total; the egg-shaped pendant took 22.5 kilometers of wire and 950 man hours to make; even the furry ring, more than a kilometer and a half of wire.

The shapes have symbolic significance for Mr. Corvaja — the ring of fidelity, the egg of fecundity, the circular brooch of prosperity and the bracelet, its inner surface decorated with 4,000 platinum granules, an emblem of commitment, perhaps honoring the 1,250 hours that went into its making.

The headpiece, not on show, is the crown of all: “a symbol of power, this headpiece is also to me a magic object,” Mr. Corvaja said.

Given the work and the materials, these will be extremely expensive objects. But like the Golden Fleece itself, the price is not the point: It is the power of the magic. “The power is given by the beauty and particular qualities of gold,” Mr. Corvaja said. “No-one is immune to that.”