

## The Golden Fleece by Giovanni Corvaja: The Embodiment of a Myth

### Interview with Giovanni Corvaja by Maria Rubtsova

*There is a symbol of the eternal nature of perpetuity, power and order: the Golden Fleece of a divine goat.  
It is guarded in a distant land across the sea where no one has been.  
It brings good luck to the kings and guarantees that their kingdom would endure forever.*

*Pierpaolo Pasolini, "Medea", 1969*

For Giovanni Corvaja the artistic, formal and technical research is more than merely a job; it is the mission and philosophy of his life. His constant research led him, some twelve years ago, to an idea: the creation of the Golden Fleece. This idea evolved from two different influences.

Firstly, in the early '90s, Giovanni developed a system that enabled him to reduce gold and platinum to the dimension of one fifth of a human hair. This opened a whole new world of expressive possibilities in the field of jewellery to him. Precious metals turned into delicate fibres under his hands: soft, ethereal matter, very pleasant to the touch, possessing the unique power of symbology and magic of gold. The experience of touching that material was as pleasurable as caressing fur. So, Giovanni became obsessed with a desire to create objects both beautiful and sensually tactile.

Moreover, the frequent encounters with the Golden Fleece in his studies on Alchemy provided the other impulse for Giovanni's creativity. The Golden Fleece was often used as a metaphor for the Philosopher's Stone, the elixir, the pursuit of perfection through a process of improvement and purification: through labour. This intriguing idea made "the Search of the Golden Fleece" a necessity for him.

Thus, more than ten years ago, Giovanni decided to pursue his dream of finding his Philosopher's Stone, his Golden Fleece. But he decided to *make* it instead of *looking for* it.

Whether one sails to the Colchis searching for it or decides to make it in his workshop, the quest of the Golden Fleece is not at all an easy task. The actual making of the gold fur presented many technical obstacles. It had taken Giovanni years of total dedication to overcome all the difficulties. Every single step of the job was carried by the hand of Giovanni in person.

As a result, the new collection of five unique pieces with symbolic forms on the theme was presented to the public for the first time in a special exhibition Modern Masters in Munich, Germany, in spring 2009.

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**M.R.: Giovanni, the inspiration for the Golden Fleece Collection comes from the myth. How important was the myth during the actual making of the pieces?**

G.C.: The Ancient Greeks said: "*O Mythos deloi*" (*the Myth teaches*). Myth, on the one hand, and Alchemy on the other, helped me understand what this quest was about: a hermetic journey into the unknown.

The Myth is a great Master of Life. Every good master should be with his disciple until the latter is capable of being independent, and finding his own way. But the lessons of the master will always be with him throughout the journey. The Myth was my guide. The main lesson to learn from it was that no great enterprise is accomplished without a great effort. I had to repeat this to myself many times during the process.

**M.R.: How important is the myth, now that some pieces are ready? Have the objects become divorced from the original "mythical" concept, or has the link become even stronger?**

G.C.: The objects are definitely not free from their original mythical concept. I wouldn't want that. No more than the *Myth* is free from the existence of those objects, now. The whole Myth has changed its meaning. At least for me.

**M.R.: The fur has been dictated by the myth. What is the explanation for the choice of the shapes? They are intentionally symbolic...**

G.C.: They are, indeed.

The myth is a form of literature which speaks to the unconscious of us all. This is why many myths from very different cultures, have a great number of parallel themes.

Although through myth we can learn about ancient history, society and the way of thinking, its main purpose is to answer the fundamental questions: *what* we are and *why*. A myth analyzes the relationship between humans, between humans and the divine, between humans and nature. It communicates the message to us through symbols. In this sense a myth is very similar to fairy tales and sacred texts.

The shapes I have chosen for my pieces represent eternal symbols that speak directly to the unconscious. The objects symbolize: *fecundity* (the egg pendant), *prosperity* (the round brooch), *commitment* (the ring), *fidelity* (the bracelet), *strength and perpetuity of power* (the headpiece)... They have many other meanings though. And the collection is not completed yet.

**M.R.: This collection is a great risk. What makes you take it? Is it self-confidence?**

G.C.: First of all, generally speaking, I am not attracted by safe games.

When I embarked upon this project, I didn't have a clear idea of how I would fulfil this task. It required ten years of research before I could start the practical making. Many experiments, and the special tools I developed along the way, led me gradually in the right direction. Now I knew exactly *what* I wanted to make. Slowly I started to understand *why*. And as soon as I realized *how*, I was ready to begin.

I needed all these years to build my self-confidence, the knowledge and a clear vision on the matter. I was not ready before. Doubtlessly, the curiosity was the main force that attracted me to this project. Probably an improvement in myself will be the reward.

**M.R.: Where do you get the energy to embark on such ambitious projects and see them through?**

G.C.: From love.

**M.R.: I know that the process of making is very important for you, sometimes even more important than the result. The pieces from the Golden Fleece Collection must be different – they are exceptionally laborious and unique. You can't underestimate the satisfaction and preciousness of the result. So, has your approach towards "process-result" changed?**

G.C.: Work is one of the most noble of the human activities. Creative work is particularly enjoyable and gratifying. If one likes the job, one should learn to enjoy every second of it. Every part of a job is a moment of transformation, and so it should be regarded.

There is something fascinating in the process of making, regardless of how fast or slow it is. Something grows under your hands, takes a desired shape and, finally, becomes more accomplished and perfect. At the same time, one becomes transformed by the Craft itself. It is always a mutual relationship.

Completing a job is just *one* moment, the moment of "separation", actually. In that very moment one "gets free" from the fulfilled task and starts dedicating the attention to the next one.

If one seeks only the result of the job, one will certainly miss all the beauty of the process and struggle most of one's life for some very rare moments of satisfaction.

For me all the stages of making a piece, even those that one might consider tedious, have equal dignity and importance. Whether I am melting some gold for an ingot, drawing down an endless wire or inscribing my

signature on the finished object, there is no “first-class” and “second-class” activity. I consider every job to be a meditation.

As the contemporary Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh suggests: *“When Washing the dishes you might be thinking about the tea afterwards and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink tea. But that means you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you are drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life. [...] Chopping wood is meditation, caring water is meditation”*.

I regard the Craft as a journey, not a destination: reaching the end is not as important as the way itself. For the pieces of the Golden Fleece Collection that is crucial. Each piece requires thousands of hours of precise labour and hundreds of kilometres of gold wire. I wouldn't be able to undertake such a commitment if I didn't appreciate the importance of every moment of it.

**M.R.: Although we've been hearing and reading about the mythical Golden Fleece for thousands of years, objects of this kind had never been made before. Why, do you think?**

G.C.: Although the Craft of working precious metals is more than six millennia old, some knowledge and technical possibilities have been acquired only in the last couple of centuries. It was not possible to transform gold into long fibres before. This was a practice used only in fairy tales and myths as a metaphor for something impossible. All the samples of golden cloths of royal or ritual garments that we can admire in museums are, in fact, ordinary textile fibres covered with thin strips of metal coiled around.

With the advance of metallurgical understanding and technological innovation, making great lengths of very fine metal wire has become possible but at the same time the whole ethic of the craft has changed. Commerce has leaned towards “quick-to-make, easy-to-sell” products, aimed at pleasing the requirements and expectations of the market. Essentially, the knowledge exists to do something of this kind, but very few people would embark on such long-term and risky projects.

**M.R.: The obsession of your life is becoming a reality. We are touching the Golden Fleece. So, what's next? Aren't you scared?**

G.C.: Experience shows that the satisfaction of a desire generates new desires. At the same time, having reached a goal, one arrives at the point where further aims are seen.

I have been, and still am, obsessed with the quest of the Golden Fleece. It is a very important step in my life, in my career. It has broadened my horizons and is opening new doors. I am not scared. I want to dedicate a few more years to this collection, test my limits and the limits of the material before embarking on even larger projects. Meanwhile I will have the time to decide which of the possible directions of development is the most interesting. I feel that there is still very much to discover.

And certainly, there is never a stage which leaves no space for further improvements.

**M.R.: Are the pieces from the Golden Fleece collection *beautiful* or *unique*?**

G.C.: The Golden Fleece had always been just an idea, and not the reality. It had never been made before. These pieces are unique. It is not me who should judge, but I hope that even the beauty of these pieces is unique. Because it is universal.

*Todi, October 2008*