

FASHION & STYLE

‘Wearable Sculptures’ Become Collectibles on Their Own

By MING LIU MARCH 24, 2017

LONDON — During the runway shows earlier this year, it wasn’t only the fashion crowd who watched the season’s creations with keen interest.

Art and jewelry aficionados were intrigued, too. In January, at Maria Grazia Chiuri’s debut couture show for Christian Dior, the designer accessorized her winter-garden themed dresses exclusively with jewelry by the 92-year-old French artist Claude Lalanne. Designs included a polished-bronze thorn-spiked sautoir worn as a choker, and a galvanized-copper flower necklace.

The following month, jewelry by the British sculptor Emily Young graced the Victoria Beckham show in New York. Ms. Young’s vibrant chrysolite and lapis lazuli brooches, which can also be worn as pendants, were pinned to blazer lapels.

Louisa Guinness, a London-based dealer who specializes in what is called artist jewelry and who has exhibited work by both Ms. Lalanne and Ms. Young, attended the Dior show. “It was the first time a fashion designer really put the jewelry out there, showing it on beautiful dresses and people,” Ms. Guinness said. “It was an exciting moment.”

She has been selling artist jewelry for nearly 15 years, showing at contemporary art fairs like Art Basel and PAD in London. In addition to staging exhibitions by important artists — like Niki de St. Phalle and her whimsical Pop-Art inspired

designs in gold and enamel from the 1970s — Ms. Guinness also works with contemporary names to create jewelry. Such was the case with Ms. Young, who never made jewelry before collaborating with Ms. Guinness.

And while most buyers have come from a small group of art collectors, drawn to what Ms. Guinness calls “wearable sculptures,” she said mainstream interest is growing. “It’s crossing new borders,” she said. “Artist jewelry is eking out, leaving the art world and becoming more acceptable.”

Rising prices tell a similar story. Some coveted designs — like the 1940s- and 1950s-era brass and copper pieces by the sculptor Alexander Calder — sold for four-figure prices 10 years ago. Today they can command much more, like the pair of Calder brass earrings that Sotheby’s sold for \$1.1 million in 2013.

According to a report by the property specialists Knight Frank, 68 percent of the 500 wealth managers and private bankers interviewed said fine art and antiques would be the most popular collectible investment by ultra-high-net-worth individuals during the next decade, with wine second at 32 percent. So with top contemporary artists’ work selling into the millions, artist jewelry is “one step in,” Ms. Guinness said. “If you want to own a Picasso or Max Ernst, this is a more affordable way.”

But it’s not all about financial returns. Diane Venet has amassed some 220 artist-made pieces over the last 30 years and curates artist jewelry shows at museums, including an exhibition scheduled at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris next January.

She says she is attracted by what she calls the “intimate story”: “These artists didn’t make jewelry for commercial reasons. It would have been for a woman — a sister, fiancée, mistress or wife. Some were small editions, but many were unique pieces.”

No surprise that a certain kind of woman wears such jewelry.

Susan Abeles, director of United States jewelry at Bonhams auction house, describes buyers as “a new frontier of collectors who understand both jewelry and art. It takes a very intellectual, sophisticated person to not only understand the pieces but to wear them.”

Elisabetta Cipriani is one such woman. Ms. Cipriani, a London-based art dealer, not only wears such artist jewelry but, like Ms. Guinness, also seeks out contemporary artists whose work she thinks will translate well, often spending years to persuade the artists to make jewelry.

Her roster of 23 artists includes the American abstract painter Frank Stella, the controversial Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and the multidisciplinary African artist Pascale Marthine Tayou. They have collaborated on more than 100 pieces to date (priced from 700 pounds to 130,000 pounds, or \$875 to \$162,200).

“They’re like all my children,” Ms. Cipriani said, adding, “It takes me ages to get to a ‘yes’ with the artist.”

This month her gallery made its first appearance at the European Fine Art Fair in the Netherlands, part of a showcase that invites emerging galleries to participate in the prestigious fair, commonly known as Tefaf. The vetting committee, Ms. Cipriani said, was impressed by the diversity of her collection and how it differed from other exhibitors, galleries like Didier in London and Primavera in New York, both pre-eminent dealers who specialize in artist jewelry by more established names like Picasso, Pol Bury and Salvador Dalí. Among the pieces she showed at Tefaf were the Sasso (or stone) magnetic brooches by the Italian artist Giorgio Vigna, handmade from layers of copper, silver and gold to have a raw, elemental quality.

Giulio Paolini’s Hellenistic-style Psiche necklaces — one engraved in rhodium-plated silver, another with a silver-enamel bas-relief head on a white gold plate — were inspired by love, Ms. Cipriani said, and depict a woman seen from behind, essentially facing the wearer’s heart. Limited to eight pieces, the designs are the Italian artist’s first foray into jewelry, and another collaboration that Ms. Cipriani said took years of coaxing.

Most of the jewelry that her artists create are fabricated by a goldsmith in Rome (“He has to enter the language of the artist, which is not always easy,” she said), and all are rendered in precious materials. “These pieces are for life: You pass them down to your children,” Ms. Cipriani said.

Much like Ms. Cipriani, Thomas W. Bechtler, a founder of the online sale site Gems and Ladders and an art collector himself, builds on his relationships with artists, inviting them to create jewels. The website, introduced in 2014, was partly

inspired by Kunsthalle, a term that refers to exhibition spaces for emerging artists, which Mr. Bechtler said are popular in Switzerland and Germany.

The site today works with 13 artists — and tries to add three new ones each year. On its books is Thomas Hirschhorn, who represented Switzerland at the 2011 Venice Biennale. For Gems and Ladders, he created three stained birch-wood medallions carved with different mottos and hung on wooden chains; each piece is priced at 270 Swiss francs, or \$267.

“What’s important is that the jewelry is not valuable because of gold or precious stones,” Mr. Bechtler said. “It’s like a piece of art, where the idea is the most relevant. That’s probably the fundamental difference to traditional jewelry.”

Another participant is Martin Boyce, who in 2011 won the Turner Prize, given by the Tate gallery to the best visual artist in Britain younger than 50.

His first creation for the website was an 18-karat gold necklace inspired by a series of concrete trees made by the French Cubist artists Jan and Joël Martel. Trees are a continuing theme in Mr. Boyce’s work, and he said that the first time he saw his necklace worn was a memorable moment.

“I hadn’t seen it on the body before,” he said. “It was exciting to see it in action, the way it moves and reflects the skin’s tone.”

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