

Astrid Skjerven

Vernacular traditions in Norwegian jewelry design

Past, present, future

Abstract

Living in an era of globalization, the capability of communicating identity has become of greater importance than ever. This has increased our estimation of the vernacular, which represents an expression of a national or local identity. In Norway the vernacular tradition in silver jewelry is particularly strong. It has played an important role not only locally, but also in the constantly changing relation with the outside world, in accordance with the societal situation. It should therefore constitute a reliable indicator of how our country relates to the present process of globalization. The aim of the paper is to throw light on the relation between Norway's role on the global scene and the use of the vernacular tradition in the development of jewelry design in general. It consists of a historical exploration that leads up to a discussion the present and future situation. Today there is a cleft between consumer behavior and avant-garde practice. In accordance with the global situation and Norway's geopolitical situation of existing in the outskirts of political and economic decisions, the situation is characterized by a variety of practices, and by a slow acceptance of the vernacular values in the world of avant-garde practitioners.

Keywords: jewelry design, Norway, vernacular traditions, globalization, identity

Introduction

Contact with the outside world and foreign cultures have always constituted an important condition for the development and display of one's own. At the same time it has been a source of influence and innovation. In Norway international relations and cross fertilization, as well as displaying national identity, has played an important role in Norway. Its significance and meaning has changed through the ages according to the societal situation. As we are being constantly reminded of through media, we are now living in an era called globalization. By that is meant the process by which national economies, societies, and cultures have become integrated through a global network of political ideas through communication, transportation, and trade. It has led to a certain world-wide uniformity and sameness. At the same time it has created a contrary tendency, a cultivation of a regional, local or individual identity. In this way the phenomenon of globalization contains its own opposite force (Lash, 2010). This situation has crucial cultural implications. The capability of communicating these identities has become of great importance. This influences our estimation of the vernacular, which represents an expression of a national or regional identity. In Norway the vernacular tradition in silver jewelry is particularly strong. It should therefore constitute a reliable indicator of how our country relates to the process of globalization.

The aim of the paper is to throw light on the relation between Norway's role on the global scene and the use of the vernacular tradition in the development of jewelry design in general. It consists of a historical exploration that leads up to a discussion the present and future situation. Today there is a cleft between consumer behavior and avant-garde practice. In accordance with the global situation and Norway's geopolitical situation of existing in the outskirts of political and economic decisions, the situation is characterized by a variety of practices, and by a slow acceptance of the vernacular values in the world of avant-garde executants. In addition to published, archival and electronic sources, it is based on personal interviews.

The tradition and its development

Our tradition in jewelry design has a long history, with the Viking period as one of its early peaks. From medieval times jewelry constituted an important part of the rural costume (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Wedding dress from Sætedalen, 19th century. Copyright: Berge, R. (1997). Norsktt bondesylv. (Facsimile of 1st ed. 1925). Skien: Fylkesmuseet for Telemark og Grenland.

Figure 2. Rural jewelry. Brooches with hanging «leaves». Copyright: Berge, R. (1997). Norsktt bondesylv. (Facsimile of 1st ed. 1925). Skien: Fylkesmuseet for Telemark og Grenland.

The reason was not only its beauty, but just as much its usefulness as economic security and expression of status and identity. In the 17th century the accessibility of local silver was growing, due to the development of a silver mining industry. This led to an increasing use (Berge, 1997). Rural silversmiths had existed since the middle ages. The technique of filigree was frequently used. During the next centuries contact with foreign travelling apprentices stimulated innovation. During the reign of the city based goldsmith firms the rural silversmiths continued their activity, and a certain interchange of goods and skills took place (Berge, 1997).

The innovation was particularly strong in the countryside of Mid and West Norway. The work of the local silversmiths mostly consisted of adornment for local costumes, especially bridal ware. Along with the bridal headdress the most important part of this adornment were the brooches. Their design was developed to a high level and in a way that is renowned as typical of Norway (Berge, 1997). In particular, the addition of “leaves” hanging from the plate of the brooch is regarded as typical of the country (Figure 2).

National Romanticism

During the era of nation building in the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a great need to find suitable symbols that could express national identity. In this matter the tradition of

rural jewelry constituted an ideal source of inspiration for the city goldsmith firms. Among these was Tostrup in Oslo, founded in 1832. Following the pattern of the highly esteemed firm Castellani in Rome, Italy, which applied traditions from Roman antiquity as well as rural filigree work to renew their work, Tostrup looked to the same traditions in their own country. Tostrup built up high competence in the filigree technique, and used rural jewelry as a source of inspiration, or even almost copying. It preferred young apprentices from the countryside.

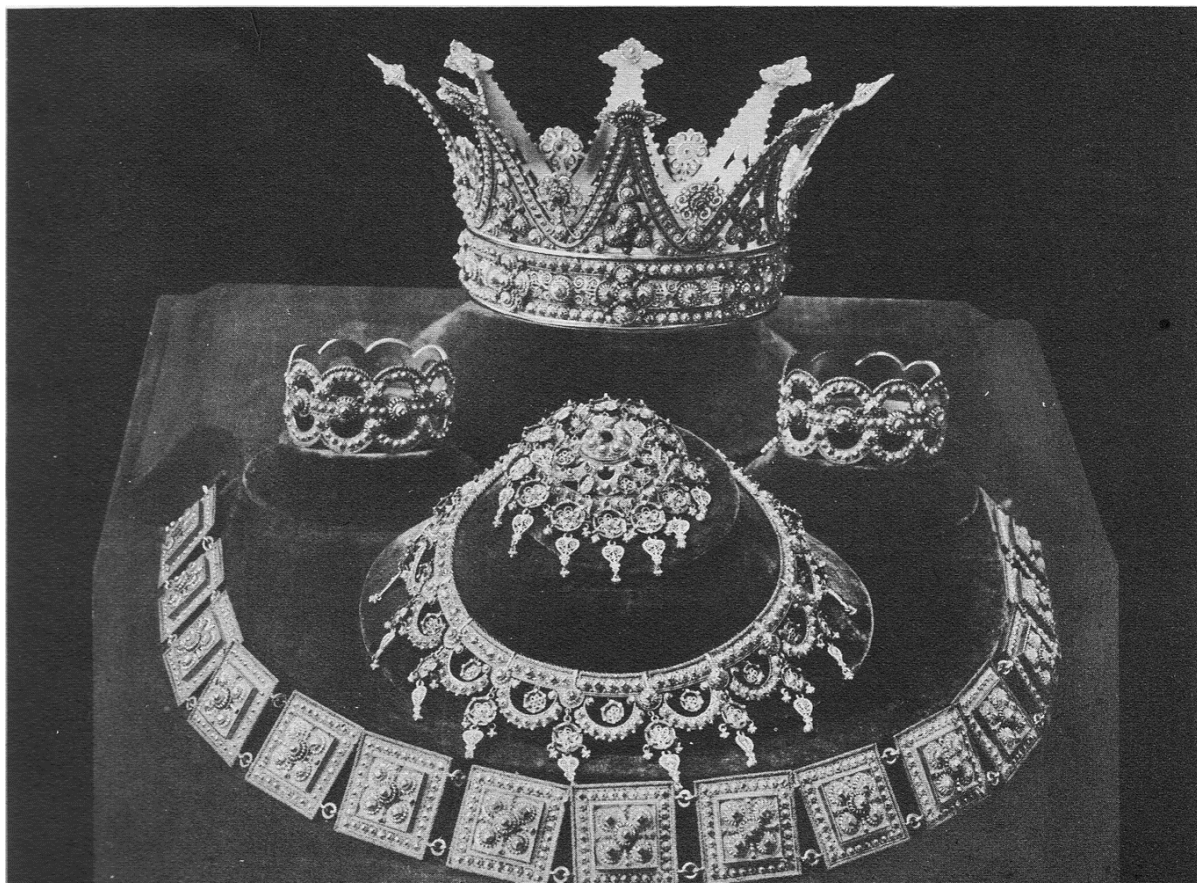


Figure 3. Norway's wedding gift to Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden in 1881. Copyright: Kielland, T. (1932). *Om gullsmidkunst i hundre år: J. Tostrup 1832-1932*. Oslo: Grøndahl.

They were believed to have an inherent talent for finer silversmith's work, whether they had any training in it or not (Kielland, 1932). This attitude and practice had been adopted from those of Castellani (Riisøen and Bøe, 1959). A result of this idiom is Norway's official gift for the wedding of Princess Victoria of Sweden in 1881, designed by the Director of the firm, Oluf Tostrup (1842-1882). It consists of a full bridal adornment in the style of rural bridal ware (Figure 3). The ornamentation was made in the filigree technique. Additionally, concavely shaped "leaves" constituted an important part of the ornamentation.

Brooches constituted a substantial part of the commercial market. Those made by the local silversmiths and those of Tostrup's own production were quite similar. They were sold to the same rural market all over the country as well as to the new segment of consumers, the tourists (Kielland 1932). This practice also led to an innovation of Tostrup's production for its consumers of the urban bourgeoisie. Oluf Tostrup started to design modern jewelry in the filigree technique inspired by female rural adornment. Contrary to the rural costume it was to

be worn directly on the skin. It became an urban vogue to wear this kind of “national” jewelry. Similar examples can be found by many of the leading goldsmiths firms.

Modernism

The tradition played a small, but significant role during the idiom of Modernism. This was the case in the golden age of Scandinavian Design in the post war era. It was a period of internationalization and economic growth, and the export market was growing. As a welcome alternative to Modernism’s emphasis on universalness and “machine aesthetics”, Scandinavian design objects were particularly esteemed for their unique combination of modernity and regional traditions. National characteristics were vital to express each country’s national profile within the common Scandinavian frame, as well as to create attention on the international arena (Skjerven, 2001).



Figure 4. Designer Grete Prytz Kittelsen: «Med punkter» from 1952. Photo by Helga Bu. Copyright: Gilje, K., ed. Grete Prytz Kittelsen: *Emalje og design*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2008. Photo: Helga Bu.

The jewelry designer Grete Prytz Kittelsen (1917-2010), representing the fifth generation of the family owned firm Tostrup, was one of Norway’s pioneers in the field of Modernistic design. She contributed to the rejuvenation of Tostrup’s collections and production methods after the war. She was occupied with making products that could be rationally produced and thereby available for most people, as well as fulfilling the expectations of the export market (Skjerven, 2001). The brooch “Med punkter” (“With dots”) designed in 1951 and produced from 1952, was meant to be a “moderne sølje”, a modern folk brooch, as she has stated herself (Skjerven, 2011) (Figure 4). Its design was based on the traditional “bolesølje”, the main brooch of the rural adornment, but was made for modern times and an according lifestyle (Skjerven, 2008). It constitutes a Modernistic updating of the vernacular tradition. It was made of silver, had a circular form and a simple three dimensional pattern reminiscent of the “leaves” of the folk costume’s brooches. In accordance with the ideal of Modernism it was made in a rational way. It was stamped out of thin silver plates in one piece and was produced in series. The “leaves” were parts of the same piece. They were stamped out half way and then slightly bended outwards. Instead of the labour consuming filigree technique the main form was ornamented with an engraved and oxidized pattern. This brought out the unornamented and polished “leaves”. The expression and style of the brooch was highly modern and fit for an international

market. It could be placed anywhere on any outfit, but contrary to the rural brooch and according to the prevailing fashion it was always put on one side. It was perfectly fit for the emblematic outfit of the busy post war woman, the woolen tweed suit.

Prytz Kittelsen also made gilded and enameled versions, and even accompanying earrings and a bracelet, of which neither belonged to the tradition of the rural pieces. Her design was too avant-garde to be a commercial hit, but sold moderately through several decades to the elite segment of the market. It paved the way for a vogue of similar, more moderately designed enameled jewelry that became very popular.

Postmodernism

What happened after Modernism? Could inspiration from vernacular traditions survive not only Modernism, but also Postmodernism? Indeed it did, it actually had a flowering period, particularly in the style's flowering stages of the 1980s and 1990s. In accordance with this idiom's ironic play with the styles of previous times (Venturi, 1966), and utilizing them to create contemporary surroundings that often contained critical societal comments. Among some of the craft artists in Norway there was a trend of renewing folk tradition, although with an ironical distance, which was named Neotradition (Opstad, 1988).

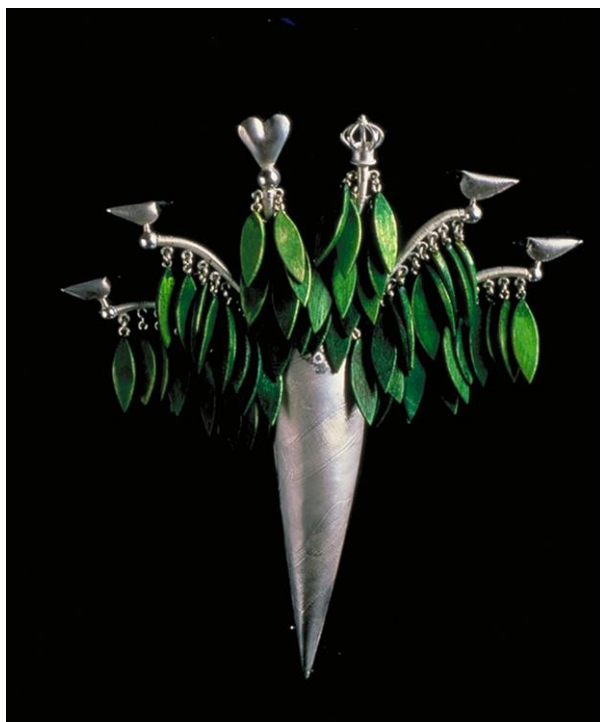


Figure 5. Konrad Mehus: «Gulrotsølje», 1991. Brooch with carrots. Copyright: Veiteberg, J., ed. (2012). Konrad Mehus: Form følger fiksjon: Smykke og objekt / Form follows fiction: Jewelry and objects. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche. Photo: Konrad Mehus.

One of the pioneers of Neotradition and an important exponent of the Postmodernistic idiom was Konrad Mehus (b. 1941). Initially trained as a goldsmith in Trondheim, he had learned the technique of filigree and to appreciate its qualities, particularly the works of the rural silversmiths. In the start of his career his ambition was to renew the technique with particular emphasis on the brooch Veiteberg (2012). After having been educated as a craft artist as well as a sculptor, his new artistic competence and interest for conceptualization, made that his interest took another turn. Rural jewelry has continuously been used as one of his means of

making comments on contemporary society, but he has never used the filigree technique. One of the most significant pieces is the “Carrot brooch” from 1991 (Figure 5).

Its shape was taken from a special category of heart shaped brooches, the “hjartesprett”, also called Maria brooches, which were used as gifts of love or engagement and were decorated with symbols of love. Mehus’ “Carrot brooches” were hand-made as unique pieces. They were made of silver, and some of the “leaves” of painted wood. The heart had been transformed into a carrot, which symbolizes the erotic side of love. The ornamental details consist of bird couples, a motive that was frequently used on the traditional brooches, but also trees and male elks. These new additions to the regular iconography refer to the eroticness of the forest and its potent king. It may also point to the awareness of nature and ecology in our own time. In this way it represented a provocative break with tradition. In this way the carrot brooch constitutes an ironic “anti folk brooch”. It expresses his critical distance to traditions along with his deep admiration of them. Symbolically it expresses a critical comment on the explicit appetite for eroticism in our time as opposed to the appreciation of love and fertility of previous times. The “Carrot brooch” was well received in a small scale market. It is Mehus’ greatest economic success (Veiteberg, 2012).

For Mehus the rural adornment is a recurrent motive and source of inspiration. He has made several brooches that are based on the “bolesølje”, where filigree ornaments are substituted by imagery that associate to them, as well as “found objects” like buttons. He has also made crowns in various materials with motives that are expressing comments on contemporary society. Some of his brooches are based on the tradition of the “hengjepenning”, which literally means coins that hang from the body of its wearer, with its origin in the old European tradition of “Agnus Dei” adornments.



Figure 6. Lars Sture: “Brudekrone”. “Bridal crown”, 1980s. Copyright: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and design, Oslo. Picture Archive.



Figure 7. Elsie Ann Hochlin: “Bursdagskroner”. «Birthday crowns», 2005. Copyright: Elsie-Ann Hochlin.

Mehus' production demonstrates the strong and lasting symbolic inherent in the vernacular silver jewelry and its potentiality as a means of communication. His symbolic message is easily understandable and relevant both nationally and internationally, which might explain the great attention that has been paid to it.

For others, the bridal crown has been a specific source of inspiration. Lars Sture's (b. 1961) huge crown, made of anodized aluminium in 1991, is a delirious interpretation of a rural bridal crown (Figure 6). It displays the same playfulness as Konrad Mehus' "Carrot brooch", although without being any ironic "anti piece". It is an object of art in its own right, and is made as a unique piece. It is obviously not made for wearing or for storing at "kistebunnen", at the bottom of the chest in case of hard times, but for being exposed for the sake of its beauty per se.

His works from this time were called jewelry, but can just as well be categorized as body outfits. They consisted of waistcoats, collars, headdresses and hand bags with references to rural costume and its adornment (Sand, 1999). They constituted a colourful play with Norwegian vernacular traditions and contemporary fashion. It is also noteworthy that they were made at a period when Sture was working in London. The international metropolis, fashion center and at the time hot spot of avant-garde jewelry design probably made him get conscious of the value of national these traditions in a contemporary setting.

A more recent example of the interest in bridal crowns is Elsie Ann Hochlin's (b.1961) series of "Bursdagskroner" ("Birthday Crowns") from 2005 (Kunstnerforbundet, 2007) (Figure 7). Their shape is reminiscent of the rural bridal crown. They are made as unique pieces although the material is cheap aluminium, and decorated with representations of national cultural personalities with iconic status, as well as other motives taken from traditional national imagery. They constitute a contribution to that year's centenary celebration of Norway's existence as a nation in the form of a humorous and nonchalant comment on our traditions. They were made for an exhibition at Kunstnerforbundet in Oslo the same year and meant for the gallery audience and eventual museum purchases.

Early in the 21st century a few other jewelry artists used the same source of inspiration, but to a minor degree and only for decorative reasons and without symbolic references. The trend of Neotradition was only one among several directions. At a later stage of Postmodernism it almost disappeared.



Figure 8. Tone Vigeland: Installation. Source: Galleri Riis, Oslo, 2010. Copyright: Galleri Riis, Oslo.

In our present phase of Postmodernism, also called Post-Postmodernism Kirby (2006), the idiom is characterized by a lot of expressions and values existing parallelly. However, the main tendency in avant-garde jewelry in the late 20th and early 21st century has been to “liberate” oneself from the claim for practical function and serial production in crafts and design. The aim was to reach the sphere of pictorial and so called free art. This has led to a focus on artistic expression and the exploration of space. An example is the work of Norwegian jewelry art's Grande Dame, Tone Vigeland (b. 1938) Brundtland (2001). Her earliest work was based on the techniques and style of fine crafts of the 1950s, and was later inspired by armour from the Viking era. That is the case with some of her bracelets from the 1880s, made of iron and silver. After having explored the international trend Wearable Art, she started to work with large minimalistic installations in space. The exhibition at Galleri Riis in Oslo in 2010 demonstrates her mastering of the new dimensions of this kind of work (Figure 8).

The present situation

Today's art oriented jewelers have got their education at the art schools in an internationally oriented milieu with many foreign guest professors and fellow students. As professionals they are concerned with self-expression in a global setting. The arenas of presentation are mainly exhibitions in art galleries, and their audience consists of visitors to the exhibitions. There are many styles or idioms as well as highly individual approaches. Some of the exhibitions consist of temporary installations rather than fixed objects.



Figure 9. Anne Legér: “Secret garden”, 2008. Copyright: Anne Legér, Oslo.

An alternative path is to stick to the making of jewelry as such, using traditional types like bracelets, brooches etc., but in the idiom of “storytelling” or “memory design”. French-Norwegian Anne Léger (b. 1966), who has graduated from The National College of Arts in Oslo, is working with history in the form of associations or memories. The objects are made from an intricate combination of various materials and techniques (Jugendsenteret, 2012) (Figure 9). Besides nature she is using figurative motives reflecting dreams or vague personal memories in a most poetic language of expression. Due to their rich symbolic content and artistic originality, her laboriously made unique pieces are at the verge of transcending into pictorial art. Still they are highly wearable.

In her opinion the rural silversmiths' traditions represent labour intensive techniques and are attached to national folklore. She explains the popularity of these objects by their creation of recognition and their representation of national culture and history. As a foreigner she does not regard them as being part of her language of expression and therefore does not find it natural to use them (A. Legér, personal communication 7. August, 2013).



Figure 10. Norwegian family in national costumes with adornment. Copyright: Sptzbrgn, Trondheim. Photo: Jarle Hagen.



Figure 11. Sptzbrgn: «National costume tie» 2011. Copyright: Sptzbrgn, Trondheim. Photo: Jarle Hagen.

This way of practice has led to a renewal in the field of artistic expression in jewelry, and has broadened its field into pictorial art. But it has happened at the cost of engagement in innovation of jewelry for the commercial market, where jewelry for national costume is in high demand. Norwegians are generally proud of their heritage within folk costume and jewelry. At special occasions people are often wearing national costume with full adornment, and they are willingly spending large amounts of money on such outfits (Figure 10). This lucrative market with its enthusiastic consumers has been left to other actors, like the many workshops offering copies of old pieces. Professionals in related fields such as costume design and other kinds of adornment have realized the potentialities of this market. One of them is the design team Sptzbrgn. In 2011 their “National costume tie” won one the award the Norwegian Design Council within the field of textile design (Figure 11).



Figure 12. Hilde Nødtvedt: Adornment for The East Telemark costume. Reconstruction. 2000s.
Copyright: Hilde Nødtvedt. Photo: Eva Brænd.

Although the vernacular traditions in jewelry have been almost forgotten in the avant-garde and artistically oriented circles, the traditions are being painstakingly taken care of by a few other actors. One of them is Hilde Nødtvedt (b. 1954), who is educated both as a goldsmith and an ethnologist. She has been doing in thorough studies of old traditions, and is making pieces that are in accurate accordance with her findings and other historical research. Among her most extensive undertakings are her pieces for the East Telemark costume, based on a recently made reconstruction of the region’s rural costumes of the 1820s (Figure 12).

The low focus on Norwegian vernacular traditions has also comprised the world of higher education. At least that was the case until a few years ago. In 2005 The University of

Aust-Agder announced a brand new bachelor education in jewelry design to be situated in Valle in Setesdalen, one of the previous centers of folk jewelry. The still living traditions of the site were planned to constitute a basis for the education. However, because of few applicants as well as the university's prioritization of so called "basic" subjects, the education was announced once and never realized (T. Haugen, personal communication 2. April, 2013).

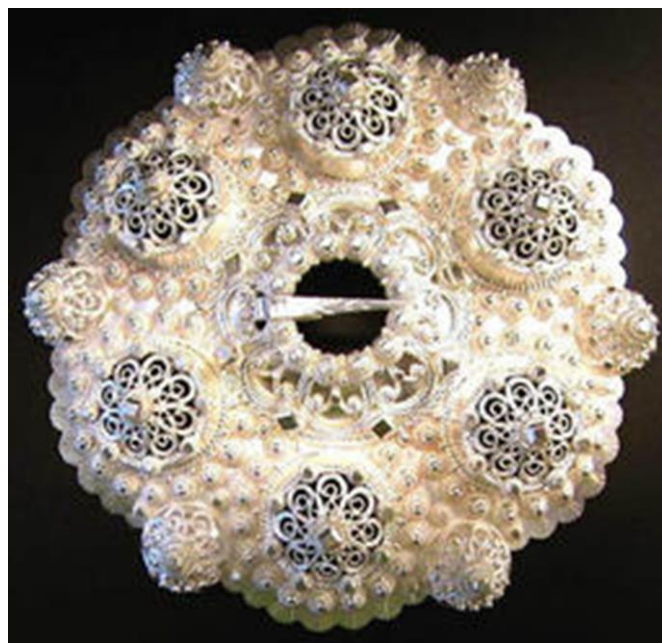


Figure 13. Telemark University College. Study of vernacular/folk art. Student's work. 2000. Copyright: Arne Magnus Johnsrød, Telemark University College

Recently, Telemark University College has taken up the challenge by establishing both a bachelor and a master degree in "Tradisjonskunst" (vernacular/folk art), and comprises the traditions of the rural silversmiths. This is the only higher education where these techniques are taught systematically and in-depth (Figure 13). There are many foreign students who are attracted by this unique opportunity of education in the field. The number of foreign applicants is increasing (A. Johnsrød, personal communication 6. June, 2013). The situation indicates that there is a growing interest in and conscience about the value of these traditions. One of its graduates, the locally born Linn Sigrud Bratland (b. 1978), is working full time as a jewelry designer. Her products represent a rejuvenation of the vernacular tradition. She believes that the techniques and their value generally are coming more and more into focus (L. Bratland, personal communication 8. August, 2013). Typically, these events have taken place at the university colleges. Nothing similar has yet happened at any of the art schools, where the traditions of fine art are still reigning.

An individual and different approach has been taken by the British-Norwegian designer Edward Longden (b. 1982). He moved to Norway a few years ago and has taken his master degree at Oslo and Akershus University College. With a foreigner's fresh eyes he has discovered stereotypes in Norwegian folk traditions (Longden, 2010). Based on subjective impressions from museums, supermarkets and everyday situations rather than historical research, he has created a concept and prototypes for a jewelry collection suited for young consumers (Figure 14). It supplies the wearer with a humorous yet appreciative attitude to regional belonging and traditions.



Figure 14. Edward Longden: Concept for jewelry design. MA project at University College of Oslo and Akershus. 2010. Copyright: Edward Longden.

In a broader perspective

In a global perspective vernacular traditions in jewelry design have for the last two decades been rejuvenated and used in art jewelry as well as in the world of fashion design. In Italy, where they in the 19th century were taken up by Castellani and became an inspiration source for the Norwegian firm Tostrup, something similar has been done by the high fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana. Ancient Sicilian jewelry, where the filigree technique and hanging coins are among the main ingredients, has been transformed into exclusive accessories. In spite of their striking likeness with the old pieces they are produced in series and represent the latest in fashion design. Even in the growing world power China there is the same tendency. Here the rich jewelry traditions of the Han dynasty have been used as an inspiration source for both art and fashion pieces Skjerven (2011). In other words, the general international situation is different from that in Norway, where the traditions are mainly used as they as adornments for national costumes.

What does this scenario tell us about Norway's relation to the globalization process of today and the jewelry designer's role in it? The country is situated in the periphery of power and events. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly involved in and dependent on interacting with the rest of the world. In the interchange of meanings and assets there is a growing demand for remedies to communicate national, group and individual identity. Vernacular traditions constitute an important means to be visible in in this communication process. The attitudes of the previously mentioned foreign designers Anne Legér and Edward Longden have demonstrated that the vernacular traditions in Norwegian jewelry design stand out as significant of the identity of the country and its citizens even to the outside world. This makes them an important means in the process.

At present there are only a few individuals with various backgrounds and some of those who have graduated from Telemark University College, who are working with our vernacular

traditions in an innovative way. Until recently they have generally been neglected by avant-garde jewelry designers and higher art education. Although working in a global context these professionals have focused on artistic self-expression rather than communication with any user, and the market has constituted of the global art scene and its audience. Consequently, communication in everyday life has got little attendance. As the world of art has lately become increasingly engaged in involving and interacting with the audience, this situation has started to change. The renewed evaluation of crafts as an artistic tool has also led to an evaluation of the qualities of vernacular traditions in the field (Adamson, 2007). As an avant-garde, meaning the troop that is walking in front to pave the way for a broader improvement, their contribution is highly needed.

Astrid Skjerven

Professor, PhD

Department of Product Design, Faculty of Technology, Art and Design

Oslo and Akershus University College

Email address: astrid.skjerven@hioa.no

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