

SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute

Issue 7 *Modernist mastermind*

Article 10

January 2013

Electron rising

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed>



Part of the [Metal and Jewelry Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2013) "Electron rising," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: Iss. 7, 24-25.

Available at: <http://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol7/iss7/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Design at VTC Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute by an authorized administrator of VTC Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact csyip@vtc.edu.hk.

A source of wonder since the dawn of civilisation, amber seems to have lost its lustre. But as DAISY ZHONG discovers, a group of contemporary Polish artists are bringing fresh vibrancy to amber design

Around 600 BC the man often cited as the first Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, noted that amber rubbed with fur attracted objects such as feathers and hair. The Greeks were in awe of amber's apparent magical powers and gave it the name *ēlektron*, which means flashing or glittering and later becomes the root of the word electricity.

For at least 15,000 years, amber has inspired admiration, wonder and scholarly curiosity. It has been widely used as ornaments, amulets, and medication in both the East and the West. Zhao Feiyan (32BC-1BC), a legendary Han dynasty beauty, owned an amber pillow in order to absorb its scent. In Europe, amber was greatly admired by the Romans, and later in the 18th century used to decorate the astonishing Amber Room, a complete chamber of baroque-style amber panels backed with gold in the Catherine Palace near St Petersburg.

Yet despite all these, it seems amber somehow lost its importance

in modern design. "In the 1980s and early 1990s amber design was not of very high quality, mainly due to a strong attachment to the historical tradition," says professor Sławomir Fijałkowski, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. "For decades the most popular products were just unsophisticated amber beads. We can observe similar situations experienced by other organic materials, such pearls."

But Fijałkowski believes that change has already taken place. Part of the evidence for this was recently brought to Hong Kong in the exhibition *A Kaleidoscope of Amber Art and Designer Jewellery from Poland* held during Baltic Amber Festival (Hong Kong) this September, showcasing the best of amber design in its contemporary expression. The Baltic Amber Festival, which was organised by Amberozia, a local company specialising in Baltic amber products, also included a public lecture at HKDI with design masters explaining contemporary amber use.

The exhibition featured creations by six amber designers and four leading amber design companies from Poland. Exhibited items ranged from caskets exemplifying the skills of the celebrated amber guild masters of the 17th century, to avant-garde collections themed around concepts such as illusion and movement. Fijałkowski notes that "courage for experiment" characterises the latest trend in amber design among Baltic designers.

"Compared to the fashion world, they are a kind of haute couture," he says. "Most of them were unique pieces designed with the intention not to be sold, but to



FROM LEFT THE BRUGGE COLLECTION DESIGNED BY ART7; THE VENUS COLLECTION DESIGNED BY MARIUSZ GUMINSKI; THE BRUGGE COLLECTION DESIGNED BY ART7



show mastery of every single designer, a pure art work, and an object of contemplation."

Fijałkowski is himself a prominent award-winning designer known for cutting-edge creations. For him, finding the right balance between the need to preserve timeless stylistic canons and the author's prerogative for reinterpretation is the most difficult and inspiring task for a modern designer.

He explains the reasons behind the revival of amber design. "There appeared a lot of young designers and new companies, for whom design was a primary development strategy. Education has played an important role, too. On the other hand, raw amber is more and more expensive so that it's a pity to just make it into beads. These factors mean that Baltic amber is – like in the Roman Empire – exclusive again. Good design and innovation are the keywords today."

And this recent restoration of confidence has its roots in Poland's heritage for being the cradle of amber designs of the top quality and craftsmanship in the world.

Speaking at a public lecture at HKDI, Michał Kosior, deputy president of the International Amber Association, said: "The southern Baltic has been the centre of production of amber jewellery since the 17th century, and Gdańsk is the capital of amber."

As the majority of the world's amber deposits lie along the Baltic coast, amber processing has always been an important part of the local economy. Baltic amber varies from transparent through translucent to opaque with a multitude of hues of yellow, red, brown, beige and white, as well as bluish and greenish tints. Historically

Gdańsk amber craftsmen formed their own school of amber processing, making the quality of their products unrivalled globally.

Kosior noted that amber also played an important role in international trade and communication. As a precious jewel depicted in *Homer's Odyssey*, amber has been the goal of expeditions undertaken by Roman legions and Greek and Levant merchants. It was transported along the "Amber Route" from Northern Europe to the Mediterranean and Black Sea countries, and finally along the Silk Road to Asia.

Amber has once again become the bridge of cultural exchange between the East and the West; September's Amber Festival marked the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between HKDI and the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts. The memorandum aims at facilitating exchange in academic areas such as jewellery design and product design, basic and elementary design, architecture and cultural identity.

Fijałkowski draws comparison with the Erasmus European student exchange programme, saying such schemes can be highly effective in building connections among universities in Europe to learn from each other and exchange experiences.

"I believe that the MOU with HKDI can provide us with new possibilities to develop and support our school's international cooperation with Asia, an increasingly important region, not only from the economical point of view but also – and perhaps even more importantly – from cultural reasons, which are very relevant for us." 