



EVERY PIECE TELLS A STORY

Jewellery designer Richard Wu on how he expresses his thoughts, emotions and memories through his innovative designs.

BY SASHA GONZALES



(Above) Richard's elegant and sculptural Tube collection. Facing page: One of Richard's latest creations is the Orchid Ring.

Richard Wu started designing jewellery in 2009, when he was in his early 20s. He had a beautiful blue amber stone that he wanted to set and give to his then-girlfriend, now-wife. However, unsatisfied with the design that a jeweller had come up with for him, Richard took on the task of designing the setting himself.

At the time, Richard made beads and cabochons out of amber and jade. Although he was not formally trained in jewellery design, he was good at drawing and had no difficulty putting his ideas down on paper.

Fifteen years later, Richard is now one of China's most prolific luxury jewellery designers, known for his bold and sculptural, statement-making pieces, many of which are inspired by nature, emotions, and personal stories.

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

Richard, who is 38 this year, was born in the Chinese city of Jian. He moved to the United States when he was six and returned to China as a teenager.

In 2012, he studied stone carving, and in 2015 he travelled to Italy to learn jewellery making techniques, like stone setting, engraving and goldsmithing.



Richard Wu in his laboratory.

PROFILE



For Richard, jewellery is an expression of his imagination and creativity.

He is thankful for the opportunity to train under several masters of these trades. "I learnt stone carving from a Chinese master who'd been carving for 20 years," Richard explains. "I'd been looking for someone who knew how to carve, so I showed up at his workshop in Suzhou and asked him if I could train under him."

In Suzhou, a city famous for its jade carvings, Richard worked mostly with white jade and red agate. His carvings were typically of religious (mainly Buddhist) figures, or of flowers, birds, fish and insects. He also created antique-style carvings.

While he enjoyed his work, Richard soon felt that he needed to broaden his horizons.

"I wanted to try something new and express my creativity in a different way, but the market I worked in was old-fashioned and didn't really allow for it," he shares.

He decided then, at the age of 29, to learn jewellery making in Italy. In Milan, Richard was studying at a goldsmithing school when he met a stone-setter, Marco Perego. He communicated his interest in stone setting and trained under Perego for about two years. Later, Richard met Mirko Dimasi, a goldsmith who worked for the Italian high-end jewellery brand Buccellati and trained under him as well.

In late 2019, Richard returned to China, and a few months later, opened his laboratory in the city of Shenzhen, eager to start making his own jewellery.

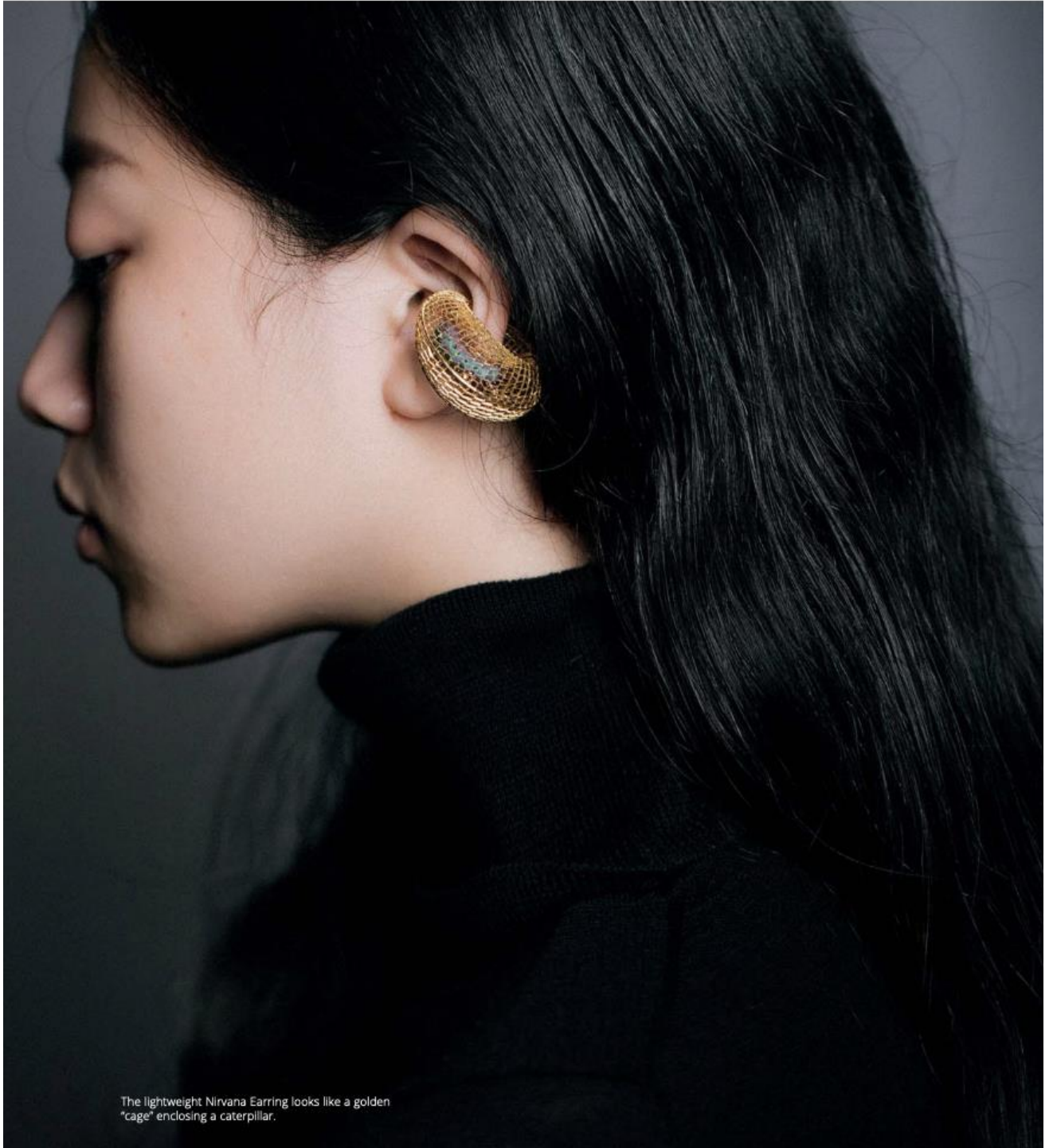
"I call it a laboratory rather than a studio or workshop, because it's where we conduct experiments and play around with metals, in addition to jewellery design and production," he points out. "Here, my three employees and I make alloys for gold, castings from titanium, and much more."

A METICULOUS PROCESS

Making jewellery feels liberating for Richard. "I can use whatever materials I want and create the shapes I want," he says.

"At first, I try not to think about how a piece will be produced or even if it's easy to produce. I like to go over all the possibilities, starting with the techniques I'm familiar with and working with materials that I'm used to, like white, yellow, rose and pink gold, platinum, titanium, aluminium, sapphire crystal, and ceramics."

The jewellery making process starts with a sketch. Next, Richard checks the measurements to make sure that every component fits. Certain materials, like enamel, for example, have to be of a certain thickness; too thin and it will crack, too thick and it will feel heavy.



The lightweight Nirvana Earring looks like a golden "cage" enclosing a caterpillar.

PROFILE



A precious ruby sits at the heart of the Cloud Ring (top).
The decorative Weave No. 1 Bracelet (bottom).

When it comes to designing bangles, chains and necklaces, Richard makes sure that they can be put on and taken off quickly and easily, so he pays extra attention to joints and clasps and then assesses the weight and size of the piece.

"If any aspect isn't perfect, or the material isn't right, we will adjust the technical drawing," he continues.

"Sometimes, even after we make changes, the piece still may not look right, in which case we may adjust something else, like our technique, for instance."

Once Richard is satisfied with his design, he starts creating the final piece. During this process, he tries to realise even his "craziest ideas" and develops new tools and techniques to bring these to life, such as combining enamel with other materials, anodising titanium to develop different colours, coming up with inventive clasp styles, and so on.

When deciding what materials to use in a design, Richard says that he considers what he wants the piece to express and how it will be worn. He has a large collection of different metals and stones, which he likes to look through for inspiration.

"There are other materials I'd love to work with but can't at the moment because I have limited experience with them or don't have the right equipment to handle them," he adds.

VIBRANT, EYE-CATCHING DESIGNS

Some of Richard's creations include Weave No. 1, a structured yet delicate bracelet which he describes as being in-between a watch strap and a piece of rope. The decorative piece features an inconspicuous clasp and a ribbon-like weave, giving it a casual look.

His Nirvana Earring, a lightweight ear cuff, looks like a golden "cage" enclosing a beautiful caterpillar. Of this piece, Richard says: "It represents being able to see what's outside the cage but not having a way out. Yet, it's also a reminder to have hope".

His Cloud Ring symbolises the evolution of jewellery making, from ancient stone-carving to modern techniques like 3D printing.

Another striking design is his Black Veil, inspired by the withered leaves of the maple tree. Crafted from black titanium and enhanced with diamonds, this light piece is comfortable to wear and "hides the expressions on one's face that may be misread by others".

Richard adds that he does not design with a specific person in mind. He feels that his pieces look good on both men and women, because "everyone should be free to express themselves".

A FORM OF EXPRESSION

Jewellery, in Richard's eyes, is the ultimate expression of his imagination and creativity. "Words are insufficient at communicating my thoughts and feelings," he says. "Sometimes, these thoughts and emotions become stories or pictures, and I feel like I need to share them or I may explode.

"Jewellery is small in size compared to, say, furniture, but it can be harder to make and involves many more complicated processes. By focusing on the different steps and fussing over the various details, I feel like I'm setting free whatever's in my heart and mind. And when I see the final product, after many months or even years of hard work, I feel satisfied and almost relieved," he shares. 🌀

