

Atinuj (Atty) Tantivit

Gallery Director, ATTA Gallery

The Vacillation of Modern Craft: An Identity Crisis or A Core Advantage  
A Case Study on Contemporary Jewelry in Thailand

Thailand is well-known for its handicraft. The craft of jewelry making has been an important part of our long history and jewelry was used as adornment to signify social status, and in more recent history, as decoration for aesthetic purposes. Up until about 40 years ago, jewelry was hand-made by craftsmen in small and primitive workshops. Industrialization and globalization brought about a big shift—from small-scaled production made by skilled hands to mass production made by machines. This also marked a time when jewelry in Thailand lost its connection to our tradition and culture as many large-scaled manufacturers made jewelry-to-order based on foreign customers demands. Moreover, jewelry had lost its connection to craft culture. Silpakorn University reintroduced the notion of jewelry as art & craft to the Thai context again only about 20 years ago as contemporary jewelry. Today, it is undeniable that jewelry as a whole can be categorized as craft, art and design—depending on whom one talks to and the type of jewelry one talks about.

My presentation draws on my overall experience in the past 10 years as a jewelry maker, a designer, an artist, a promoter, a seller, a collector and a student in the field of art & craft in Thailand. However, my focus for the presentation is on my main role as the owner and director of the only gallery that specializes in contemporary jewelry in Thailand, ATTA Gallery.

It is important to look at how contemporary jewelry in Thailand has been perceived in the past decade and how it has changed from being perceived as art & craft, to accessory, to fashion, and now to art & craft again. The changes occurred mainly because of how contemporary jewelry has been promoted by various sectors such as academia, trade organizations and fashion industry in Thailand.

I would like to point out the positive transformation of this once an uncertain identity crisis to a core advantage in promoting “craft” sustainably. In the world of multi-everything, the utilization of the multi-role concept of craft is crucial. For example, for the past 15 years, various contemporary jewelry galleries in the Western world have been attending many types of fairs—from craft (Collect, Schmuck under International Handwerksmesse) to fine art (SOFA, Kunst Rai) to design (Design Miami/Basel, Collective Design).

We have lived through the time when everything needed to be exclusively labeled, when we felt the need to fit in. I myself struggled with this identity crisis soon after opening the gallery. For example, a year into our existence, ATTA Gallery was denied promotion by a governmental design center because they viewed contemporary jewelry as art, not design.

Today, it's the time when we are able to position what we create into different things based on its context and content. There's no longer the need to categorize contemporary jewelry as I can tailor contemporary jewelry into any context...be it design, art or craft. It is the time when we can “craft” stories for our own craftwork.