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How to Find Ethical Jewelry

Gemma Alexander | November 20, 2018



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No one wants to adorn themselves with environmental destruction and human suffering. Unfortunately, there is no universal third-party certification that guarantees the jewelry you buy is ethical. If you're considering a gift of fine jewelry this holiday season, you need to educate yourself about more than cut, color, and clarity.

Considering the environmental impacts and economics of mining, completely ethical fine jewelry may not exist. Most major jewelry brands are members of the Responsible Jewellery Council (RJC). Like many industry-led initiatives, it falls short of the standards that environmentalists and human rights organizations desire. Greener certification and sourcing systems are often limited to a small group of producers or to certain materials. Ethical consumers need to ask a lot of questions, beginning with whether retailers can identify the mines where their jewelry materials were extracted.

Clean Diamonds

The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme was designed to reduce the flow of conflict diamonds, and now covers nearly all global diamond production. It provides a baseline — inability to provide a Kimberley Process certificate for a diamond is a red flag. But a certificate may not guarantee that a stone is truly conflict-free, and it does not address other ethical concerns at all. Diamonds and other

precious stones are still being used to fund human rights abuses in various parts of the world.

Two companies are famous for going beyond the Kimberley process. Tiffany & Co. maintains its own chain-of-custody controls, often buying diamonds direct from the mines. Brilliant Earth sources all of its natural diamonds from countries and individual mines that have committed to follow internationally recognized labor, trade, and environmental standards. They also sell recycled and lab-grown diamonds.

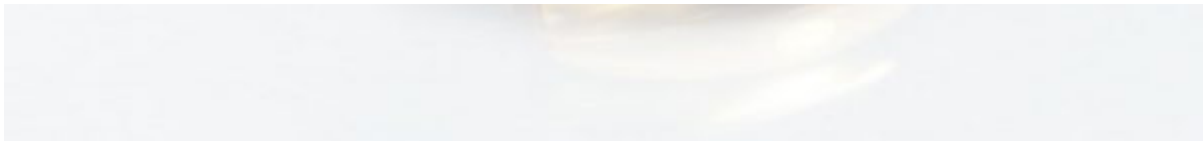
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Green Stones

Colored gemstones, and even semiprecious stones, have serious ethical issues as well, without even a Kimberley Process to limit abuses. Afghan lapis lazuli has generated funds for the Taliban. The sale of Burmese jade and rubies, mined by slave and child laborers, could be funding Rohingya genocide. These jewels were banned in the U.S. until 2016. (Late Senator John McCain introduced a bill to reinstate the ban, but it has not passed.) Even before the ban was lifted, jade and rubies generated more than \$30 million per year in sales, primarily to China. Many rubies cut in Thailand originated in Myanmar.

In contrast to diamonds, colored stones are predominately extracted through artisanal small-scale mining (ASM). Don't let the name fool you – small-scale mining is largely unregulated. Criminal activity including forced and child labor, environmental damage, and health and safety concerns are endemic. Gemfields (and its subsidiary Faberge) is a vertically integrated supplier of rubies, emeralds, and amethysts whose mining operations align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Other colored gemstones can be harder to source, but there are a few ethical suppliers.





BUYING RECYCLED GOLD ELIMINATES THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF MINING NEW METAL BUT DOESN'T IMPROVE CURRENT MINING PRACTICES. IMAGE: QIMONO, PIXABAY

Ethical Metal

Gold, like less precious metals, can be recycled. Many of the same jewelry companies that offer more sustainable gemstones use recycled gold for their settings. Buying recycled gold eliminates the environmental impact of mining new material but does nothing to improve current mining practices. Monica Stephenson, a board member at Ethical Metalsmiths, joined Earth911's podcast to talk about a production movement in the jewelry industry that aims to lift ASM miners out of poverty and teach them sustainable practices. Marc Choyt, the founder of Reflective Jewelry, has also talked with Earth911 about fair trade jewelry. He supports Fairtrade Gold, the world's first independent ethical certification system for gold. A related ASM certification in Latin America is Fairmined, which offers mines certification for both environmental and human rights performance.

The Final Word

Human Rights Watch released a report in early 2018 scrutinizing 13 major jewelry brands. None of them fulfilled all the criteria for responsible sourcing, and only one – Tiffany & Co. – had taken significant steps. However, nearly all of them acknowledged their responsibilities and have made some efforts to responsibly source their gold and diamonds.

Pressure from consumers can help these companies take more significant steps toward sustainability. When shopping for fine jewelry, don't be afraid to ask questions and don't make a purchase if you don't like the answers. Your loved ones might prefer a gift of upcycled jewelry that expresses your shared values more fully.

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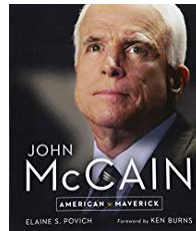
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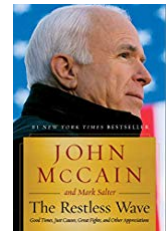
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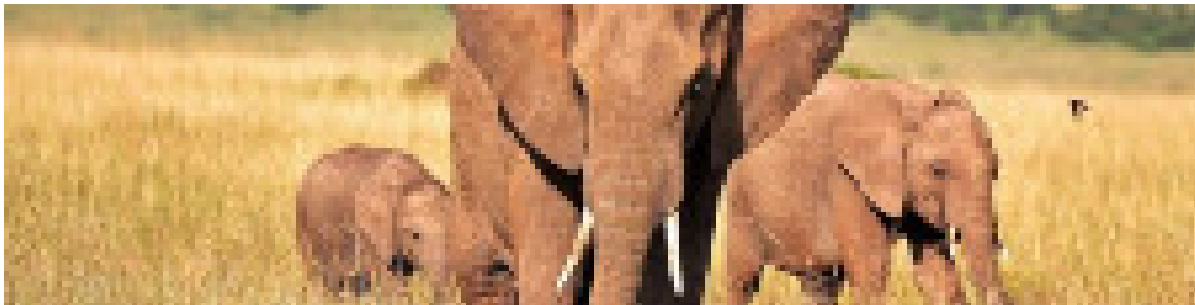
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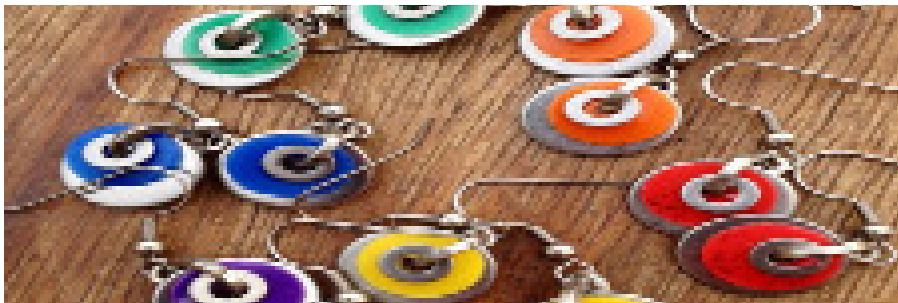
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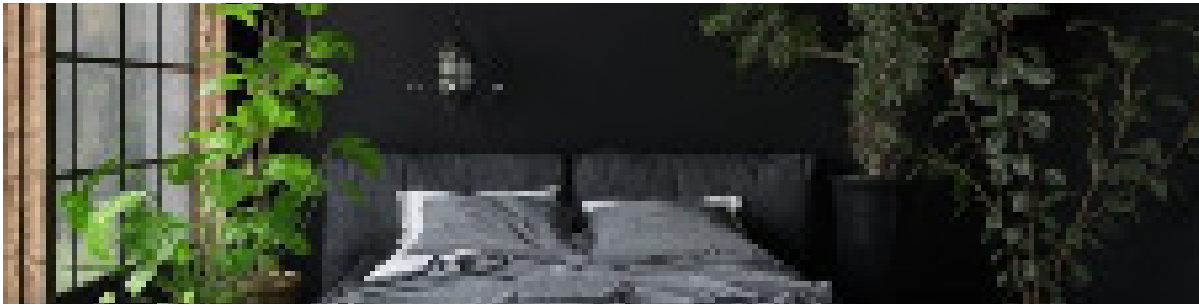
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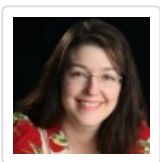
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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).