

New Macedonian Filigree

By Lyubov Gurjeva

Today every souvenir shop in Macedonia will offer you an intricately woven metalwork flower or butterfly imitating traditional silver filigree, and it is hard to believe that a decade ago Macedonian filigree was on the verge of extinction.

Filigree is a jewellery technique of using fine metal wire to create intricate designs which either remain open or are applied to a metal surface. The term "filigree" is derived from two Latin words: "filum"(thread) and "granum"(grain). Today filigree is practiced in various parts of the world including the Balkans. Filigree has been known in the region since ancient times. Jewellery excavated from antique graves is often decorated with filigree in combination with other techniques, such as casting, granulation, beating and enamel. Beautiful earrings excavated near Kochani and Bitola date back to Hellenic period, but it is not known whether they were made locally. Artefacts from this period point to the cultural and trade links of the Balkans with the Middle East and Asia Minor. Large filigree is typical of the Roman period across the region.

The living tradition of modern Macedonian filigree can be easily traced through the Ottoman period. The open lace-like filigree as we know it today goes



Silver filigree butterfly broche from the collection of the Museum of Macedonia

back to the late 18th – early 19th centuries. The centres of filigree work in Macedonia are Bitola, Ohrid, Struga and Skopje. Both male and female traditional costumes from these areas may be decorated with filigree. Filigree work can be seen on crosses, belt buckles, buttons and other fastenings, pipes and weapons. These objects had many functions: utilitarian as well as decorative, protective as well as ritual. Clips and buttons held clothes in place. Necklaces and chest pieces decorated and symbolically protected women's bodies, especially, of young brides. The main motives in traditional Macedonian filigree are floral: leaves, twigs and flowers. Some practitioners trace the local tradition to the Byzantine filigree that is also famous for its floral motifs.

In the nineteenth century traditional





Ring by Marija Milosevska

and urban jewellery diverged. Urban jewellery, while preserving traditional motifs, also ventured into new subjects; it became increasingly elaborate and largely lost its utilitarian as well as magical and ritual functions. The famous butterfly broche from the Museum of Macedonia is an example of purely decorative urban art.

Until very recently filigree was created by families of jewellers who practiced the craft for generations, passing it from father to son. The earliest written record of filigree craftsmen in Skopje area dates back to 1692. At the time filigree apprenticeship lasted 15 years. Vangel Dereban of Ohrid, one of the oldest living filigree craftsmen, has a documented family history of filigree craftsmanship going back 250 years.

Although historian Kosta Balabanov



Secret Slice ring by Biljana Klekackoska

names filigree among the nine surviving ancient crafts in his book on the history of the Skopje Bazaar, the number of traditional practitioners has reduced dramatically during the late 20th century. Today Skopje and other former filigree centres can boast only a handful of families continuing traditional businesses. Filigree is a very time-consuming technique that

did not fare well at the time when many new mechanised techniques of jewellery making became popular. On the one hand, hand-made filigree became too expensive in comparison with machine-made jewellery. And on the other hand, its traditional design no longer appealed to buyers exposed to a whole range of new trends.

Fortunately for the survival of the craft, after the Second World War filigree tradition also



Cufflinks by Biljana Klekackoska



Pepper pendant by Biljana Klekackoska

continued in Skopje at Rubin Jewellery Factory. But while maintaining the presence of filigree jewellery on the market and employing some of the skilled jewellery-makers, Rubin failed to meet the design challenge. That was left to the new

generation of creative and entrepreneurial jewellery-makers of the first decade of the 21st century.

By contrast with the traditional craftsman, the filigree jeweller of today is typically female, has no family tradition of jewellery-making, has a university degree, and operates as an independent artist. Many of them learned the craft in 2005 from Biljana Klekackoska, one of the most experienced and innovative independent Macedonian filigree artists, in the framework of a special project aimed at revitalising filigree in Macedonia that was co-sponsored by the Embassy of the Netherlands and Aid to Artisans programme of the USAID. Veneta Iljoska, art historian and a co-organiser of the project, taught the theoretical part of the course, providing the students with a rich visual vocabulary and introducing them to more than ten different metalwork techniques with lots of historical examples ranging from ancient Egypt to Bauhaus and surrealism. This course helped aspiring young artists gain access to the ancient indigenous practice of filigree and to root their innovative work in the history of art and in the local tradition.



Red Pepper pendant by Marija Milosevska

Fortunately for the new filigree designers,

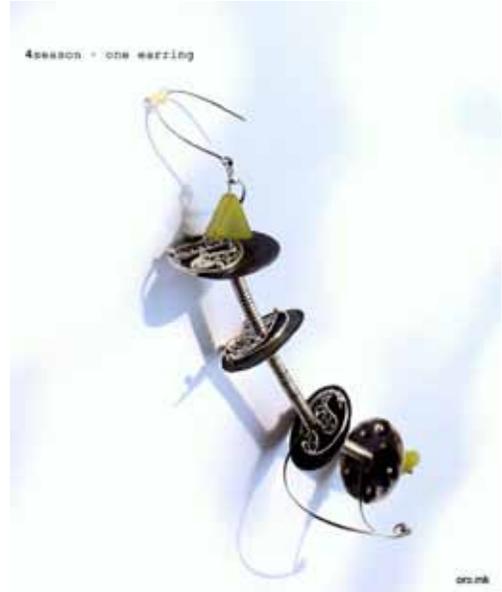




Filigree performance by Marija Milosevska

consumers' there is a renewed interest in filigree among consumers. There is a new niche market for handmade jewellery, and today there are more young people interested in learning and practicing the craft. They have formed a small but viable community. They increasingly see themselves as artists and designers, rather than craftsmen. Some of them have indeed elevated filigree to an expressive art form. Among them is Marija Milosevska who has also explored the performance aspect of filigree-making.

But there still remains a strong craftsmanship component in filigree jewellery. When I asked Biljana Kleckackovska to sum up the characteristics of well-made filigree, she came up with three: it



Four seasons – one earring by Marija Milosevska

is clean, solid and enduring. It takes time for a non-professional to train the eye for technical details, but Biljana's advice should help you recognise good work when you see it. "You shouldn't see the soldering: filigree should make you wonder how it's constructed, how it holds itself together and how it is possible that it's all made from just wire and beads. One should not see any melted parts: the texture of the twisted wire should be very clear. Filigree should live up to its poetic definition as the art of captured air."



Pebbles necklace by Biljana Kleckackovska