



Otto Jakob. Photo: Paul Muders.

MEET THE ARTISTS
Harnessing ancient craftsmanship and materials with a contemporary twist, visionary German artist-goldsmith
Otto Jakob has always played by his own rules

OTTO JAKOB

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Otto Jakob in his studio. Photo: Paul Muders.

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For four decades, Otto Jakob has proudly marched to the beat of his own drum. “I was a happy *Einzelgänger*, I was very independent,” says the self-taught German artist-goldsmith whose loyal clientele can’t get enough of the historically informed, avant-garde designs he conceives from his workshop in Karlsruhe, Germany. The start of his career, however, was a different story. At a time when contemporary jewelry favored the abstract, Jakob dared to revive the figurative and ornamental in an homage to the centuries-old designs he gawked at in museums as a child. “I was convinced that what I was doing would be important in the future, even if it wasn’t now,” says Jakob, the ultimate exemplar of risk-reaping reward.

Jakob found inspiration in other cultural disruptors like Cream and Jimi Hendrix, and especially David Bowie, whom he calls “a freak like I was.” Describing the musician’s early work, Jakob says, “it was like an alien singing of a world away from ours. He produced music that didn’t sound like anything that came before it.” Jakob, too, sought to develop his own artistic language. Eschewing the notion of simply being a “historicist,” copying ancient Etruscan or Art Nouveau jewels, he has consistently pushed his craft by experimenting with unusual techniques and materials, typically combining them with 18-karat gold, precious stones, and cutting-edge technology.

Above all, nature has been Jakob’s eternal muse. Beyond depicting real and fabled animal forms, such as ravens and dragons, or flora and fauna, Jakob’s creations often employ seeds, shell fragments, and many other materials from nature. Foraging in the Black Forest region of Southwestern Germany as a child is where he traces his passion for treasure hunting. While his father, a textile engineer who always wanted to be a painter, made watercolor landscapes in his free time, Jakob would dig for small crystals in an area dense with silver and lead mines—an activity he says felt like unearthing gemstones. Today, he still incorporates unpolished, unaltered crystals, as well as agate and even moldavite drops formed from terrestrial debris, into his pieces. Jakob’s father furthermore instilled in him a deep love of museums.

Aspiring to become a painter, Jakob attended the Fine Arts Academy in Munich, after which he moved to Karlsruhe to join a newly formed class by renowned German Expressionist Georg Baselitz at the art academy. Realizing painting “didn’t stimulate [him] like the way he felt looking at the crystals [he] found in the wilderness,” Jakob swiftly pivoted to jewelry after visions of jewels he would design came to him in a dream. Images of symbols ranging from hands and feet to wings and waterfalls would form the “manifesto” he still abides by today.

Knowing that any teacher would deem his ideas too “strange,” Jakob endeavored to teach himself ancient techniques based on the jewels he saw in museums. “It was not a fear but rather a self-confidence that motivated me,” says Jakob, who established himself in the world of high jewelry without external financial support, first exploring how non-precious materials could be turned into art. From the beginning, he designs each jewel “like a 360-degree sculptural piece” to be appreciated from every angle. Luckily Jakob’s first customers were Baselitz and his circle of artist friends, including Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Markus Lüpertz, and Günther Förg. Jakob says this was an ideal launching pad: “If you work for someone whose work you admire, you are much more motivated to do extremely good work.”

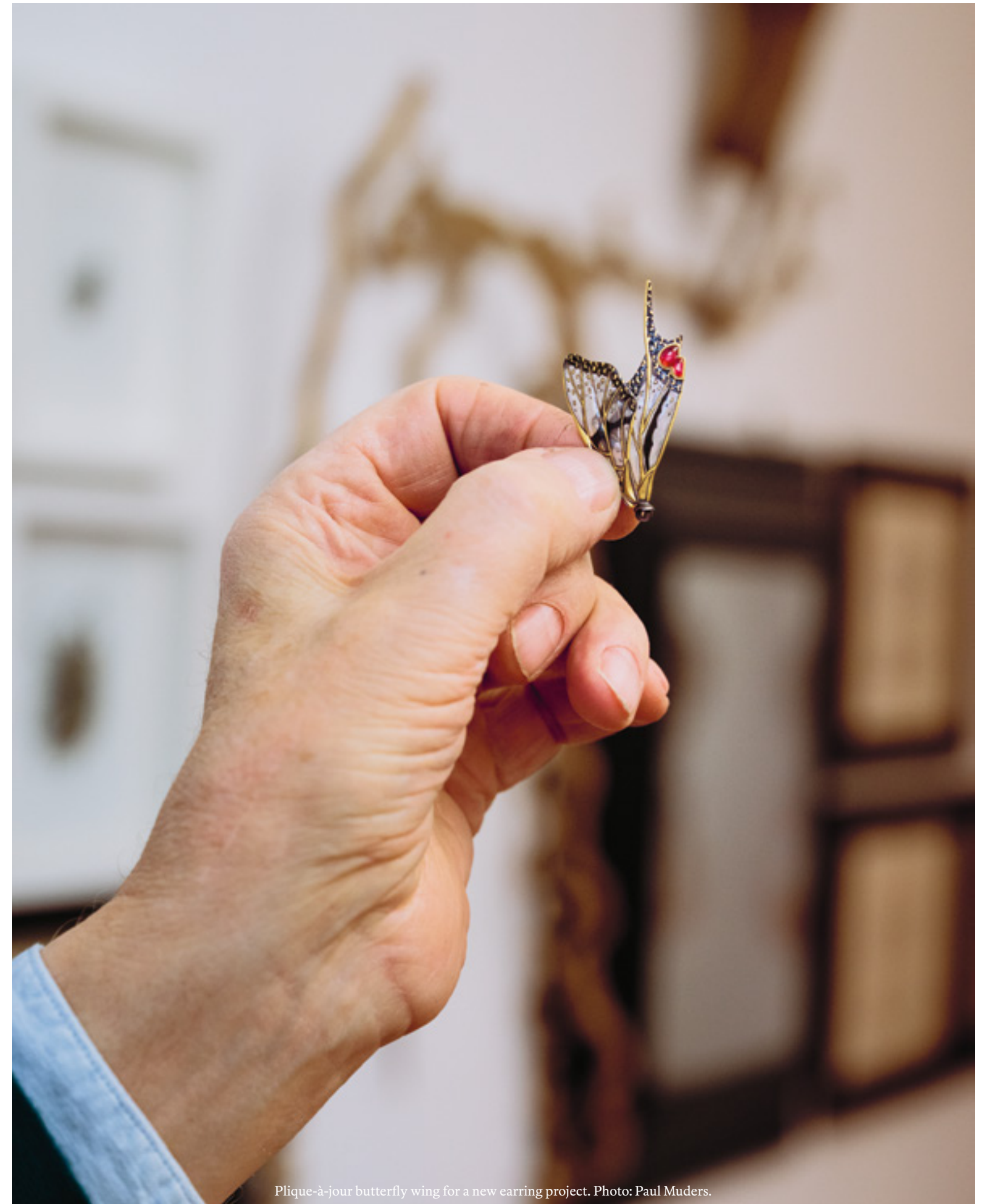
Four decades later, fine art collectors form the core of Jakob’s clientele. His transition into fine jewelry stems from that same perpetual desire to acquire something unique and highly original. “I’ve visited clients’ homes and was amazed to see Giacometti sculptures and Picasso paintings,” he says. “It’s an honor to be among such high-quality art.” Beyond cultural connoisseurs, Jakob’s favorite clients are those that offer him a creative challenge. “If you have a client who has a vision and is intelligent and not shy to ask for something never seen before, that’s the first thing that enables me to heat up my machine,” he says. “I learn from them, and they learn from me. This exchange is so important.”

The only places to purchase Jakob’s jewels are at his German atelier and TEFAF fairs, where he has exhibited since 2008. For three decades, his atelier has occupied an Art Nouveau building where he lives and works. “It’s very related to ancient workshops where everything was done under one roof: stone cutting, casting, engraving, enameling, etc. Nothing is outsourced,” Jakob describes. To complement his alchemist nature, he only employs traditionally trained goldsmiths and master artisans, though being “open minded” is key: “I’m very happy when, after a while, they realize that it’s not the work of a crazy man, but it’s in fact, something which is highly interesting and enables them to develop a different language of craftsmanship.”

Jakob, a self-proclaimed “old craftsman,” attributes his increasing embrace of technology to his son, a computer scientist, and his daughter-in-law Olesya, who has worked with him since 16 years. Calling himself a “mix of Renaissance and futurism,” Jakob says, “the workmanship we use is like a workshop from 400 years ago, but on the other hand, we live in an iPhone world.” Olesya has helped Jakob utilize digital tools for three-dimensional design. For example, when a flower petal was too thin to be nature-cast, a 3D-scanner allowed them to increase the petal’s thickness by one-third of a millimeter, resulting in a perfect form.

Nevertheless, the honing of techniques, old and new, never stops. Jakob is currently experimenting with plique-

à-jour, a vitreous enameling method that allows for transparency — artists like René Lalique popularized this technique at the turn of the 20th century. Jakob compares his constant quest for innovation to that of traditional Japanese calligraphers. “They spend their whole lives writing the word ‘love,’ for example, yet they’ve never reached their goal,” he says. While Jakob admits his own target is always moving, the journey there is sure to keep collectors guessing what staggering creation will come next.



Plique-à-jour butterfly wing for a new earring project. Photo: Paul Muders.



Inspiration from nature in Otto Jakob's studio. Photo: Paul Muders.



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Earrings inspired by morning stars and chestnuts. Yellow and white gold, green and black vitreous enamel, diamonds.
Photo: Volker Kirschner. Copyright/courtesy of Otto Jakob.



Earrings with articulated 3D scans of succulent leaves.
Yellow and white gold, diamonds, vitreous enamel, painted gold.
Photo: Volker Kirschner. Copyright/courtesy of Otto Jakob.