

A Career in the Ethical Jewelry Business

A young woman with an eye for beauty and a head for business finds success in bringing new ideas to an established industry.



Ethical jeweler Natsuko Shiraki talks about studying abroad, returning to Japan and starting her own business.

Often used as symbolic adornment on auspicious occasions, precious items of jewelry have added color to people's lifestyles since ancient times. However, most people are not aware of how its materials are obtained, something jewelry designer Natsuko Shiraki, who founded Hasuna Co., Ltd. in Tokyo in 2009, wants to address. "I have pursued a kind of jewelry where beauty can be found in every step of the process," she says.

In 2003, while a student of international development at King's College London, Shiraki visited

a village in southern India, where she was shocked at the terrible conditions the local mine workers had to endure. That experience opened her eyes to exploitation and inequality, and led her to intern at the United Nations Population Fund in Vietnam after graduating from college.

While she was impressed by the UN's capable and motivated staff members, she became aware of the limits of international support projects. "The existing framework tends to end up with organizations just giving money to people who are facing challenges," Shiraki points out. "Instead, I thought it would be

better to create a new business structure that encouraged self-reliance and growth, and that involved them as long-standing partners."

Her experience stirred a desire to learn about business, and she returned to Japan in 2006. She joined a real estate investment fund in Tokyo, the city she thought would be the most suitable place to gain business know-how. Raised in Aichi Prefecture, it was her first time living in the capital. "Tokyo was an extremely high concentration of people, money, information, culture—everything," she recounts.

While concentrating on her work, the experience in India kept crossing her mind. "Since childhood, I have always had the desire to create beautiful things," Shiraki says. "Perhaps I was inspired by my mother, a designer for a clothing company." Two years later, she left the fund to focus on her vision of establishing an ethical jewelry brand that would be friendly to society and the environment.

When she set up Hasuna, however, the term "ethical" was not yet recognized in Japan. People in the jewelry industry told her that it would be impossible to utilize fairtrade or fairmined gems and minerals because of the difficulties in tracing distribution channels via the many brokers and dealers beyond borders. "But I knew that ethical jewelry already existed in Europe and the U.S.," Shiraki says. She continued gathering information about mine owners and jewelry artisans around the world through her networks of London college friends and former colleagues at the UN, as well as through SNS.

Her first product was a ring made with diamonds from Canada, where all such gems are certified by the government. That same year, she visited Belize to purchase specialty Wilkes seashells for use in her jewelry, increasing the income of local craftsmen who had previously been poorly paid. In 2011, she traveled all the way to a mine in Hunza Valley in the extreme northern part of Pakistan to look for colored gemstones.



"eclat": jewelry designed by Natsuko Shiraki, featuring Canadian melee diamonds and certified fairmined 18K gold.

Today, Hasuna jewelry uses materials imported from ten countries, including Belize, Botswana, Canada, Colombia, Micronesia, Pakistan, Peru and Rwanda. Meanwhile, the concept of ethical products has gradually become known to more Japanese people, especially in the fashion industry. Japan's first ethical jeweler, Hasuna's annual sales increased from 13.6 million yen in 2008 to 170 million yen in 2016.

Based in Tokyo's fashionable Omotesando district, Hasuna plans to expand sales outlets overseas to further promote its ethical jewelry business framework. Shiraki often travels to the U.K., the U.S., Germany and France for marketing research and new ideas for ethical products. "I go to the most popular shops there," she says. "On returning home, however, I realize that there is no other city like Tokyo, where you can find the most sophisticated and interestingly designed products."

In this sense, the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art is her favorite place in Tokyo. "Every time I visit, I feel like I am getting a glimpse of the near future," Shiraki says. "Much of the cutting-edge cultural aspects and contemporary Japanese design seems to find expression there in a condensed form." One of her future projects is to open a gallery to present works by budding jewelers and artists.

Shiraki believes that Tokyo is home to excellent craftspeople. "They assemble and finish our products with a great attention to detail, which results in fine, soulful jewelry," she says. "For example, their way of making our solitaire diamond ring is superb." While bringing together ethical materials from partners around the world, Hasuna's jewelry is also furthering Japanese craftsmanship.

Selected as a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum in 2012, Shiraki means to continue pursuing her vision of a better world, believing in the power of jewelry to bring a smile to those who wear it, as well as those who contribute to its creation.