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Jewelry Designer Battles Elephant Ivory Poaching Trade through Seed of Life

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LOS ANGELES, CA -- Elephants are dying. One fine jeweler has an intriguing, and beautiful, answer: A seed of life.

While the battle against illegal elephant poaching rages, with thousands of the animals killed each year for their precious ivory tusks, designer David Alvarado is altering the fine jewelry landscape - protecting wildlife throughout regions like Kenya and redefining what humans have traditionally defined as "valuable" -- by returning to the root of where life begins: a seed. It's Tagua. The founder of Irthly Jewelled Adornments believes that seed holds an answer.

Alvarado is the first fine jeweler in the world daring to redefine value through a play of materials that mixes use of premium Tagua seeds with conflict-free diamonds, fair trade gemstones, recycled precious metals including gold and platinum, and invisibly set screws that replace toxic glues. The result is both gorgeous and eco-friendly. The most valuable material Irthly uses? It's not precious metals or dazzling diamonds, but Tagua - a seed that replaces animal elephant ivory, now dubbed "white gold".

The slaughter over "white gold" is needlessly eliminating life. Alvarado's Tagua use marks the birth of a new path that begins, not ends.

"My use of these high-grade seeds in jewelry is intended to raise awareness of the truest definition of value. The Tagua is necessary to life and opulent, as well as rare and controlled, but the seed represents the highest value on earth: life," says the designer and founder of Irthly Jewelled Adornments.

A healthy Tagua tree produces 50 pounds of nuts per year, rivaling the amount within a single African elephant tusk -- an animal with just one life to give.

In three decades, more than half of Africa's elephant population has been lost to poachers. The animals are being ruthlessly slaughtered for their tusks and monetary value associated with the illegal ivory trade. Elephant population numbers have plummeted from 1.2 million to less than half a million now in existence. Kenya's elephants are at risk of disappearing altogether, extinct from the continent within a decade, unless poaching efforts are dramatically slowed or stopped. At least 25,000 elephants died in 2013 by the hands of poachers.

In 2014 the United States, China, France, Belgium and the Philippines have now publicly destroyed a combined total of over 21 tons of elephant ivory - in efforts to combat the illegal poaching problem now known as "blood ivory". The illegal ivory trade industry is estimated to be worth ten billion.

If Tagua nut use in fine jewelry seems unusual, it matches Alvarado's background. A jeweler his entire life, Alvarado's background also includes comparative Chinese and European philosophy - with inspiration for his collections drawing upon deconstructing the notion of "precious" to include the concepts of life, and nurture.

Protected deep inside the nut of a palm, growing in mountainous regions of Ecuador, lies a hard seed. With high polishing, the hidden seed reveals characteristics virtually identical to those of elephant or animal ivory in beauty and luster, and in density and strength.

It's strong and it's brilliant. The renewable nut of palms has been used for over 100 years, imported by the tons to the nation in the early century.

The seed has appeared in high-impact billiards balls because of its strength. The seed has appeared on dress uniforms of United States soldiers because of its beautiful luster and incredible durability. And the seed has been prized by foreign dignitaries, who carry handmade Tagua pens that have been coveted by Hollywood celebrities - the instrument used by Panama's President in the historic signing marking expansion of the Panama Canal.

Tagua continues to become even stronger, through life: The polished seed gains even more durability through contact with the human body, where oils continue to naturally strengthen the seed worn in necklaces and rings.

Irthly's new Art D'eco collection serves as an homage to material or mental travel. "Terminals" is an exploration of departures and arrivals, gates, and receptions marked by the 1920s - the time when Tagua began disappearing from the nation as it was replaced by cheaper, synthetic materials. Every destination, goal, or aspiration, holds a place of departure and of arrival - now, back to the seed of life itself.

Designer David Alvarado of Irthly Jewelled Adornments has been named a 2014 JCK Design Center Rising Star, has been named an MJSA Vision Laser Distinction Award winner, and named 2013 American Jewelry Design Council's (AJDC) New Talent Awards Runner Up.

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