



Above: A ring based on the costume worn in the traditional Chinese lion dance. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Left: Primary Silver's designers often incorporate motifs inspired by nature into their designs. Below: A sterling silver kitten peers curiously into a fishbowl. PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Right: Primary Silver's designers manipulate the natural oxidation of sterling silver to produce stunning color effects. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Above: Primary Silver manager and designer Zhou Jian-ting crafts bracelet links at one of the store's workbenches. Left: Simple displays made of unfinished wood are hallmarks of Primary Silver's airy showroom. PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

Primary Silver's combination showroom and workshop gives customers a peek into the art of handmade sterling silver jewelry

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Behind a shop window near the Shida night market, passersby can glimpse four workbenches placed back to back, their surfaces laden with small blowtorches, tiny anvils and miniature hammers. Most afternoons, young men sit hunched over the tables, their hands delicately tapping away. Turn the corner and you will see the fruits of their meticulous labor: intricately handcrafted sterling silver jewelry artfully displayed in an airy showroom.

Primary Silver (元銀手作) opened in September on Longquan Street, just a few steps from the night market and right next to a popular purveyor of steamed buns. The store was founded by a group of four jewelers, including manager Zhou Jian-Ting (周建廷). The team originally produced gold jewelry for clients. Eventually, they decided it was time to start focusing on their own designs. Primary Silver provides Zhou and his colleagues with a workspace and a showroom for their creations.

"Each of us like creating things that are a bit more unusual than what other jewelry stores usually want. We figured that if we opened Primary Silver, we'd be able to find time to create and sell our own designs in between doing production work for other companies," Zhou says.

The designers use sterling silver for their own pieces because it is cheaper than white gold and allows them to manipulate the natural oxidation of silver to create design effects. One bracelet (NT\$1,500) has cloud-like whorls highlighted with iridescent blue and purple hues that resemble enamel on first glance, but is in fact the oxide that forms on silver after it has been exposed to air or water.

Each piece is created in limited quantities, and Zhou hopes that the intricacy of the designs will redefine people's notions of what a handmade object can look like.

"When people hear 'handmade' now, I think they tend to think of things that are relatively simple and maybe a bit homespun-looking, so it's obvious that it's not machine-made," Zhou says. "Of course that has its appeal, but we wanted to show our customers that something made by hand can also be very refined and very detailed."

Pieces include earrings made to look like a pair of miniature lily pads (NT\$880), with the texture of the leaves and each thin vein carefully delineated in sterling silver; and a playful pendant that looks like a kitten dangling from a branch with its tiny claws (NT\$2,200). More abstract pieces include a series of pendants inspired by the undulating curves of the female body (NT\$2,200). Techniques used by the designers include shaping the silver by hammering, drilling or soldering it, and lost-wax casting, in which a wax form is first carved, allowing for finer detailing, then used to make a mold.

Primary Silver also makes custom designs, which range from a few hundred NT dollars for small, simple pieces to about NT\$20,000 for larger and more detailed jewelry. Custom jewelry is also available in white gold, which is priced according to the weight and complexity of the finished piece.

One customer recently requested a pair of matching pendants for him and his girlfriend but wasn't quite sure what design he wanted.

"He said it had to be romantic, but he didn't want a traditional heart pendant," Zhou says.

Zhou asked the man about his girlfriend's tastes and interests and found out that she likes elephants, a motif he decided to incorporate into the jewelry. The finished set of pendants are identical but meant to be worn differently: the girlfriend's pendant, which hangs horizontally, looks like a stylized, heart-shaped elephant; the boyfriend's vertically-hung pendant transforms the same design into a more masculine, abstract stone shape.

By placing Primary Silver's workbenches in the showroom and right next to a large window, Zhou hopes to not only attract potential customers, but give passersby a peek into the art of silversmithing.

"A lot of stores don't want people to see inside their workspaces," Zhou says. "But I think a lot of people enjoy seeing how jewelry is made. And we think that understanding the care that is put into each piece allows people to value and enjoy their jewelry even more."

Behind the silver screen



PRIMARY SILVER (元銀手作)

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A silver cat grins saucily on top of this ring. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES