

The Appeal of Titanium

By Victoria Gomelsky

May 10, 2026

As gold and silver prices continue to soar, the metal's relatively inexpensive cost has attracted new users.



In 2020, in the midst of a pandemic lockdown, the jeweler [Adam Neeley](#) and his husband, Zach Rollins, threw a dinner party for themselves at their home in Laguna Beach, Calif. Their inspiration was “Les Dîners de Gala,” an opulent cookbook by Salvador Dalí published in 1973 and dedicated to Mr. Dalí’s wife, Gala.

Later that night, Mr. Neeley awoke from a series of dreams in which he was a guest at one of the Dalí’s extravagant feasts. In one reverie, he wandered into a garden, sat on a bench and watched, wide-eyed, as vibrantly colored creatures alighted around him.

Adam Neeley holds up a Morpho earring from Dalí’s Garden Collection. Beth Coller for The New York Times

“Right on the trunk of this amazing tree was this gorgeous blue butterfly, just shimmering in the moonlight,” Mr. Neeley recalled during a recent interview in Beverly Hills, Calif. “Then suddenly, there was this little ivy that started crawling on my ear. I looked down and there is this gorgeous rose bush. It blossomed open and glowed right in front of my eyes.

“I promise I didn’t take psychedelics,” he added.



The Morphe earrings from Mr. Neeley’s Dalí’s Garden collection, a pair of blue-purple butterfly wings ablaze with over 85 carats of precision-cut blue and lavender sapphires.

One look at the phantasmagoric designs that Mr. Neeley sketched after waking and you might be tempted to doubt him. Introduced last month at the PAD art fair in Paris, the jewels in his Dali's Garden collection boast a Technicolor palette, ranging from a pair of four-inch cobalt blue, sapphire-studded Morpho earrings inspired by the fluorescent butterfly to the Rosa Petula, a collar necklace of purplish-red petals smothered with more than 55 carats of Burmese rubies.



The Rosa Petula from Mr. Neeley, a collar necklace of purplish-red petals smothered with more than 55 carats of Burmese rubies.

That's because the new collection, unlike his previous creations in gold, was crafted almost entirely in titanium. Named for the Titans of Greek mythology, the space-age metal — as light as aluminum yet stronger than steel — can be anodized into a range of hues. The process begins when the naturally gray metal is placed in an electrolytic solution and zapped with electric currents. Each charge creates an iridescent oxide layer that blushes, depending on the voltage, from bronze to purple, blue, teal, green, pink and yellow (just not bright red).

Best known for its use in technical applications, such as aeronautics and medical implants, titanium also has a near-mythical following among a growing subset of fine jewelers, including many devoted goldsmiths.

“This is alchemy,” Vasilis Giampouras, a mechanical engineer-turned-jeweler who began working in titanium in 2000, said during a recent video call from his workshop in Athens.

A ‘gutsy’ material

While titanium lacks gold's heft, intrinsic value and historic appeal, it lends itself to large, contemporary designs, such as the intricate meshlike creations of Richard Wu, a jeweler in Shenzhen, China, or the abstract designs of Elsa Jin in New York. The material is often used for earrings and brooches impossible to render in gold or platinum. (With a density roughly three and five times greater than titanium, those precious metals might rip the very garments and lobes they were meant to adorn.)



Adrien Brody at this year's Oscars wore the titanium Ulysses brooch, designed by Elsa Jin. Kevin Winter/Getty Images

At the Oscars ceremony in March, for example, the actor Adrien Brody accessorized his Gucci suit with an artful diamond-studded pin about the size of a bread plate. Designed by Ms. Jin, the Ulysses brooch, according to her Instagram feed, represents a twisted, torn sail. “She uses the hardness of titanium to articulate the traces of tearing, amplifying both visual impact and artistic resonance,” the caption said.

Marion Fasel, a jewelry historian, author and founder of the online jewelry publication The Adventurine, said the metal appealed to designers looking for unorthodox ways to make a statement. The recent volatility in the gold market has only added to its allure, she said. (High-grade titanium typically sells for \$20 to \$50 per kilogram (2.2 pounds) while gold currently is valued at about \$4,700 per ounce.)

“When gold started skyrocketing, everyone immediately started beating a retreat to silver, but we’ve also seen wood come on strong, and beads,” Ms. Fasel said in a phone interview last month. “Jewelers have an attraction to many different materials, but even for those who have the skill set, titanium is a daring material. You’re not making basic jewelry with it.”

For designers catering to couture clients “who want to be wearing things for right now,” titanium is an obvious, if “gutsy,” choice, Ms. Fasel said.

Mike Saatji, the co-founder and creative director of the fine jewelry brand Mike Joseph in Bangkok, began working with the metal in 2023.

“I wanted something that felt different from the traditional materials I’d been using,” Mr. Saatji wrote in an email. “It gave me a way to introduce color without relying on stones and enameling, and at the same time it brought a certain modernity and lightness to the pieces.”



Mike Saatji, the co-founder and creative director of Mike Joseph, uses titanium in his Petali collection, which features green, purple, blue and bronze flowers.

Mr. Saatji uses titanium in his Petali collection, which features green, purple, blue and bronze flowers with petals that he sanded to create an unusual matte finish.

Alix Dumas, who makes one-of-a-kind high jewelry designs by hand at her studio in Auray, a river port near the coast of France's Brittany region, also has turned to titanium to recreate the vivid colors of floral blooms.

"The main reason I decided to use titanium is because of the way it feels alive," Ms. Dumas said on a recent video call. "What I mean is, when you anodize titanium, you don't get one color as you would, for example, with aluminum. You'll have multiple colors, and depending on the light and on the angle, they will shift."

Since 2021, when she began teaching herself how to work with the metal, Ms. Dumas has learned that manipulating titanium is far more time-consuming and complex than working with precious metals.

“Cutting a shape in silver would have taken me maybe half an hour — cutting it in titanium would take me more or less four hours,” she said. “Shaping it is really difficult because it’s extremely hard, but it also breaks. So all the techniques that you usually use on silver or gold, you have to rethink.”

A grand scale



The Los Angeles designer Emily P. Wheeler used colored titanium for the leaves of her Hibiscus earrings.

“I’m creating a huge-scale piece, and I’m excited about using titanium as a way to add color and also bring down the gold, which is ungodly expensive,” Ms. Wheeler said by phone last month. “When I first started using it, it was really about the lightness of the metal. It wasn’t saving that much money because it’s tricky to work with. But now I’m seeing it as an alternative to gold and keeping prices reasonable.”

Ms. Wheeler said the metal had changed her approach to design. “Since adopting titanium, I’ve imagined bigger scale pieces that I would never have dreamt up in gold,” she said.

The same goes — and then some — for Wallace Chan, a pioneering jewelry designer and gem carver from Hong Kong whose debut collection of titanium jewels, introduced in 2007, set a precedent for the metal’s use at the high-end.

This week in the chapel at Santa Maria della Pietà in Venice, Mr. Chan is presenting “Vessels of Other Worlds,” an exhibition of titanium works coinciding with the Venice Biennale, on view until Oct. 18. The dual-site exhibition also is scheduled to open at the Long Museum in Shanghai, with vessels as tall as 10 meters (almost 33 feet) on display from July 18 to Oct. 25.

“Titanium still excites me because it can be monumental in more than one sense,” Mr. Chan wrote in an email. “It can be monumental in scale as it is strong and light enough to belong to the world of aerospace. But it is also monumental in complexity, in its colors, forms and engineering.

“For me, its possibilities move in two directions at once: toward the monumental and toward the intricate.”

In an industry that has stubbornly clung to the belief that value is solely related to cost, Mr. Chan and his fellow titanium devotees are helping to reframe the narrative. But even Mr. Giampouras, the Greek jeweler who fell in love with titanium’s alchemical properties a quarter-century ago, acknowledged it had been an uphill battle.

“Titanium is not expensive,” Mr. Giampouras said. “It’s the cheapest metal. The traditional jewelers, they don’t want it because they know. When you have gold jewelry and it doesn’t sell, you can melt it and make something else. But with titanium jewelry, you have to sell it. If you are not selling it, then what are you going to do with it?”

A version of this article appears in print on May 11, 2026, Section S, Page 10 in The New York Times International Edition. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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