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FROM ITALY, *CON PIACERE*

For a few moments, join me in a journey back in time to the Vicenza fair in January, 1994: I'm ambling through aisles, visiting vendors, deciphering design directions. At the end of the show, I conclude that the trends are typically and distinctly Italian: classic, yellow gold, high-polish, bold scale, bombé shapes, and curving contours.

Now, fast-forward a decade to January, 2004. Once again, I am at the VicenzaOro 1 fair, but this time, after several hours, I'm beginning to wonder if my Alitalia pilot overshot his mark on the way over from the states and landed the plane somewhere in Africa instead of on the Italian peninsula. Why? Because in many of the most fashion-forward showcases, collections don't appear typically and distinctly Italian. Instead, in fact, they bear the influence of the continent just south of the Mediterranean. What I'm seeing is Afrocentric chic: rough-hewn finishes, natural themes, disc and spike shapes, big collars, amorphous gold beads, and materials like horn and ebony mixed with the 18k gold.

Indeed, it appears we have entered the Italy meets Africa era. Well, in terms of design only—Italy meets China is all the buzz in terms of emerging markets for Italian jewelry production, and Italy meets Russia enters discussions concerning the country's new markets for future growth.

Speaking of discussions, the "E" word was on everyone's lips: the prolonged strength of the euro against the dollar. How could it not be? Needless to say, the poor exchange rate for Americans did make me long for 1994, when, quite frankly, Italy's troubles meant bargains for us. Some of you may recall that ten years ago the lira had plunged to 1,700 to the dollar, making Italian jewelry so affordable for U.S. retailers that some booths at January's Vicenza fair resembled an old-fashioned fire sale. The lure of the lira was, in fact, so palpable that, at the end of the show's first day, U.S. attendance was up 18 percent over the previous year.

Hence, the question for today becomes this: Do I yearn for that same period in design? The answer is no. In my opinion, the way Italian design has evolved over the past decade is the way any art form should over a ten-year period. It develops, based on the world's development. Last year, a good share of new Italian designs emerged with an uncharacteristic neo-oriental flair, while this year they arrived bearing the African influence. As for what's next, I look forward to that, whatever it is—as do retailers like this issue's Guest Editor Maria Frasca of Frasca Jewelers in Palm Desert, California. Maria's editorial (page 27, "An Italian 'Love Story'") is a must-read for anyone who hasn't yet included Italian jewelry in their store's mix.

Like Maria, we at Lustre believe that, to be a luxury jeweler in the states, the inclusion of Italian goods is essential. Which is why this issue celebrates Italian jewelry style and substance. Beth Bernstein provides us with an illuminating interview with Gianmaria Buccellati of the legendary house of Buccellati (page 29), as well as some advance information on an exhibit coming to the states in November that is sure to influence 2005 jewelry design and consumer purchases ("The Castellani and Italian Archaeological Jewelry," page 34).

Meanwhile, for those who've been preoccupied with chandelier and drop earrings, consider now the new neck pieces. In this issue, neck pieces are in the limelight, featured in three separate stories (pages 14, 36, and 41). As our Fashion Director Jeff Prine says, "With more fashion designers showing suits and jackets for fall, the necklace is poised to crash onto the scene again." On page 41, "Shattered Illusions" showcases some neck pieces you may not have seen if you missed the January Vicenza show. Of course, it's our job to keep you updated on what you may miss. And, as the Italians would say, we do it *con piacere* (with pleasure).