

Erna's joint venture

A Dutch artist collaborates with Kathmandu artisans for an exhibition of silver ornaments in London next week



MARK TURIN
in AMSTERDAM

Erna Anema was a 25-year-old art school graduate when she first travelled to Nepal in 1979. She and her travelling companion had hoped to journey overland, like so many Europeans before them but the deteriorating situation in Iran meant that they had to fly directly to Kathmandu to travel and trek in the Himalayas.

Coming to Nepal had long

been high on Erna's list of desires, after reading a book as a child about the 1953 conquest of Chomolungma. While she had expected to be bowled over by the natural beauty of the country, the fine craftsmanship of the metal workers and jewellers fascinated her the most, sowing the seeds of future collaboration.

When she was studying at the prestigious Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, where she now teaches, Erna had become interested in working with gold and silver and wanted one day to collaborate with the skilled Newar craftsmen in Kathmandu valley.

It wasn't until 1995, however, that this germ of an idea would blossom into a joint venture. In the intervening years, while working as a professional artist, Erna often holidayed in Nepal with her three children and her husband, Cas de Stoppelaar, the part owner of the Summit Hotel and eventual Consul General of Nepal to the Netherlands. In 1995, Erna began visiting a number of Patan craftsmen to watch them at work and seek potential partners who could translate her artistic vision into precise copper, silver

and gold objects.

I had the pleasure of meeting Erna at her house in the Netherlands earlier this month, where she regaled me with tales of her collaboration with and fondness for, Nepal's artisans. Her enthusiasm for her work and her ongoing relationship with this Himalayan kingdom are infectious, topped only by a charming unpretentiousness. She is disarmingly frank in the way that she describes both the challenges and successes of her artistic work.

One of the unexpected challenges in working with craftspeople in Nepal is the difficulty of accurately conveying an artistic idea in a manner that has local resonance. Trained to produce careful technical drawings in two- or three-point perspective, Erna soon realised that her Newar co-workers were unable to 'read' such visualisations, even if they marvelled at her precision.

The rough but elegant simplicity which Erna achieves in her art is unsightly to most Nepali craftsmen with whom she has worked, given the differing



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aesthetic sensibilities. Once she finally succeeded with a copper worker in forming a bowl in the way she wanted it. She left for a couple of hours and returned to discover that he had carefully beaten an undesired wave into the rim.

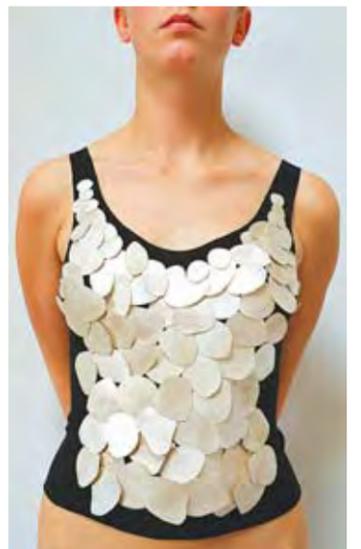
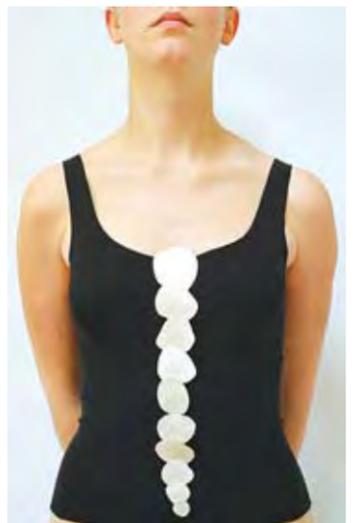
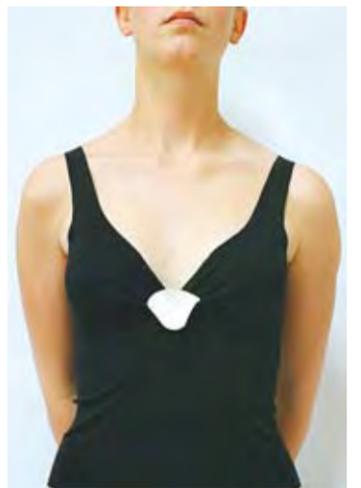
Erna is modest about her contribution to the livelihoods of these craftsmen, suggesting that her artistic commissions make up only a small part of their annual income. While respecting traditional craft techniques, Erna delights in bringing small gifts for her friends and colleagues Rajesh, Saroj, Mohan, Nabin and Gautam, such as strong work gloves, books on gilding and gas masks to combat the noxious mercury fumes which are released when Patan's craftsmen decorate temple domes.

Erna's oeuvre is made up of three components: objects, jewellery and paintings. The first two are made in collaboration with craftsmen from Patan, while her painting is solo work from her studio in the Netherlands. Soon after an exhibition at Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu in the late 1990s, while Erna was teaching a workshop at Nepal's Art Academy, she organised a successful exhibition in Haarlem at which all exhibited items were sold.

Her most recent artistic adventure is the *Lal Project*, which she will take on tour to London next week. A *lal* is a Nepali unit of measurement for silver, from which Erna makes beaten silver brooches of different sizes and constellations. ●

9-13 February
Victoria and Albert Museum
London
COLLECT 2006
<http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/collect/>

For more on lals and Erna's other:
www.ernaanema.nl/



LAL SALAM: (clockwise from left) The artist Erna Anema, in her studio. A model wearing different combinations of silver Lals for an exhibition in London next week. Copper pots and other objects beaten in Nepal.

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