



■ Sun Museum director Yeung Chun-tong, main, curates an exhibition about the gold industry in Hong Kong through the prism of local jewelry brand Chow Sang Sang. On display are photos, sales receipts and jewelry from the past.

## Golden oldies

Katie Hung

The story of gold never grows old.

*Hong Kong Gold Legend: CSS* at the Sun Museum in Kwun Tong offers an insight into Hong Kong's gold jewelry industry over the past decades from the perspective of Chow Sang Sang, a famous jewelry brand with an 80-year-old heritage.

On display are gold bullion coins and bars from different periods alongside contemporary jewelry. The jewelry pieces also reflect how design and technology have evolved over the years, said museum director Yeung Chun-tong, who is also the exhibition's curator.

In the 50s, gold bullion was highly prized among local fishermen as a means of preserving wealth. "That's why streets next to the sheltered bays [where fishermen docked their boats] in Aberdeen and Causeway Bay were filled with goldsmiths in the olden days," he said.

Bullion coins typically had small holes drilled into their centers so that they could be easily strung together, allowing fishermen to wear them around their waist.

The gold bullion produced in the 1950s are rough and their lettering and brand names are unclear. This is because they were crafted by hand at the time, Yeung said.

But over the years the goldsmiths honed their skills and crafted bullion with smoother surfaces and more distinct lettering.

Yeung recalls going to goldsmith shops as a child with his relatives, who were very discerning shoppers.

"My relatives were careful about selecting jewelry pieces that were well crafted and of good quality," he said. "But if you walk into a goldsmith shop today, you would probably find that every piece looks the same as they are all machine-made."

Jewelry would also be specifically designed for special occasions and ceremonies. One old tradition that's been passed on to the present day is the custom of giving one's daughter a pair of gold bangles engraved with motifs of the dragon and phoenix – traditional auspicious symbols in Chinese culture – ahead of her wedding.

Also, a Chinese bride would traditionally wear a gold necklace



■ A four-tael double-happiness bridal necklace with multiple pigs to symbolize fertility by Chow Sang Sang.



featuring a motif of pigs as a symbol of fertility, so that she would be blessed with many children.

"Giving gold jewelry as a present is a ceremonious gesture, as gold has been considered a luxury since time immemorial," Yeung said, adding that it also shows the importance the Chinese placed on gold as a status symbol.

Working-class men, meanwhile, wore chunky gold jewelry not for show but as a good-luck charm that would help keep them employed in a well-paid and stable job, since gold is said to last forever.

In addition to gold jewelry, there are old sales receipts and certificates on display, giving us an idea as to how gold prices have soared over the last few decades, driven by inflation.

A pair of gold bangles with dragon and phoenix motifs today cost around HK\$10,000, but it was a mere HK\$500 in the 50s. However, this was still considered a fortune at that time, said Yeung, pointing out that his father took home a salary of around HK\$200 a month in the 1960s. So HK\$500 would be the equivalent of a month's rent for a shop.

Yeung said it was a challenge to organize the exhibition and that he has been working on it since last year. He found it particularly hard to source old jewelry, as most goldsmiths turn unsellable jewelry into new pieces, instead of letting them gather dust on the shelves.

He hopes the exhibition will give visitors interesting insights into the lives of people in Hong Kong through the eyes of gold jewelers.

*Hong Kong Gold Legend: CSS* runs until August 11 from Tuesdays to Saturdays at Sun Museum in Kwun Tong alongside an ink-paintings art exhibition by four Chinese masters. Admission is free.



■ From far left: gold rings, an old weighing scale used by goldsmiths in the past, a three-tael gold bracelet for men, a one-tael gold bullion coin made before 1950 and gold bangles engraved with dragon and phoenix motifs.