

Winged serpent bracelets
with diamond-studded tails,
leopards' heads enamelled
with black spots . . .

goldsmiths Courts and Hackett (above)
make their jewellery fantasies come true, and
Rolling Stone Keith Richards is one
of their best customers.
VIVIENNE BECKER takes
a shine to them



S STONES for a STONE

Courts and Hackett, two of Britain's most talented goldsmiths, are little known outside a band of devotees of modern jewellery design. They belong neither to the craft ethic of artist - jewellers who exhibit in galleries - nor to the mainstream of modern commercial jewellers. They have turned down several offers to manufacture, refusing to compromise on style and quality or to sacrifice their ideals about jewellery. They work mainly to commission for a small clientele which appreciates their particular originality.

Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones is their best customer, and in the role of new-style patron of the arts he has been quietly buying and encouraging their work since the start of their career in about 1976. This rock-patronage relationship works very well. Keith Richards has an adventurous taste for exciting jewels that are contemporary works of art; this means that Courts and Hackett have a patron, elusive and unpredictable perhaps, but who is happy to buy their most fantastic creations.

David Courts and Bill Hackett met at Hornsey College of Art. They both went on to study at the Royal College of Art and began working together in 1974. In their first year they produced a series of eight or ten pieces concentrating more on design and workmanship than expensive materials. David had met Keith Richards some time before in 1968, through London art dealer Robert Fraser. At a weekend house party, Keith was interested in hearing about David's ideas, asked to see some of his work, and was receptive and encouraging.

When David and Bill began to work together he bought a skull and cross-bones ring. David and Bill agree that he was a vital catalyst in their career. They trust his judgment and realise too that he has a very good sense of value and appreciates quality and design. They know too that Keith is in a position to buy any of the best jewellery from top names around the world. They were delighted when he and Patti came to them recently for an engagement ring; they made a gold band thickly entwined all around with lush clinging vines that enclosed a 4-carat ruby at the front. 'It has always been exciting having Keith as a customer because, with his taste for unusual and unexpected items, he opens up possibilities, which other customers may be less aware of. And, despite his reputation, he is a true gentleman.'

By 1976 Courts and Hackett had impressed Wartski, London Fabergé and antique jewellery specialists into giving them an exhibition which in turn led to an invitation to take part in an exhibition of modern

jewellery at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1977. After this the museum bought one of their most original pieces for the permanent collection. It is a winged serpent bracelet, articulated, its head carved from buffalo horn and set with diamonds and cabochon rubies, its slithering tail studded with diamonds. Shirley Bury, former keeper of the metal-work department, still finds this jewel exciting: 'Their work will endure because they combine a real originality with an old-fashioned craftsmanship and respect for materials.'

At the Victoria & Albert Museum, their work was spotted by an Oppenheimer and they were asked to submit a design for the Diamond Day trophy, a prize commissioned by De Beers for the winner of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Diamond stakes at Ascot. Their entry won. Courts and Hackett made a silver box with a bronze lid, in the centre a finely sculpted 18-carat gold horse's head, streams of diamonds flaring from each nostril, a vibrant and magical vision achieved within the rigid framework of a specific brief. It is this dramatic combination of the bizarre and biomorphic with traditional, meticulous craftsmanship that is compelling. Luxurious materials and tactile forms are the lure towards the strange and shocking beauty of a fierce sensuality. Designs hover between the erotic and the macabre, and yet they have the open innocence of nature itself. Courts and Hackett are intrigued by the beauty and complexity of nature. They say that when they look at an insect, for example, they fantasise about reproducing it absolutely realistically, with the minimum of artistic interference, aiming at the simple magic of Fabergé's flower studies. They love the shapes and forms of skulls and skeletons and bones. They are proud of a gold frog skeleton, an exact replica with no artistic embellishments which Edward Lucie-Smith described as part of 'a tradition which descends from the metalsmiths of the Renaissance, among them Benvenuto Cellini'. Their unconventional view of nature gives their jewels a haunting mystery, a weird and ethereal beauty.

David and Bill love movement in shapes and also in articulation and in finely engineered clasps and hinges. Many of their jewels move or come apart. They are dedicated to technical perfection, the kind of brilliance they admire in Cartier jewels of the 1930s and '40s. Patti (see picture) wears a pair of bracelets based on fantasy creatures of 18-carat yellow and white gold with mother-of-pearl heads and tassels of silk tipped with gold. The goldwork is articulated for slinky suppleness. The gold winged serpent in the V & A is also ingeniously

articulated: when worn, the diamond tail slithers down the back of the hand; when it's taken off, it settles into sinuous curves.

David and Bill share an instinct for materials. They love the luxury of rare and expensive stones and metals, and would like the chance to work in yet more lavish materials, on a grander scale. They're never intimidated: they make the materials work for them and their ideas. Their goldwork is a speciality, strong, sculptural and rich. A recent commission was for a pair of matching rings for each little finger, each in the form of a leopard's head, realistically modelled in gold, enamelled with black spots, green eyes and blood red mouth, snarling open jaws clamped on a diamond. The faces were menacing as if the animal was about to pounce, its energy pulled back around the finger by the fluid lines of taut muscles. Earlier Keith Richards had bought a tiger's head ring, its coloured gold shaggy face set with glaring water opal eyes and diamonds in its forehead. The rings feel good to wear and handle: all their jewels mould beautifully to the curve of the neck and wrist, sway easily with the movements of the hand or body.

Jewels that shock and slither have a rarefied following. They're not for the faint-hearted and the cost of this dedication to skill and quality is high. In 1977 the V & A serpent cost £7,500. Clients find their way to Courts and Hackett through word of mouth. They include Prince Rupert Lowenstein, financial adviser to the Rolling Stones, and eccentric Kentucky collector George Headly, for whose museum they made an animal objet d'art. Now they are working on a commission for Charlie Watts and his wife based on their stable of Arab horses, although details are a close secret. This year De Beers commissioned Courts and Hackett along with seven other leading designers to make a piece of diamond jewellery for Visions of Quality, a collection to be exhibited by Mappin & Webb throughout England and Scotland; it will be in London in October. Between commissions, when they get ahead in time and money, they work with passionate enthusiasm and intensity on speculative jewels, sheer flights of fantasy to exercise ideas and techniques. It is Keith Richards who most often buys these, a skull pin carved in ivory with gem-set bishop's mitre for himself, the articulated bracelets for Patti. For Courts and Hackett these jewels are the most important. They appreciate Richards's support and patronage: it enables them to continue exploring, perfecting, making powerful jewels that thrill with myth, magic and energy, hoping one day to create the definitive jewel of the decade. ■



*Only rocks and roll:
Keith Richards and his wife Patti
wearing some of their
Courts and Hackett jewellery*