

by Katrina Balmaceda

FLASH FALCONS

JEWELS FOR AN IMPERIAL SPORT

The debate goes that falconry originated either in the Arabian deserts or Mongolian steppes. Historians agree that the sport existed even before written history. It passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth, and training usually meant at least a year-long apprenticeship.

Originally a method of hunting, it became a sport practised by emperors and aristocrats in ancient times. This meant that whenever war toppled a dynasty or a ruler, falconry became forgotten in that area. Its absence stretched for centuries in countries like China, India, Spain and Belgium. A revival began in the 1900s but was slowed by animal conservation regulations or laws that declared it illegal. Falconers fought for legalisation by proactively conserving the environment and establishing standards.

Today, falconry is again a rising sport in parts of the world. Clubs have either been formed or are being proposed, and are officially recognised by governments in places like England, USA and the Netherlands. In the UAE, United Nations cultural agency UNESCO has acknowledged falconry as a cultural heritage. The region even has a falcon hospital. Birds of prey in the UAE are issued passports to protect them from illegal trading.

With falconry's fame, Italian jewellery house Tiroler Goldschmied unveiled a novelty in the International Hunting & Equestrian Exhibition in September 2010 — a collection of diamond studded falcon hoods. One-of-a-kind pieces whose design — colour, choice of stones and gems, adornments — depends on the falconer's fancy.

Family coat of arms, signatures and other personal emblems can be incorporated in the design with the use of precious stones.

Italian craftsman Giancarlo Pirrotta fashions the hoods from fine leather for Tiroler Goldschmied, who then bejewels and finishes them. Goldschmied, a 40-year-old, family-run company with numerous international goldsmith awards, took an entire year to firm up the process of decorating the hoods.

Falconers use hoods on their birds to keep them calm while the quarry is being spotted or prepared. Without the hood, a hunting bird with its keen sight could spot potential prey or other game far away or at the periphery.

Excited and distracted, the falcon would be unable to concentrate when the falconer finally chooses the target prey. When the hood is removed, the quarry is the first thing in sight, and the falcon locks on it for the hunt. 

