

**Features**

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# The design knot between Italy and Cambodia

Yin Soeum / Khmer Times



Martina Cannetta, daughter of Il Nodo founders, discusses jewelry patterns with students. KT/Siv Channa

Martina Cannetta is excited. Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has invited her and her association Il Nodo ("Il Nodo" is Italian for "the knot") to hold an exhibition to display their exclusive handcrafted collection of jewellery. The event will be an example of collaboration between Cambodia and Italy in the fields of handicraft and design.

Cannetta has lived for more than 20 years in Cambodia, where her parents founded Il Nodo. The organisation welcomes naturally talented young Cambodians who have no access to proper education, and her parents brought in Italian designers to help train them.

She told *Khmer Times* that their uniquely and spectacularly designed collection of jewellery will be exhibited at the National Museum in conjunction with the ASEM Cultural Festival (ASEMfest). The event takes place annually, on the side-lines of ASEM Summits or Foreign Ministers' Meetings.

The exhibition will be on-site and also shown online. It is being promoted and sponsored by the Italian Embassy in Bangkok. "We aim to promote our respective heritages and make crucial contributions to cultural understanding and sharing," Cannetta said. "We are also preparing a video about our 'A Sketch for Hope' project that is illustrated in a book."



Run Rattanak at work making jewelry. KT/Siv Channa

Cannetta has devoted her life to helping disadvantaged youth become productive citizens by offering them training and helping them pursue economic independence. She arranges for them to learn handicraft skills that enable them to produce uniquely designed jewellery blended with traditional and modern concepts.

Under the tutelage of talented Cambodian master silversmiths and renowned Italian designers, they design creative jewellery that combines traditional ancient models and modern design.

Lon Phanna, 33, a father of two children and goldsmith from Preah Sihanouk province's Sihanoukville, is happy to have learned skills from Il Nodo. However, he found the language barrier a challenge while learning from foreign designers and teachers.

"It took me two years to study the skills of the trade," he said. "It was not easy, but we finally learned it." He added that because of what he learned and mastered, he can now make a good income.

Phanna said he is proud to train students and pass on the experience and skills he gained over the years, including making creative pieces of jewellery. “I am so happy to know that my jewellery will also be exhibited at the National Museum from November 22 to 26,” he added.

Ry Sangha is happy to be part of Il Nodo because of the knowledge, skills and experience he gained there. He recommends it to young Cambodians who want to learn.

“When I started my studies at Il Nodo, I got a nutritious meal every day and they paid me some money to pursue my university studies.” He said Khmer jewellery is full of intricacies, so it is more difficult to make than western jewellery.

Mant Somorn, 23, told *Khmer Times* that he has been working with Il Nodo for six years and has learned a lot about designing various types of jewellery. “Some can be made within two or three hours,” he said. “Others could take longer, depending on the design.” Lon Phanna and Ry Sangha are among Il Nodo’s first graduates and are now, respectively, first and second-year silverwork teachers.

Cannetta had always realised that Cambodia has a rich artistic and cultural heritage. She thought the people had artistic skills and talents that could be further improved under the guidance of international artists. This would strengthen Cambodian culture, improve production quality and uplift the lives of the artisans.



Vorn Chhiev shows a piece of jewellery which was produced at the Bottega dell'Arte. KT/Siv Channa

Designer Renzo Bighetti arrived in Cambodia in 2008 and designed an item of jewellery that led to the setting up of Il Nodo. It was a beautiful bracelet in the form of a bowline, a sailor's knot, and it symbolised the uniting of Italy and Cambodia.

Since 2010, the school takes in about 10 or 15 students every year. "The path was set 10 years ago and the journey began by setting up the Bottega dell'Arte, a vocational training school. This hard labour bore fruit, when the students' end products fetched high prices," says Cannetta.

"In 2015, Il Nodo sent a message to a network of Italian designers, asking for a sketch – a design of a piece of jewellery to be made by the students of the Bottega dell'Arte in Phnom Penh," she said. "The response via the Internet was beyond expectations. More than 90 well-known Italian designers have contributed designs for young Cambodians to work on. Since then, Il Nodo has brought in different designers from Italy to teach."

Each of these designers comes with his or her own different teaching methods, designs and creativities, Cannetta explained: "These are an inspiration to the students. Our teachers and students are also exposed to the beauty of Angkor Wat and local arts. They take inspiration from these to create contemporary pieces of jewellery with modern designs."

The school is recognised by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and now offers diploma courses that are recognised in all Asean countries. Cannetta is grateful that the ministry has allowed the school to reopen after being closed due to the pandemic.

Cannetta said the teachers and students are now working on beautiful pieces of jewellery that need a lot of hard work and careful precision to respect high quality standards.