



jewellery making



what is it?

It's the art of making decorative items such as necklaces, bracelets, brooches, ear, nose, finger and toe rings, etc. to wear on the body or on clothing. The practice of body adornment may be almost as old as humans. There's evidence that, long before the discovery of precious metal deposits and the development of metalworking skills, prehistoric peoples made jewellery from shells, stones and bones.

Beyond its intrinsic aesthetic or economic value, jewellery has traditionally been used by different cultures down the ages as a mark of rank, status, power and wealth, as well for its talismanic and symbolic properties. Great civilizations like the ancient Egyptians and Romans buried splendid, elaborate pieces with the dead, and the wearing of amulets or certain stones in many cultures was (and still is to an extent) to bring luck, ward off evil or protect against ailments. While jewellery today can be made out of almost anything, precious metals like gold, silver and platinum, often combined with gemstones, dominated jewellery making for many centuries. Expanding global trade (and a lot of theft from colonies) in the 17th and 18th centuries fuelled the European appetite for pearls and gems and saw brilliant cut diamonds eclipse other stones in popularity.

The use of jewellery as a status symbol began to decline somewhat during the Industrial Revolution when the invention of gold plating and imitation stones made it more affordable and readily available to all. The Arts and Crafts movement, with its naturally-inspired shapes and designs, promoted a revival of hand crafting techniques, while the 'machine age' of the 20th century ushered in the use of modern new materials such as Bakelite and plastics.



Classic hand-made cotton friendship bracelets that are very easy to make.

what are the benefits?

Bought jewellery often comes with a hefty price tag in the form of human and labour rights abuses and environmental damage. Precious metals and gemstones are often sourced from areas with substandard working conditions, low wages and unenforceable health & safety regulations. Mining for precious metals is one of the most environmentally-damaging industries in the world, often displacing indigenous communities, destroying pristine environments, polluting land and water with mercury or cyanide, damaging human health, devastating wildlife, leaving open scars on the land and generating huge amounts of waste. Plus 'conflict' or 'blood' diamonds and other stones have been used to fund wars and insurgencies in countries like Sierra Leone and Angola in recent years. Consumers are becoming more aware and organisations like the Kimberley Process and the Responsible Jewellery Council are working towards improving pay and conditions for workers and avoiding the use of conflict stones. It's now possible to source precious metals from the world's few Fair Trade mines, but it can be hard for a retailer to ensure that a piece of jewellery is 100% ethical. Gemstones are more straightforward as they don't tend to be re-cut when reused and thanks to the Kimberly Process it's now possible to find suppliers who offer conflict-free guarantees.

You can reduce the impact of your jewellery by buying original or 'upcycled' items from an ethical designer; or you can learn to make your own. These options have a number of advantages:

- You can get a unique item made just for you, or you can give broken jewellery a new lease of life. Scrapping old jewellery is unnecessary as much of it can be repaired or reworked. Stones are endlessly recyclable and, with some limitations, precious metals can continually be melted down and recast. Upcycled jewellery also has the potential to incorporate a huge range of materials and styles and be highly eclectic and individual.
- Spending money locally means that it stays in your community, rather than being taken out by corporate jewellers to pay shareholders; and local production ensures that no manufacturing is outsourced overseas to maximise profit at the expense of workers' pay and conditions.
- The carbon footprint of your jewellery is greatly reduced as there's no overseas shipping.
- Energy use when working with recycled materials is pretty much the same as with raw, but you avoid the impact of mining / refining processes.



what can I do?

Support ethical and/or local suppliers and makers. Look for jewellery makers who offer repair or upcycling services where you can take your old or broken items to be repaired, melted down or reworked. Things like ear wires, piercings or any jewellery that has been inserted into the skin are usually off limits for hygiene reasons (unless melted down) - other than that the only limits are your budget and your imagination. Whether you're buying an original or a recycled piece, ask the maker about source materials and production methods. A good designer will happily talk to you and may even allow you watch certain stages of the production process.

You can also learn to make jewellery from re-melted and recycled metals, precious and non-precious stones, old cutlery, crockery, textiles, wood and driftwood, beads, plastics, even car tyres. Precious metal clay (PMC) is a popular low-impact material made from finely ground silver particles reclaimed from scraps, x-ray and film plates. You can take an introductory course with a local jewellery school or art college to get a feel for it. Plus you can find course providers here, and it's also perfectly possible teach yourself using books and the Internet. A search for 'jewellery making projects' will return thousands of free online tutorials or beginner's projects, and there are some links here. You can pick up a basic jewellery-making kit for just a few pounds online with all the wire, strings and fittings you need to get started.



Jewellery made from recycled, upcycled or natural materials: duct tape, T-shirts, bathroom tiles, wire, clay, paper clips, cutlery, hair grips, leather, braided rope, lollipop sticks, shells.

If you're interested in a career at the high end of jewellery making, the usual route is to study at art college or similar and then an apprenticeship. Apprentices aren't well paid, so tend to start young. The Goldsmiths' Company funds training and links employers and apprentices together, so at least you're not saddled with student debt. Post-apprenticeship, you may decide to stay on with the company or to rent a bench in a shared workshop, with access to the necessary machinery without the high costs of setting up your own workshop: around £80,000-£100,000 for initial tools and stock, plus rent and insurance (at this end of the market, jewellery is a high-value / high-risk business so premiums are high).

resources

- lowimpact.org/jewellery for more information, links & books, including:
- Julia Manheim, *Sustainable Jewellery*
- J MacDonald, *Jewellery from Recycled Materials*
- M le Van, *Fabulous Jewelry from Found Objects*
- kimberleyprocess.com, reducing the flow of 'blood' or 'conflict' diamonds
- brit.co/diy-necklaces, 40 DIY necklaces
- vam.ac.uk/articles/a-history-of-jewellery, history of jewellery
- ccskills.org.uk/careers/advice/any/jewellery/making-jewellery, advice on careers in jewellery



These wedding rings (belonging to Dave of Lowimpact.org and partner) were recycled from broken gold bracelets donated by family members.

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