

As a part-time Jeweler and a full-time teacher, I occasionally wonder where the boundaries of jewelry lie, and what aesthetic potential the field offers. Unluckily, intelligent writing on Jewelry is scarce. The vast amount of theorizing about painting and sculpture offers very little of real value, because the basic agenda of the traditional "fine arts" doesn't really face the issues properly belonging to Jewelry. So far, most writing on Jewelry has stressed design, craftsmanship and physical usefulness, with some recent efforts to expand the familiar definitions. But I have come to believe that Jewelry, more than most other disciplines in the visual arts, is characterized by social and psychological utility. The personal uses to which adornment is put suggests an aesthetic possibility that few observers have noticed: its ability to touch people.

Jewelry can be regarded as a body of objects, emanating from almost every known society since the beginning of culture. Seeking an exact definition of the term "jewelry" is a bit of a futile exercise, perhaps, but one hopes the effort will shed new light on the subject. Unfortunately, while it's possible to define chemical elements like "carbon", or rigorous constructs like an "equilateral triangle" with some precision, terms in the arts defy accurate elucidation. Such terms are-invariably messy and vague. Critics and theorists have been arguing for centuries about the exact meaning of "painting" or "sculpture" , and one generation's answers disintegrate as the next generation looks at the question anew. No doubt, getting a firm grasp on the idea of jewelry is equally difficult.

Let me say at the outset that other definitions exist beside the ones offered here. The American blacksmith Albert Paley maintains that architectural ornament can be called "jewelry for buildings", and the English writer Ralph Turner has suggested that class accents could properly be regarded as jewelry. However, I suspect both of these proposals confuse more than they clarify, and they fall outside of my definition. In the end, each of you must settle on your own interpretation.

I have found it useful to investigate the vast production of historical jewelry while attempting to define the field. By examining historical jewelry, especially the adornment employed in pre-literate cultures, and then by scrutinizing contemporary western jewelry objects, one can compile a list of qualities and functions that together define the word. The definition is loose, of course, and some aspects are almost mutually exclusive. But I'm trying to define an enormous body of work here, and could probably be excused for some imprecision.

I think that jewelry falls between sculpture on one side and garments on the other. Like sculpture, most jewelry consists of a physical object that has its own discrete existence. Some jewelers clearly intend their work to be viewed isolated from the human body. But unlike most sculpture, jewelry is also inextricable from the presence of a living person: most jewelry is made to be worn, or imagined being worn. So, like garments, the site of jewelry is the body. But unlike garments, jewelry is rarely made to protect people from heat, cold, precipitation and the gaze of our neighbors. Most ornament won't keep you warm and dry. The line between garments and jewelry is vague: certainly garments can be metal - chain mail, for instance - and jewelry can be made of fiber.

Similarly, the scale and enveloping quality of garments has become the province of jewelers: Caroline Broadhead's veils and Susanna Heron's hats come to mind. So, I think of jewelry as occupying a territory between sculpture and garments, overlapping both to a considerable degree, but also maintaining a distinct identity.

Traditionally, jewelry is made to be attached to the body or to clothing. As I said, the site of jewelry is the human body. Some types conform to the anatomy, as in rings, bracelets, necklaces, head-dresses and the like. (Most of these shapes are loops of some kind.) Other types of jewelry are designed to be fixed to garments, as in pins, penannular brooches, and buttons. Some varieties demand alteration of the body itself, as in earrings for pierced ears, nose ornaments, and lip plugs or labrets. A vast array of other forms remain (hairpins, combs, barrettes, pasties, pocket watches, etc.) but the common element is that they are all fastened to the human form.

Jewelry has always been used to decorate the human figure. The word "decoration" calls up all kinds of evil connotations in the purified regions of modernism, but I use the term without any negative overtones. In formal terms the decorative function of jewelry has been to provide visual accents, color, contrast, and texture, as well as to focus attention to specific parts of the body. In these senses, jewelry serves as a compositional device in the layout of the human form.

But the urge to decorate satisfies psychological purposes, too. Jewelry beautifies, within the value system of the local culture, and sometimes renders the wearer socially or sexually desirable. One cannot underestimate the power of jewelry to enhance self-image and to alter social perceptions. A caricature of this effect might be found in the prototypical disco-era groovy guy, hoping to impress the chicks with four or five strands of gold chains about his neck.

Decoration can be more than the mindless application of gop. Especially in pre-literate cultures, most decoration is a carefully orchestrated collection of signs, each with particular meanings and overtones. As worn, jewelry constitutes a complex statement of social fact and personal fantasy, which other people in the same culture recognize and interpret. In spite of the bad rap that decoration has received from several generations of artists, critics, and teachers, personal ornamentation exerts a subtle control of the coded message the wearer imparts. What public relations is to large corporations, clothing, makeup, and jewelry are to the individual. On the body, decoration has a subtext.

Probably the most important subtext of jewelry is to mark social identity and status. Adornment has always been used to either distinguish or merge the wearer with social groupings. The coded information that societies evolve for jewelry can be employed to make the wearer different from his neighbors, or the same.

Military insignia do both, for instance. The stars that a general wears identify him as belonging to a particular branch of the armed forces (and thus the same as everyone else in the army) but also place him at a high rank (and thus in a superior class to majors and colonels and enlisted men). In civilian life, diamond rings and razor blades are equally coded. A large diamond announces wealth, the razor blade declares the wearer to be a late-blooming punk. Diamonds at a country club indicate likeness and a bid for acceptance, but in the same place, razor blades hung around the neck would elucidate suspicion and raised eyebrows. Probably, that would be exactly the intent. In each case, jewelry is instantly recognized as a marker, a cipher in a sign language.

Another traditional function of jewelry is to serve as a redeemable investment and a portable bank account. Women all over the world wear a substantial portion of their wealth in jewelry, which can be converted into goods and services should the need arise. In this way, Jewelry is also utilized as a life insurance policy, guaranteeing the survival of a woman's family in the

event of her husband's death. For cultures lacking banking institutions, keeping wealth attached to the body offered a convenient alternative to a savings account. I suspect the form is also a safeguard against theft: a woman could always protest loudly when her investment was being stolen, and the small scale of jewelry allows wealth to be easily hidden.

For as long as we know, jewelry has been associated with the spiritual and the supernatural. Amulets and talismans appear in every culture, offering magical power and protection to the wearer. Sacred symbols are frequently made portable, as in cruciforms, stars of David, or Islamic protective hands. In these cases, the Jewelry object is a condensed symbol for an entire cosmology, summarizing the relation between God and person. The intimate contact between symbol and skin as jewelry is worn becomes a constant reminder of one's faith, and the promise of security and salvation. It's ironic that contemporary jewelers in secular cultures often find the mystical overtones of jewelry very attractive, as in the work of the American William Harper.

Each of these functions partially defines jewelry. Most ornament fulfills several functions simultaneously, setting up a layering of use and meaning that can be confusing and contradictory. Jewelry is still used for all of these industrialized Western countries, every bit as much as in preliterate societies. In spite of all our technical sophistication, people still use jewelry for much the same reasons as the most primitive of African tribesmen.

So far, I outlined five functions that traditionally have defined jewelry: attachment to the body, personal decoration, displaying socially meaningful codes, serving as portable and redeemable wealth, and mediation with the spiritual. But I think other constants have remained in the history of jewelry, and I'll try to name a few.

One such constant is the astonishingly wide variety of material employed for jewelry. The idea that metal is the medium of choice for adornment is a narrow Western European view, sanctified by tradition and education. Even in Europe, stone, wood, glass beads, leather, animal horn, coal, and human hair have been applied to jewelry-making. A cursory study of non-Western cultures reveals an even greater range: feathers, clay, cloth, straw, laquer, shell and dozens of other materials have all become adornment. The rebel Jewelers of the early 80's who disdained metal shocked only those who discount the world history of jewelry.

Second, the majority of jewelry is caught up in sensual and sexual appeal. The basic impulse of decorating the body has always been connected to a bid for acceptability, of trying to be secure and likeable. The powerful human urge to belong is a basic motivation for the use of jewelry, and the means to that end has always been looking as good as possible. Every society, of course, has its own standards as to what looks good, but the common thread is sensual and sexual appeal. The shine of polished metal and the glitter of faceted gemstones on wedding rings are typical of the seductive allure of jewelry. In an example from African culture, the yaake dance of the Wodaabe tribe of Niger, young men adorn themselves so as to accentuate the local standards of masculine beauty: straight noses, white eyes and teeth, and slender bodies. During the dance, young women can choose the man they find most attractive, and they later discretely spend the night together. Just as in your average pick-up bar, good looks pay off.

For the westernized practitioner, designing jewelry to stimulate desire creates some ethical problems. I don't condemn desire itself; the emotion is part of the human condition. Playing with allurements can be fun and stimulating. But in the industrialized West, attractiveness is often inextricable from the appearance of wealth. That is to say, most of us are taught that precious metal and expensive gems are desirable, just as wealth itself is desirable. A jeweler who confines his output to the most seductive and valuable of materials, according to this society, is going to become a servant of the rich. And while some jewelers have no objection to this role, others believe it unethical to so limit one's potential audience, and the vast majority of one's fellow citizens.

On another level, I suspect that playing into the sexual appeal of fine jewelry can reinforce unfortunate role stereotypes for women. In most societies, women have long been regarded as sexual objects, not as complete human beings. Since women are still the primary users of jewelry, one must question whether jewelry reinforces the idea of women as yet another possession, or an equal partner in the social process. I don't know what the answer is. But if jewelry is to stress sexual allure, it must also maintain the dignity of men and women alike, and refuse to treat women as amusing sex objects. Considering that the majority of studio jewelers are women, perhaps the younger generation is now more sensitive to the way social codes (of which jewelry is one) can reinforce role stereotypes.

The sensuousness of jewelry brings up another constant that seems to permeate the history of the field. I believe jewelry is generally visual and ornamental, rather than conceptual. Let

me show you two works done within five years of each other. The first is a piece of body-jewelry by Arline Fisch from 1969. It is very much a decoration placed on the body, the detail and structure of which was intended to create a rich and rewarding visual experience. As the model moved, the piece moved as well, making a second contour that echoed the human form. It probably made a subtle noise, too. It is first and foremost an object, and the experience of it is primarily sensuous.

The second piece, called "Velvet Water" was done a few years later by the California artist Chris Burden. The genre came to be called "body-art", and it is fundamentally different from the Fisch piece. Here, Burden immersed his head in a sink full of water and tried to breathe, until he collapsed on the floor choking. The audience watched the event on video monitors. The work is essentially cerebral, not sensuous. Burden decided to make his own body the material of art, instead of using a medium like oil paint or steel. Further, he determined to address the subject of existential pain by actually experiencing pain, not symbolizing it. Finally, the work is not an object but an event, which was reconstructed first on video and then in the imagination. It is not sensual experience that sums up this piece: it is a mental construct. The purpose here was to address the context of art and the idea of suffering, not to make a pleasing visual and auditory experience. In a sense, the piece is to be thought about, much more than seen.

The piece by the jeweler relies on sensuous experience for its impact. The piece by the conceptual artist relies on the intellect. I will not claim one to be better than the other. Some people will refuse to respect the pleasantness of Fisch's piece, others will dismiss the esoteric nature of Burden's performance. While some jewelers have followed Burden and tried to focus exclusively on concept by dematerializing the object, the tremendous bulk of historical jewelry is more closely aligned with Arline's work. Most jewelry is a coded, portable, ornamental object, accessible by sensation. This is not to say jewelry is necessarily unintelligent, but rather that it may rest on a different premise than deeply conceptual art. While this discussion has concentrated on the traditional functions and qualities of jewelry, please don't understand that I am advocating a slavish adherence to convention. To the contemporary practitioner, the past can be a rich and valuable resource, as well as an inspiration. Unfortunately, the Modernist view holds that tradition creates stagnation and repression. (As if in agreement, the word "tradition" appears as a synonym for "oldness" and "decline" in my copy of Roget's Thesaurus.) The early modernists struggled against a system of art and thought that was totally intolerant of fresh new ideas. To thinkers like Adolph Loos

and Walter Gropius, the ridiculous and restrictive rules sanctioned by the academies and the powerful critics of the time proved that all tradition had to be discarded. However, they may have overreacted. The Modernist distaste for historical reference came from a confusion between self-righteous academicism and the authentic lineage of the past. Quite contrary to Loos and Gropius, tradition should be preserved because it allows for variation and invention within structured continuity.

In her recent book, "Has Modernism Failed?", critic Suzi Gablick proposes that tradition may yet have uses in twentieth-century art. Modernism posits a history of less than a century: references to artistic styles and themes from earlier periods are forbidden. But Gablick points out that the human animal needs a firmer foundation, and suggests that the history of the past thirty centuries can offer possibilities for reference and reinterpretation that will make contemporary art broader and more humane. Our forerunners were human too, so there must be something we can learn from them.

The trick is to regard tradition not as a collection of ironbound rules, but a loose structure that allows room for creative movement. It may be a typically European misunderstanding to regard tradition as sacred dogma. A close look at any preliterate or ancient culture will reveal that tradition in the visual arts allowed for ongoing, organic changes. It also allowed for considerable variation and personal invention. People have decorated themselves for tribal ceremonies from New Guinea to Africa, and many of these performances are recorded in books and magazines. At first glance, a Western observer often thinks that all the patterns are identical, and every individual must be the prisoner of custom. But a longer look shows that every person is different, and that within a group style there is also divergence. Further study will reveal that tribal styles gradually evolve, reflecting changes in community and environment. Clearly, pre-literate peoples regarded tradition as a framework and a starting-point, not as a rulebook to follow blindly.

My point is this: the traditions of jewelry can be honored and understood, but not taken as holy scripture. The history of jewelry is far older than the history of painting, and far richer than the history of sculpture. Jewelry is firmly grounded in the human condition, and we are neither so enlightened nor so creative that we can afford to ignore the combined experience of hundreds of cultures and dozens of generations. At the same time, we must realize that not all lessons from the past are relevant today, and tradition can be tailored to fit present conditions. The past is not the only referent in modern jewelry.