JEWELLERY TEACHERS' RESOURCE

Explore one of the world's finest jewellery collections at the home of creativity
Key Stage 3–4: Art & Design, Design & Technology

Hair ornament in the form of an orchid, made by Philippe Wolfers, 1905–7, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Introduction

The William and Judith Bollinger Jewellery Gallery displays 3,500 jewels from the V&A's jewellery collection. It focuses on the history of European jewellery from 1200 to the present day. The design of jewellery reflects the time in which it was made, responding to fashion, faith, politics, technical innovations, and social hierarchies.

Jewels accompany men and women on the journey through life, from cradle to grave. Among the examples in Case 1 (on the left as you enter from the Library staircase) are:

– a child's silver bell from Spain (1700–1800) worn to ward off evil spirits
– a brooch given by a lover in England (1830–40) containing a lock of hair
– a good luck pendant with a four-leaf clover from England (1899)

From Case 2, a chronological presentation of jewellery runs clockwise round the walls and the central cases. Upstairs there are watches, snuff boxes, jewelled swords and 19th-century traditional jewellery from many European countries.

Pre-visit activities

Discussion: Personal Relevance

What jewellery do students own and wear? What does it mean to them? Do students have jewellery inherited from older generations? How is it different from the jewellery of today? What judgements do we make about a person based on their jewellery?

Analysis: Materials and Techniques

Choose a single piece of jewellery made from a combination of materials. Explore each material separately (e.g. metal, stone, plastic) and how it has been transformed and combined in the finished design.

The Museum visit

To encourage your students to take time, select only a few key pieces for in-depth discussion and sketching. The following themes can be modified to meet the needs of your group – please download the relevant worksheets (www.vam.ac.uk) that accompany this resource. The gallery is popular and quite narrow so we recommend working in small groups of four to six students. There are other galleries that also offer opportunities to explore jewellery and adornment, including the South Asia gallery (Room 41), the British galleries (particularly Room 57), and the Medieval & Renaissance galleries (particularly Rooms 8 and 62).

Function & Context

Jewellery reflects the time in which it was made. The rediscovery of Pompeii in 1748 ignited a passion for antiquity and inspired classical designs. Josiah Wedgwood's ceramic cameos were mounted in buttons and brooches surrounded by steel facets polished by machines powered by the steam engines of the Industrial Revolution.

Inspiration

Jewellers take inspiration from a huge variety of sources. The natural world is very popular, with frequent depictions of flowers, insects and birds, and organic lines, suggesting flowing water or growing plants. Previous periods in history also have an enduring hold – ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian motifs appear repeatedly. Abstract patterns allow for endlessly inventive new combinations of line, shape and form. Found materials incorporated into new designs in the gallery range from clay pipes picked out of the Thames mud to a squash ball and plastic dogs dressed as a football team.

Materials & Techniques

Gold and silver decorated with enamelling, engraving and gemstones dominate earlier jewellery. In Cases 47 to 49, films on enamelling and making a diamond ring flank a display on tools and the process of making, from design to costing the finished product. In 20th-century and contemporary design no material is off limits, from paper and acrylic, to egg-shell, titanium and cardboard.

Follow-up activities / find out more

• Create new designs, using everyday materials such as pegs, rubber bands and straws.
• Take inspiration from the jewellery to design a poster... a chair... a jacket...
• Create a jewellery design brief with the aim of commemorating a contemporary event.

The gallery interactives and videos (Search the Collections, Hidden Treasures, making a diamond ring, enamelling a brooch, making a watchcase) are all available on the V&A website. The Prints & Drawings Study Room at the V&A has jewellery designs (groups by appointment).