

Alternative materials

With precious metal costs still rising, Laura Johnson speaks to some of the designers thinking outside of the budget box and industry traditions with their jewellery designs

Fluctuating, inflated precious metal prices have led to a massive shift in the jewellery-buying habits of the public, with the carat-, authenticity- and rarity-driven end of the market now more or less out of reach for the average consumer.

Therefore, under pressure to find eye-catching collections that appeal to cash-strapped customers, we have seen retailers across the UK opening their minds (and doors) to collections where gold, silver, palladium or platinum content isn't the centrepiece of the designs.

Untrained in traditional jewellery making methods and freed from the restrictions of working with precious metals, three emerging brands reveal how they're using alternative materials to challenge the traditions of the industry, many of which are now outdated in a changing and increasingly challenging world.

Winning the hearts of the ethically conscious consumer

There's something endearingly familiar about Kate Hamilton-Hunter's jewellery. It's just initially hard to put your finger on exactly what it is. And then suddenly it clicks.

Made from everything from vintage tobacco containers to beautiful floral biscuit and toffee tins, every piece of jewellery has its own story, having previously been treasured in a different form. "A lot of retailers say it's the story that helps to sell my jewellery," Kate says. "People can't get their heads around the fact that the piece of jewellery they're looking at is made from an old biscuit tin. That's what they find fascinating about my work."

With a background in textile design, Kate brings her eye for patterns and print to her jewellery making. Now supplying over 400 stockists, her jewellery appeals to today's ethically-aware consumer. "As well as the jewellery itself, our packaging is all recycled and our ethos is very green across the whole company," says the environmentally conscious designer. "Also every item is UK-made at my studio in North Wales. The British element is another reason people are buying it."

It's not just a flattering glow of a clear conscience her jewellery offers. "The recycling element is fantastic, but with the recycled tin, you also get all these lovely old colours and flowers that you just could not reproduce," she adds. "When I get a vintage biscuit tin and cut it into a piece of jewellery, there's no other way you can get that type of design onto jewellery, even with enamelling."

Sold in attractive presentation boxes and with prices starting from £20 for earrings and £22 for a necklace, every item is perfectly positioned to appeal to the gift market – as well as her growing fan base of collectors.



KATE HAMILTON-HUNTER



"A lot of retailers say it's the story that helps to sell my jewellery"





GWYDR

Materials that capture a moment

When you think of stained glass, you automatically picture the breathtaking windows of some of the world's most significant religious buildings. You definitely don't associate it with jewellery. Yet GWYDR is using the juxtaposition of the bold colours and delicate nuances of stained glass with free-running solder to create a surprisingly wearable jewellery collection. "I have yet to come across anybody making jewellery the way I do, and certainly not to the same standard and quality," says Leanne Bunce, lead designer and maker for the brand.

A stained glass artist by trade, Leanne's passion for her medium is clear. "With solder I can cut any shape of glass I want," she says. "I never use a template. Everything is cut by eye and rounded by hand. Every shape is made in the moment. Every piece is different down to how the metalwork looks. For example, the temperature of the room can affect the appearance of a piece."

It's the characteristics of the solder as much as the glass itself that give GWYDR jewellery its character. "Although the solder looks like silver, we're not trying to simulate silver," she explains. "There's an intrinsic beauty in itself in the nature of the tin and silver solder."

With prices ranging from £60 to £180, GWYDR offers retailers the opportunity to sell entirely one-off pieces of wearable art with an affordable price tag. "Stained glass is such an ancient medium; we've been making glass for thousands of years and I'm really surprised people aren't using it in jewellery very much at all," Leanne says. "I'm thrilled as well, because it means we're being innovative and different in what we're producing." →



JUDITH BROWN

"I liked the idea of recycling buttons that were hoarded away by careful grandmothers in the times of 'make do and mend'"

A modern twist on 'make do and mend'

"Textiles and stitching have always been part of my life," says jewellery designer-maker Judith Brown. The quirky nature of her jewellery, which is made from haberdashery items, has been strongly influenced by her background in textiles. "Once I discovered that fine wire was available in a wide variety of colours, this was a door into a new way of working for me," she explains. "I started stitching with wire rather than thread and without fabric, making the intricacy of the stitch the focus of my pieces."

Behind her designs is also a strong sense of nostalgia for a time when everybody knew how to make things for themselves. It's this respect for frugality that seems apt in today's economic climate. "I had my nana's button tin from the early 20th century," she remembers. "I liked the idea of recycling buttons that were hoarded away by careful grandmothers in the times of 'make do and mend' and making them into something elegant and wearable."

Experimenting with these buttons to create the earrings, bracelets and necklaces in her Vintage Collection opened her up to the possibility of using other haberdashery items. "I went on to develop my Vintage Noir range, made with old hooks and eyes and press studs, mostly from the 1930s to 1980s," she says. "At first I was unsure about using these functional, almost industrial-looking hooks, eyes and press studs," she admits. "But the final effect is elegant, with feminine pieces reminiscent of Victorian or Edwardian jewellery."

Strangely, it's not the unusual items in her jewellery that catch your eye; it's the designs themselves. "Customers seem to love the fact that in many of my pieces it's not always immediately obvious that they're made with vintage haberdashery, which is a great talking point for the wearer or gift giver."

Information

Kate Hamilton-Hunter: www.katehh.co.uk

GWYDR: www.gwydr.com

Judith Brown: www.judithbrownjewellery.co.uk

