

Up Close and Really Personal Putting *Human* Elements into Jewels

While jewelry is traditionally made of metal (precious or not) and embellished with gemstones or enamel, many other categories exist. Marie Chabrol looks at some of these more unorthodox jewels.

For a long time, the presence of elements in jewelry from the human body has served the functions of symbolism and remembrance. Before the birth of photography, hair was used in mourning jewelry—a tradition that was long-lived in the United States. This material is long lasting and easy to work with when it is not treated. Hair, then, has naturally found a place in jewelry since the early 19th century.

The human body also produces other elements, among them teeth, nails, bones, blood, ashes and breast milk. To say that these jewels are atypical would be an understatement, yet the fact that they are a part of the jewelry world leads us to try and understand the reasons for their creation.

Far from *tribal* or so-called *ethnic* jewels, the examples that follow celebrate life and sometimes a memory. They also illustrate that some materials from the human body can be as precious as traditional gems and minerals.

Hair

Hair has been used for a very long time in jewelry. Locketts containing a lock of hair of a loved one are fairly common. They also serve as reminders of special occasions such as the birth of a child, whose hair would be immortalized in a locket or medallion. The hair of a deceased person has also been used in different types of jewelry as a sort of memorial.

Hair has been worked in ways that lends itself to the creation of necklaces, bracelets, rings and pins. Since hair does not easily disintegrate, the jewel can be kept for decades. Some examples date back to two or more centuries. While the tradition of using hair in jewelry is gradually being lost, it

is not completely gone. These jewels continue to have some success in the United States where the tradition of hair-work is still quite alive. No longer used for bereavement, strands of hair often remain witness to important moments.

Since hair is intrinsically related to the evolution of our life and to important decisions, we often hear the old adage: “A woman who cuts her hair is a woman who changes her life.” This saying probably takes root—pun intended—in a certain reality.

Today, the use of hair takes on other aspects. Brushed, colored, cut, styled or braided, it is a symbol not only of beauty and body care, but also of culture and hope. In this regard, the work of German artist Sybille Paulsen deserves to be highlighted. Working with women who have cancer and using their previously-cut hair that may be lost because of chemotherapy, Paulsen makes meaningful jewels that symbolize a beautiful goal: heal and wear them again.

Sybille Paulsen necklace made from Mary-Beth's hair during her chemotherapy and worn by her. (Photo: Sybille Paulsen)



Three pendants in gold, hair and natural pearls. From England, 1775-1800. (V&A Museum, London. (Photo: V&A Museum)



Rings set with human teeth by Polly Van Der Glas. (Photo: Polly Van Der Glas)

Breast Milk

Preserving breast milk in a piece of jewelry is a fairly new concept. In recent years, some companies specializing in objects for pregnant women and young moms offer these pieces. Two such examples are *Mama's Liquid Love* and *Indigo Willow*. The movement seems to be international since we find this type of product around the world, although it is more prevalent in Anglo-Saxon countries, namely the USA, Canada and Australia.

Immortalized in rings and pendants, it has never been so easy to give testimony to the moment the female body gives life. You will find on the market

simple containers and also manufacturers that can solidify breast milk in the form of resin to make into faceted stones or cabochons. It is unclear if these objects will stand the test of time, so a check is in order in a few decades.

In this sense, however, we should look back at *Galalith*—a sort of plastic made from casein, a milk-based protein that gets its trade name *milk stone* from the Greeks—that was used in the 1920s and 1930s.

Human Bone

Using human bones in jewelry requires some *sang froid* and, above all, a good knowledge of the laws in any specific country since possessing parts of dead bodies may or may not be allowed. This explains, among other things, why it is

more obvious to use animal bones. To find examples of creators using human bones, we must dig into the Gothic and underground universe, which is about as far as you can get from the traditional jewelry industry. While these jewels are extremely rare, they nevertheless exist.



Breast milk cabochon set on a gold ring by Mama's Liquid Love. (Photo: Mama's Liquid Love)

Teeth and Nails

Jewels containing teeth are extremely rare nowadays. They were mainly made during the 19th century and used to preserve a child's first milk tooth. As a reminder of the transition to adulthood, some pieces of jewelry mixed teeth and hair.

While teeth and nails are rarely used today, the contemporary Australian designer Polly Van Der Glas works with them in her creations. She explains her approach by the interest we have in these elements during our lifetime; we brush our hair; wash our teeth; and maintain our nails. If they are beautiful in our lifetime, why would they stop being beautiful at our death? The question is excellent, although her artistic response may be more controversial for some.



The *Hero in Vitro HIV* pin by Serena Holm. It is the only brooch containing human blood. (Photo: Serena Holm and ArtAurea)

Blood

Using blood in a jewel is not an insipid act. It takes a lot of nerve as well as a real philosophical approach. The only example that comes to mind is a brooch by the Swedish designer, Serena Holm. She created the *Hero in Vitro HIV* pin, which raises the question of our relationship to blood, disease and, most importantly, to life. Because blood is the essential fuel of life, it can be viewed, therefore, as the hidden gem of our body, the most precious material. Something to meditate on!

Ashes

The end of life can also be turned into jewelry. For ten years, companies such as Lonite (Canada) and Algodanza (Switzerland) have proposed turning the ashes from cremation into diamonds. They maintain that the carbon content is sufficient to produce a lab-grown HPHT diamond in about ten weeks.

Gemological laboratories have long believed, however, that this process is not feasible and that a diamond cannot be created directly from ashes. *Buyer beware* before spending a few thousand euros, since there is no scientific way to verify that the stone was, in fact, made from a beloved's ashes. In a different approach, jewelers do offer small urns that can be worn as pendants to keep the ashes close. Other methods use techniques to incorporate the ash into glass beads or ceramics. But this is a transformation that skirts the edges of the uses described above.

Creative or Disturbing?

During our research, we found artistic approaches that use urine and human semen as part of a jewel. These examples are more artistic expressions rather than jewelry to wear. To consider that elements from the human body can find a place in jewelry is something that often is more disturbing than it is understood.

Long denied in the current creative process, we often forget that the jewel is, above all, intimately linked to the body that wears it. Does everyone agree with these examples? Not all of the time. But we must recognize that creative daring is always good because it opens the doors of creativity. The jewel is a fertile and amazing territory that can explore unusual mediums. No doubt, it will continue to surprise us and make us collectively reflect upon its origin and power.

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