

David Poston

Education Pack



Five bracelets, 1983, sprung stainless steel cable

Necklace for an Elephant and Other Stories- The Working Lives of David Poston

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Milton Keynes Arts Centre: February – March 2016

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Introduction

Internationally acclaimed designer David Poston has been at the vanguard of innovative thinking and practice in the field of contemporary jewellery for over forty years. His cutting-edge work is represented in major public and private collections, worldwide.

This retrospective exhibition brings together a wide range of his work from the late 1960s to the present day. Focusing on his jewellery, it will also include other strands of his multi-disciplinary career, for example his medical and technical research and his third world development work as designer and consultant to the UN, the World Bank and Oxfam. The exhibition will also feature previously unpublished photographs by Poston of famous cultural figures including the Rolling Stones, contemporary band Fairport Convention and experimental artists Stuart Brisley and Marc Chaimowicz, all of which evocatively trace the political and social environment in which he has worked.

This pack is designed to support teachers and educators in planning a visit to the exhibition with suggested ideas, workshops and points for discussion. It focuses on Poston's work as a means of exploring self expression, personal associations and memories evoked by the materials and textures of jewellery. It uses his works as a starting point for talking about different forms and functions of jewellery and also for creating a range of art in the classroom. The activities are suitable for all age groups and can be adapted to your needs, before, during and following your visit.

The project is funded by Arts Council England, commissioned by The Harley Gallery and Ruthin Craft Centre and is curated by former Director of the Crafts Council, Dr Louise Taylor.

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Bangle bracelet, 2010, woven tapestry on welded stainless steel wires

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What is Jewellery?

“Jewellery is a way of reconciling people to their bodies, making them feel switched on. It is about how they feel inside and how they can realise that feeling.” - David Poston



Four rings, forged titanium, various dates, 2004-2014

The tactile texture of these rings was produced by making individual spot welds with a laser beam

Jewellery:

- **definition:** Personal ornaments, such as necklaces, rings, or bracelets, that are typically made from or contain jewels and precious metal (Oxford Dictionary)
- **origin:** the word jewellery derives from the Old French 'jouel' meaning plaything

Examples of jewellery survive from prehistoric times, suggesting that from an early date, humans have adorned their bodies and clothes with materials such as shells, bones, teeth and stones, and its form and materials varies amongst different cultures worldwide. Archaeologists have discovered jewellery in ancient tombs which was buried with their owners to accompany them to the afterlife. Amulets and other items have been worn as talismans by different cultures throughout history to protect the wearer from danger or harm. Rare metals such as gold and silver, or precious stones became highly valued and were displayed as signifiers of status or rank in hierarchical societies.

An important stage in the development of jewellery was the discovery of processes to work and combine metals in order to create ever more intricate objects and beautiful forms of decoration. Designs began to reflect the individuality of the wearer with personal touches such as portraits,

initials, messages or mottos. Styles reflected changing fashions throughout history, for example a renewed interest in Classicism during the Renaissance period or Art Deco in the 1920s.

In 1995, Poston curated an exhibition for the Crafts Council, 'What is Jewellery' which explored the idea of jewellery, its function, different forms and why people historically have chosen to adorn themselves with it. According to his survey, people wear jewellery for:

- Status – to display wealth or importance
- Alignment – to project a certain image, to convey a message, to create a sense of belonging to a group or as a form of propaganda
- Self – for its physical or psychological effect, its tactile or sensual qualities, sentimental value, means of projecting one's character or saying something about oneself
- Spirit – as a ritual object, charm or amulet with symbols or icons
- Imposed identity – from within or outside a certain group
- Functional purposes – as a fastener, for medicinal reasons, as a weapon or tool (eg penknife, 'knuckeduster', keyring etc)

In the modern era, jewellery has become valued for artistic and aesthetic reasons rather than for its cost or materials. In response, many designers have deliberately shunned expensive metals. New technology such as laser welding, allows contemporary jewellers to create increasingly elaborate work, often combining unexpected materials and textures. For designers such as Poston, jewellery today is less concerned with visual attraction, as the physical, sensual and psychological experience of wearing and touching becomes paramount.

Activities

Discuss jewellery that can be:

- worn to denote status (eg badge, medallion, chains of office, crown or tiara)
- a signifier of ethnic, religious or social affiliation (eg badge, cross, star, ring)
- with a functional purpose (eg cuff-links, hair-grip, hat-pin, watch)

Research amulets and lucky charms – find examples of jewellery designed to ward off evil and protect the wearer. Make drawings and design your own charms.

Visit your local museum and discover jewellery from other periods and different parts of the world (eg Viking, Roman, Native American, Oceanic, Egyptian, Aztec, Victorian, Art Nouveau,

Punk etc). Find out about their history and the people who wore them. What was the purpose of these objects? What were they made from?

Discover different forms of jewellery eg head-dresses, nose-rings, pendants, armbands etc. Make sketches or collect pictures from leaflets, magazines or catalogues. Make a collage or an abstract painting based on some of the designs you find.

Interview friends and family and ask them about their favourite jewellery. Take photographs or video and report their stories back to your class. Do you have any items that are personally significant, have an interesting history or sentimental value?

Find an inexpensive item of jewellery in a charity shop and imagine its history. Make up a story about where it might have come from, who owned it and what occasions it might have been worn.

Discuss jewellery that has functional purposes eg buttons, hat-pins, pill-box, cuff-links. Find as many examples as you can. Study their design, materials and structure – how do they work? Draw some designs of your own.

Create cameo portraits of each other by taking profile photographs, trace the outline onto black paper and cut it out and mount on a white background.

Collect images of celebrities from magazines or websites. Discuss the image they project through their clothes and accessories.

Compare and contrast Nicholas Hilliard's *Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I*, c 1575 (National Portrait Gallery) with Peter Blake's *Self Portrait with Badges*, 1961 (Tate Gallery). What do the wearer's adornments tell you about their personal identity and social status? What does your jewellery or badges reveal about you?

Discuss the role of jewellery as a status symbol. What other possessions or commodities have been used as indicators of wealth or power in society?



Necklace, 1970, thorns, silver & galvanised wire

Materials



Bracelet ,2003, is made from two wooden forms sheathed with recycled painted steel from oat tins. The seams are laser welded with a soft beam that produces smooth edges.

Since his early career, David Poston has opted to work primarily with stainless steel and titanium, along with many unconventional materials, such as glass, plastic and found objects. He is interested, not only in the aesthetic qualities of these different resources, but also the tactile, psychological and sensual effect of having certain textures next to the skin or worn as an accessory.

Here are some of the materials Poston has incorporated in his designs with examples of their uses in his work:

Steel is an alloy of iron and, most commonly, carbon, valued for its hardness, ductility and tensile strength. Although the use of steel can be traced back to antiquity, efficient production methods were not invented until the seventeenth century. Further improvements in the manufacture of steel made it a cheap material to mass-produce which led to its widespread use during the Industrial Revolution.

Silver and platinum are the traditional white metals used for jewellery, but from the 19th century steel has become a fashionable and cheaper alternative.



Bangle bracelet, 1981, hand-forged stainless steel

Titanium, chemical symbol *Ti* was discovered in Cornwall in 1791 and named after the Titans of Greek mythology. It is highly resistant to corrosion and has the highest strength-to-density ratio of any metallic element. Titanium can be alloyed with other elements to produce strong, lightweight materials for a range of uses, eg: aerospace, dental implants, sporting goods, mobile phones, jewellery.

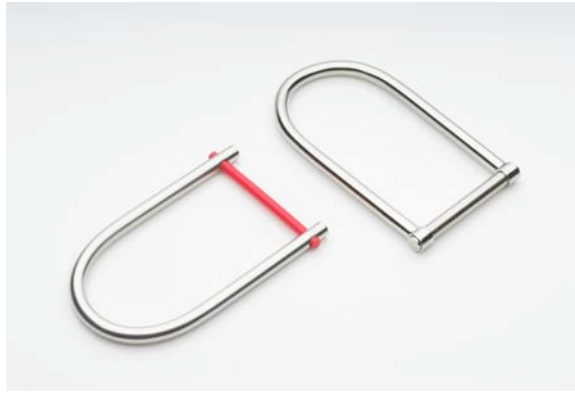
Poston first used this material in the 1960s. Titanium is a material that cannot be soldered, but recent experiments with 'hot-forging' have allowed him to produce simple, elegant forms: 'I again enjoy the nature of this material, of which laser welding allows me to make rings that combine and contrast it with gold.'



(Shown standing) **Bracelet**, 2008, hot-forged titanium in two parts; shown with (lying down) **Bracelet**, 2008, hot forged titanium in three parts

Plastic is a synthetic material usually derived from petrochemicals. Due to its relatively low manufacturing cost, ease of production and versatility, plastic has replaced many traditional

materials in modern life. Some everyday uses are: packaging, plumbing, vessels, utensils, toys, cds, clothes hangers, mobile phones etc



Two bangles, 1979, stainless steel, one with red plastic

Silk is a natural fibre which can be woven into textiles. It was first manufactured in ancient China and historically was a much sought after luxury item, traded between Asia and the Western world. The best known type of this material is obtained from the cocoons of the larvae of the mulberry silkworm. Its shimmering lustrous quality is due to the prism-like structure of the fibre which allows silk fabric to refract light at angles.



Bangle bracelet, 2010, silk woven on welded stainless steel wires

Glass: early civilisations used naturally formed volcanic glass or obsidian before they learned to make it by heating sand to extreme temperatures, allowing it to cool and then forming it by blowing or pouring into moulds. Although brittle, glass is also very durable which is why fragments of amulets and glass beads made c 25,000 have survived from Eastern Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Glass can be translucent or made opaque with the addition of colour and

various ingredients. It can also refract and reflect light. Uses throughout history include: vessels, windows, stained glass, lenses, magnifying glasses etc



Bangle bracelet, 29013, stainless steel with red glass beads

Activities

Describe the experience of wearing different materials next to your skin, such as metal, fabric, leather, wool, paper, wire etc. Which feel most comfortable, sensuous, irritating, heavy, tight, loose, itchy...etc. Which materials do you consider most suitable for making jewellery and why?

Compile a list of different materials used by Poston in the works displayed in the exhibition. Assign a different material to each of your students from the above list and ask them to find out more about its properties, its history, associations and find other examples of its uses.

Make a necklace, bracelet or brooch from recycled materials found around your home. Eg broken toys, plastic bottle tops, foil, sweet wrappers etc. Plastic carrier bags may be twisted into a thread for knitting or weaving. Pasta tubes may be painted and threaded together on a string. Be inventive!

Watch videos of metal forging, welding, glass-making and other processes used for making jewellery (eg <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMt1tqDI1nM>)

Find out about Steel and how this material revolutionised construction in the 20th century

Collect samples of a range of materials and attempt to capture their textures and properties in sketches and paintings. How do you express 'softness', 'lustre,' 'translucence,' 'opacity,' 'rust,' 'sheen,' etc? Experiment with different media and discuss your results.

Guess the material – identify objects and what they are made from through touch, smell or sound while wearing a blindfold.

Discuss how items of jewellery may respond to the wearer. For example, cool metals may become warm, bangles might jangle, metals reflect light or change colour in different environments, rings may wear thin or change shape as fingers get fatter!



Neckpiece, 'All you Can Eat', 2013, recycled painted steel

Work in Focus: *Necklace for an Elephant* 1975



In late 1975 to the following summer, Poston had five works in a touring exhibition, *Jewellery in Europe: An Exhibition of Progressive Work Selected by Ralph Turner*, organised by the Scottish Arts Council and the Crafts Advisory Committee. The exhibition brought his work into the public eye and placed him alongside some of the most progressive contemporary jewellery makers. It also featured perhaps his most famous work - a necklace of limestone, hemp, mild steel, cotton

and bronze with a diameter of five foot and weighing about two hundredweight The beads were actually boulders of limestone, collected and carefully sorted for size on the beach at Church Ope Cove, Portland and carried up the cliff path by hand.

Poston recalled that he intended to make an item that could be handled and touched by visitors to the exhibition without fear of it being damaged. It was also a response to Turner's request for something 'big, BIG.' He subsequently reproduced an oversized version of a necklace he's made for Turner the previous year as a joke: 'When he visited my studio in Portland, Ralph surprised me with his enthusiasm.' Not only was the necklace larger than life and a fun object that would appeal to all ages, it also cleverly punned on the slang term for diamonds 'rocks' and provided an ironic take on the saying, 'diamonds are a girl's best friend.'

The massive scale of this work meant that it could not be worn by a person and Poston was not in favour of Turner's initial suggestion that an image of the necklace should be superimposed on the body of an attractive female model for publicity purposes. When he received a formal invitation to meet the model, 'a lady called Womba' at a Midlands safari park, she turned out to be an elephant from Mary Chipperfield's circus. This was an era when it was still usual for animals to perform in circus acts and many years before Chipperfield was convicted of cruelty to creatures in her care. The unforgettable photograph by David Cripps showing Womba wearing the chunky beads was chosen for the exhibition poster and it has been reproduced worldwide as Poston's iconic *Necklace for an Elephant*.

The necklace was purchased by a private collector who had it installed on a wall of his architect designed house in the Forest of Dean where he encourages his visitors to reach up to the stones and feel them as they pass by.

Activities

Make an oversized item of jewellery with unlikely objects such as tin cans, potatoes, dustbin lids, pine cones...be inventive! Discuss the best way of displaying it for a photograph and how to accentuate its scale.

Design an even BIGGER necklace! Imagine jewellery as architecture – a space you could inhabit. Take David Poston's bracelets and necklaces as a starting point and make drawings of houses based on the shapes and forms. What materials would you use for these buildings? Create models of your architecture in cardboard. Display them together in your classroom.

Make a lightweight item of jewellery, eg a daisy chain, crocheted or textile armbands, a bangle composed of feathers, leaves or paper etc. Describe how it feels to wear these materials next to your skin.

Research artists who have experimented with scale, weight and mass in their art (eg Richard Serra, Ron Mueck, Jeff Koons, Claes Oldenburg). Discuss the impact of their works on the

viewer. What effect would they have if they were smaller, lighter or made from a different material?

Find out about Portland Stone – what is it? What are its characteristics? How was it formed? What does it feel like? What is it used for? Are there any buildings in your town or sculptures made from this material? Which types of stone are local to the area where you live?

Discuss the importance of ‘touch’ and ‘feel’ of jewellery. Blindfold your students and invite them to handle a range of different materials and textures. Ask them to describe their experience and try to identify the materials from touch.

Make edible jewellery from biscuits, fruit or sweets! How could you incorporate the sense of taste and smell into the items you create? Take photographs of your creations and compile a ‘cookery book’ with your class.

Design an item of jewellery for another animal. What would a cat wear, or a penguin, giraffe, kangaroo....?

David Poston: Design and Life

‘As a designer rather than an artist, the solution I develop to any problem feeds my ability to solve other problems I may encounter. The problems are different, training system or bracelet, but the intellectual tools are the same.’



David Poston diploma show 1970

David Poston was born in Moscow in 1948 and he spent much of his early childhood abroad due to his father's work in broadcasting and the media. This was a period that nurtured his sense of adventure and exploration and it is not surprising that he felt frustrated and restrained when he returned to the UK to attend boarding school. Like many rebellious pupils, he found refuge in the art department where his imagination was given free rein and individuality was encouraged. He loved making, constructing and problem-solving, and at the age of 10, he was introduced to metalwork which would become a life-long passion.

His developing interest in jewellery led to his enrollment at Hornsey College of Art in 1967 where his tutors included experimental jeweller Gerda Flöckinger. The roots of many of the preoccupations and themes of his mature career can be traced to this period of great social and political change in Britain. Poston's active involvement in student politics and demonstrations affected his attitude to jewellery as he became determined not to 'make bling for the rich.' This awareness of material values and ethics would later be reinforced by his stand against apartheid and lead to his refusal to work with gold, opting for non-precious metals such as tin and stainless steel. *Diamonds Gold and Slavery are Forever*, 1975 demonstrated that jewellery could be more than mere ornament: it had the potential to carry potent messages, social commentary and political statements.

The 1960s was an exciting decade when there was cross-fertilisation of ideas between artists, designers and musicians. Poston had studied photography as his second subject at college and took the opportunity to capture London's art and music scene. His subjects included contemporary artists Stuart Brisley, Marc Chaimovicz and rock stars, Elton John and the Rolling Stones.

'I believe absolutely that jewellery is for the wearer, not the spectator, since I believe it essential that people should be involved in their own existence rather than in the image of it.'

Following a trip to the USA in 1969, he began using natural materials, inspired by the skills of North American Indians. He particularly admired the way their beadwork on garments responded to the wearer's body movement. Poston was one of the first contemporary makers to use textile materials, such as silk, cotton, hemp and string in his work. During this period he also experimented with 'found' materials such as bottle tops, tin cans etc, and he rapidly came to the public eye as one of the leading figures in the avant-garde jewellery scene in Europe.

In the late 1970s, Poston's work took a new direction as he began forging in steel to produce sensuous, but 'rigid, smooth and counterpointing rather than soft and conforming' jewellery.

'During a gap of twenty years I had no workshop, made nothing and was totally occupied by other things, indisputably more important.'

Despite international fame and recognition, Poston became disillusioned with the contemporary jewellery scene and its increasing commodification as 'art' in the 1980s. Always a restless polymath, he spent the next two decades writing a Ph D thesis in engineering, studying and assisting in the development of sustainable livelihoods in many African countries and worked as a researcher and consultant designer in eco-technology.

The landmark exhibition *What is Jewellery?* curated by Poston for the Crafts Council in 1994 marked his return to the subject, questioning the purpose of jewellery and its relationship to 'fine art.'

In 2000, whilst working at Loughbrough University, Poston was introduced to laser welding, a technique that led to a series of works made from recycled food cans, where the beam was employed to soften sharp edges.

In recent years, he has continued to produce innovative and highly acclaimed work using forged titanium, laser welded steel and textile woven structures. He has also assisted organisations such as the UN, World Bank and Oxfam as a designer and consultant. The connecting thread through the many facets of his careers is a determination to understand and then solve problems and ultimately, to improve people's lives whether through education, technology or creativity.

Activities

Research the fashion and design of the 1960s and 70s. Collect images of clothes and accessories and use them to create a collage of a disco or fashion parade. Ask older family members if they have any items you could borrow for a fashion show in your classroom.

Find images of North American beadwork and make copies of designs using beads, buttons, strips of fabric and mixed media.

Discuss the development of Poston's jewellery throughout his career. What materials, processes and techniques has he used? Why does he prefer 'non-precious' metals? What do his designs remind you of? Which would you like to wear and why?

Make sketches or paintings of your favourite David Poston items. What would it feel like to wear them? Describe them in detail and explain why they appeal to you. Design outfits that could be worn with them.

Think about the translation of 2D drawings into 3D objects. How does a jeweller, architect, dressmaker or sculptor work out designs? Make models from your own line drawings in wire, clay, paper or card. Which materials do you prefer to experiment with and why?

Dance – respond to movement, twisting, form and space in Poston's works. As a group, choreograph a dance or sequence of movements to perform to the class.

Sound – compose a sound-piece using percussion instruments such as rattles, maracas, triangles, chime bars etc to accompany your dance and to express the properties and characteristics of Poston's jewellery

Photograph your family and friends wearing their favourite items of jewellery. What do these portraits say about their taste and personality?

Glossary

Alloy: combination of two or more metals

Amulet: object worn as a charm for good luck or to protect against evil

Art Jewellery: term used to describe jewellery produced by studio craftspeople, emphasising creative expression and incorporating a wide range of materials and processes.

Embossing: pattern pressed into a material to leave a design in relief

Forging: a metal shaping process using processes such as hammering, pressing or rolling with tools.

Hallmark: stamped mark on items of jewellery as a guarantee of authenticity

Hot Forging: as above, but heating the metal to a high temperature first to make it more malleable.

Inlaid: when space is routed out of a surface and a contrasting material is fitted inside it.

Lustre: ability of a material to reflect light

Laser beam welding: a technique used to join elements together by means of a laser beam which provides a concentrated heat source.

New Jewellery in the 1960s, a movement associated with makers such as Emmy van Leersum and Gijs Bakker who protested against the use of precious materials, limited meaning and conservatism of form and placement of jewellery in relationship to the body.

Further Resources

David Poston, *What is Jewellery*, Crafts Council, 1995

Hugh Aldersey-Williams, *Periodic Tales: the Curious Lives of the Elements*, Penguin, 2012

Peter Dorner and Ralph Turner, *The New Jewellery: Trends and Traditions*, Thames & Hudson 1994

Joanne Hayward, *Mixed Media Jewellery: Methods and Techniques*, A&C Black, 2009

Julia Mannheim, *Sustainable Jewellery*, A&C Black, 2009

Kathie Murphy, *Non-Precious Jewellery: Methods and Techniques*, A & C Black, 2009

Website for the exhibition: <http://www.david.poston.co.uk>

Other Online Resources

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewellery>

<http://davidposton.net/about.html>

<http://inspirationalbeading.blogspot.co.uk/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forging>

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KsfRxQw3ImAC&pg=PA9&lpg=PA9&dq=david+poston+jewellery&source=bl&ots=MsWGxzeUYO&sig=NBQkye4bCcW9Im5vRd1UT8Hp5jk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=TT0xVNvmJYfh atXPgNgJ&ved=0CD8Q6AEwBjgU#v=onepage&q=david%20poston%20jewellery&f=false> :

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-jewellery/>

<http://www.historyofglass.com/>

Julie Robson 2014