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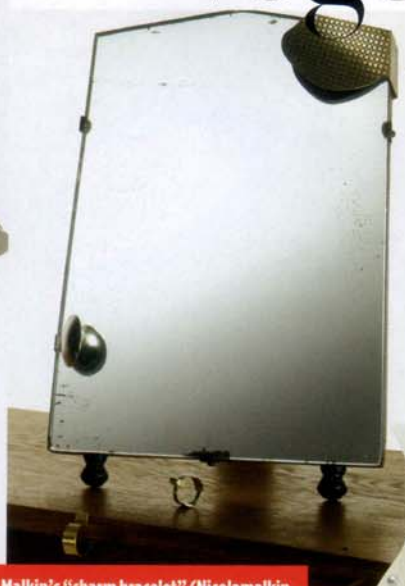
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DRESSING UP

Red-dress power, new evening looks, mega-watt jewels





Left, Nicola Malkin's "charm bracelet" (Nicolamalkin.com), hung over an Amoeba chair by Verner Pantón, from a selection, at Vitra. Above and top right, Chrysanthe Staikopoulou's jewellery is designed to grip furniture (Chrysanthe.co.uk). Right, Jayne Potter's narrative-led vases (Jaynepotter.co.uk)

Charmed, I'm sure

Decorating furniture: simple whimsy or interactive art? Three young designers take Dominic Lutyens on a sentimental journey

Such is the turnover of trends in design today that sentimentality is probably the last thing you'd expect. The idea of passing faddy buys down through generations seems utterly contradictory. Yet sentimentality is the driving force behind a new and burgeoning trend: furniture and homewares draped with precious or costume jewellery.

Chrysanthe Staikopoulou, who trained as an architect before studying jewellery at the Royal College of Art (from which she graduated this summer), finds "furniture with character", then designs jewellery that complements and enhances it. When I suggest, rather hesitantly, that her work is sentimental, she welcomes the description: "I like the idea that you can feel as attached to furniture as you do jewellery, and that when you move house, you take both with you, along with the memories that go with them."

Narrative undoubtedly underpins the trend, so that the prettiness of the piece is not just the main attraction. Nicola Malkin, a recent ceramics graduate from Camberwell School of Art, creates surreally outsized, gloriously kitsch charm bracelets that can be draped over chairs and mantelpieces or used

as table-top centrepieces. Malkin explains: "The bracelets build up like a photo album of my life, expressing my memories: symbols of my parents' marriage (gold-lustre wedding bands), my brother and sisters (peas in a pod), and a quirky reference to my convent school upbringing (a pregnant Virgin Mary). Narrative is an important part of my work: new charms with new associations can be added over time."

Product designer Jayne Potter's hybrid vases and jewellery are similarly autobiographical: they dramatise her emotional life but also have a therapeutic effect. "My pieces explore the stereotypical act of throwing objects in a rage—and the consequences," she explains. And so silver necklaces are trapped inside a vase and can only be accessed when it's smashed, piggy bank-style. Such a violent act might evoke the actions of an angry lover, while the treasure it releases represents the lover's peace offering. Another vase, similarly inspired, is perforated with holes. The design is complete when these are filled with crystal-coated pearls, snapped off a real necklace. Slotting these into the holes represents a conciliatory gesture by the lover.

For a recent exhibition staged at the Villa de Bondt Art Deco house in Belgium, Staikopoulou created site-specific jewellery pieces that gripped onto furniture but could also be removed and worn. A cast bronze ring, "docked" onto a wooden drawer handle, was designed so that you could put your finger into it and yank out the drawer. "At college, I was never interested in just making a bracelet," says Staikopoulou. "I wanted to push boundaries." She now plans to move away from site-specific jewellery into making pieces that can be used in any space: the idea of seeing her trinkets incorporated into our everyday environment underpins Staikopoulou's work. She has already created a 14ct-gold ring that safely plugs into the earth aperture of any standard electric socket (originally designed to get round having an unsightly socket in her degree-show exhibition space).

Interactivity is another factor: these designers invite us to handle, change or rearrange their pieces. Interestingly, the trend appears to be historically unprecedented. So claims James Yorke, the Victoria & Albert Museum's furniture curator: "The nearest we have to this is the jewelled spinnet, an Italian harpsichord made in 1577, which is encrusted with 1,928 gemstones." Yet this is a static artefact: the gems cannot be re-ordered according to your fancy.

If these three young designers really are producing something so truly original, they may just have struck gold. ■