

**FASHION  
JEWELLERY**

Catwalk and Couture

MAIA ADAMS

# FASHION JEWELLERY



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Maia Adams



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Frontispiece: 'Run Over Floral Neckpiece' from Michelle Jank's *Airs and Social Disgraces* collection AW08

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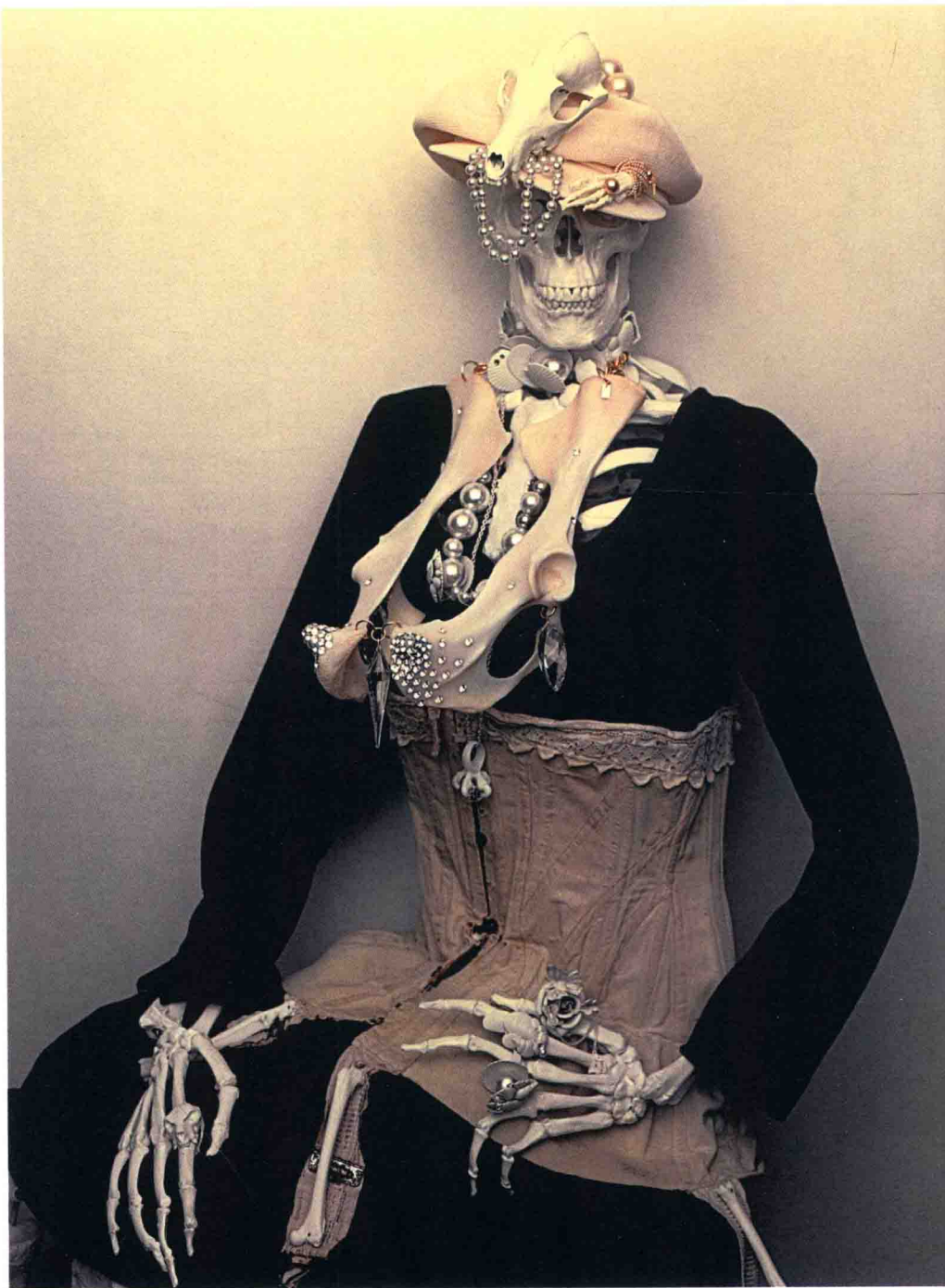
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# Introduction

## **'Why do we wear jewellery?**

**Because we crave attention and decorating ourselves is a great way to get it. When you break it down, that's it, we just want to be noticed.'**

**Alexis Bittar**

It is perhaps no coincidence that in financially-straitened times jewellery, with its glamorous connotations and endless scope for enhancing individual style, has been heralded as the perfect way to rejuvenate our wardrobes without breaking the bank. From high street to high end, at no other time has it enjoyed such prominence, but it is within the field of contemporary designer fashion that the form is undergoing its most remarkable transformation. After seasons of it-bags and to-die-for shoes, designer fashion jewellery has captured our imaginations, exploding into a new language of adornment as a vibrant array of jewels drip from magazine pages, dominate style barometers and fuel debates on the outfit-enlivening merits of the right bit of bling.

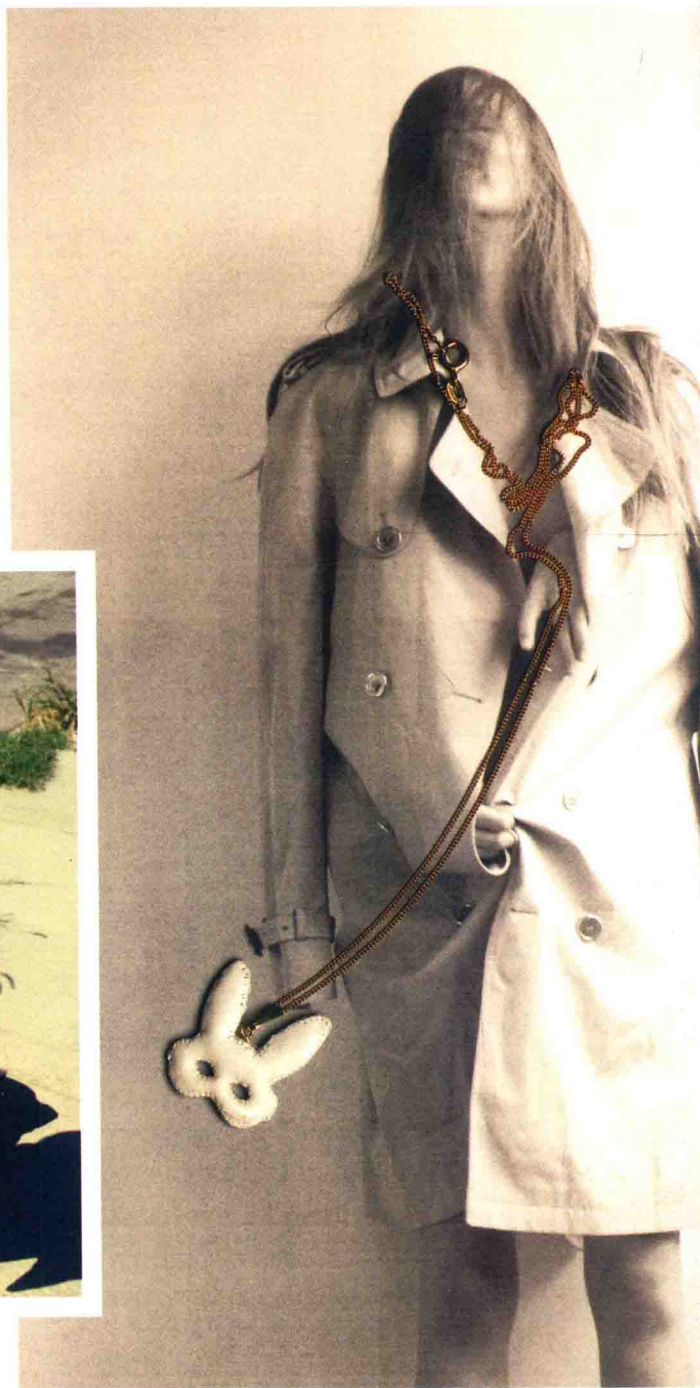
Economic factors may have played a part in jewellery's renaissance, but the breadth and originality filtering through is down to the unfettered vision of a growing number of independent jewellery-makers

who are pushing the boundaries of their creativity and the expectations of their peers by rewriting the rules. Among their ranks are those whose fine jewellery sensibilities and training see them apply classic methods to contemporary jewellery-making, and those whose background in art jewellery casts a conceptual slant on their work. That many of them work simultaneously as stylists, photographers and fashion, costume or product designers means that they bring an eclectic arsenal of techniques and influences to bear on a body of work that runs the gamut from craft-based to technology-led; cerebral to silly; witty to whimsical. Whatever the project, their work represents the spirit of couture for the twenty-first century, showcasing skilled craftsmanship, unusual materials and an often limited-edition approach. As jeweller Scott Stephen puts it, 'Designer fashion jewellery by its nature packs more of a punch. Size, shape, form – anything's possible.'

What unites this otherwise disparate group is the impact they are having on the fashion industry as a result of collaborations with fashion designers, the production of their own bi-annual 'fashion' jewellery lines and the appearance of their work in editorial and catwalk shows.

As designer fashion jewellery becomes a viable way of expanding the brand message – and what was previously a niche market has become big business – luxury fashion labels without dedicated in-house design teams are drafting in independent jewellery makers as long-term consultants or to create capsule collections and catwalk showpieces of the kind demonstrated in this book. Such ventures are symbiotic: jewellery makers enjoy a raised profile or the financial wherewithal to use materials (and learn skills) otherwise unavailable to them; the brands gain kudos by association with jewellers who are design stars in their own right, or with an edgy young name.

In an industry that feeds on the thrill of the new this dynamic medium offers scope for eternal reinvention and with designer fashion jewellery evolving at an unprecedented pace, jewellery makers are looking for ways to extend their visual vocabulary. According to Valery Demure, a London-based agent who has brokered collaborations between some of the world's top fashion jewellers and brands such as Comme des Garçons and Repetto, 'What is important is to encourage designers to develop their jewellery skills into things such as accessory design,



garment embellishment and footwear. It's in this cross-pollination of ideas that exciting things happen.'

It would be disingenuous to suggest that this is the first time that jewellery has enjoyed a moment in the fashion spotlight. As one of the oldest forms of body adornment – used to denote status, celebrate rites of passage and enhance our beauty – it has formed an essential part of our sartorial repertoire since time immemorial. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that fashion jewellery came into its own. During the 20s Coco Chanel's pioneering use of costume jewellery challenged the status quo that jewels were only for the very wealthy. By the 60s Paco Rabanne was designing futuristic jewellery with wood, plastic and paper to complement his 'space-age' fashions and Kenneth Jay Lane was creating fabulous fakes for Jackie Onassis and Elizabeth Taylor. The 80s were dominated by Butler & Wilson with their supersized imitation jewels, and Madonna baited the mainstream in rubber bangles and crucifixes designed by New York scenester, Maripol. As the century drew to a close jewellery's re-emergence onto the catwalks of designers such as Thierry Mugler and Hussein Chalayan

marked the end of a lengthy reign of minimalism and the start of a more experimental approach to fashion jewellery. Initiatives such as Swarovski Runway Rocks in 2005 and Coutts London Jewellery week in 2008 demonstrated that it had become a discipline in its own right. The Jewels for Fashion symposium held at Geneva's University of Art and Design indicated a desire for intellectual inquiry about the burgeoning impact of jewellery on fashion.

What distinguishes contemporary fashion jewellery from its costume predecessors is the ethos that underscores it. As Erickson Beamon's Vicki Beamon says, 'Costume is an antiquated term for jewellery that, on the whole, was designed to look real! This new breed of designer fashion jewellery makes no such claims – its purpose is not to imitate but to innovate.

Recently, fashion's love of statement necklaces blossomed into an affair with lobe-taxing earrings and supersized bangles but where other fashion fads dart from oh-so-now to so-last-season in the blink of an eye jewellery, with its ability to be simultaneously frivolous and symbolically potent, has an enduring appeal that will keep it top of our wishlists for some time to come.



PREVIOUS PAGE A SELECTION OF JEWELLERY FROM YOSHIKO CREATIONS' 'LE FOSSILE' COLLECTION SS07

ABOVE RIGHT 'BUBBLE' NECKLACE FLORIAN 2004

OPPOSITE, LEFT MODEL WEARING JEWELLERY FROM

'BLESS NO12 TEAM-UPS – THE JEWELLERY' OPPOSITE,

RIGHT A PAGE FROM THE LOOKBOOK THAT ACCOMPANIED

SABRINA DEHOFFS 'LITTLE HELPERS' COLLECTION AW08

'Jewellery is such a wonderful way to celebrate being human – this strange mess of mind and body, imagination and matter.'

FLORIAN LADSTÄTTER





# Alexis Bittar

IF EVER A TALE EPITOMIZED THE AMERICAN DREAM, ALEXIS BITTAR'S LIFE STORY IS IT. SPECIALIZING IN HAND-CARVED, COLOUR-CENTRIC LUCITE JEWELLERY, BITTAR WENT FROM HAWKING HIS WARES ON THE STREETS OF NEW YORK CITY TO PRESIDING OVER A GLOBAL BUSINESS EMPIRE. AND THAT, HE SAYS, IS JUST FOR STARTERS.

'If it wasn't for the excitement that I get from fashion I'd be bored shitless,' avows Alexis Bittar. 'What drew me to jewellery in the first place was actually my love of fashion. I get a thrill out of creating jewellery that fits into an era so that in the future people can look back and gauge what was happening back in the day.'

In 1982, aged just thirteen, Bittar started selling vintage jewellery and clothes on the streets of New York's East Village. 'MTV was starting out so you could still find really underground movements whose fashions were

incredibly inspiring,' he says of the scene at the time. After a period selling 1930s Bakelite jewellery he realized that people bought it because they were drawn to the fact it was hand-carved. Looking around at the 80s' penchant for mass-produced, moulded plastic jewellery Bittar had a brainwave. 'I bought a block of Lucite and started hand-carving it as if it was a precious material. A year later I dropped out of college to sell the Lucite pieces on the street full time. After that, selling to stores was easy.'

As Bittar's empire grew stylists such as *Vogue*'s Grace Coddington and Patti

Wilson began to take note, asking him to produce bespoke pieces for their shoots. Bittar says that to this day he still gets excited at seeing his work on the pages of *Vogue* or *iD*: 'I look forward to seeing my fantasy become a reality on the glossy pages.' Asked to pinpoint a moment when he knew he'd become a success Bittar tells of the time stylist Laurie Goldstein commissioned a piece for an Estée Lauder campaign starring Carolyn Murphy. 'It's amazing the impact one good stylist using your work can have on your reputation. That image, with my glowing jewellery, went worldwide and suddenly everyone

understood how alluring Lucite could be.' Although today the staff in his New York studio number in excess of 160, Bittar still personally hand carves the prototype of every new design for each of his three collections: Lucite, Elements and Miss Havisham. And the measure of affection he feels for his work is indicated by the fact that he ascribes female personas to his collections: Elements, with its feminine and eclectic mix of precious and semi-precious rough-cut stones and hammered metal, is 'a pot-head girlie from Santa Barbara smoking a joint,' while Miss Havisham, the newest member of the trio, started out with 'a totally schizophrenic personality' but has calmed down somewhat to become 'what Grace Jones would wear in the 80s'. In translation this equates to sculpted metal cuffs and necklaces that reference Brancusi's large metal sculptures and knotted cord chokers festooned with gold discs, pearls and ice-like Lucite slivers. Of his frequent and

affectionate references to the 80s Bittar says simply: 'I can't stop flying the flag for that decade. It had such an impact on me so it sneaks into every collection.'

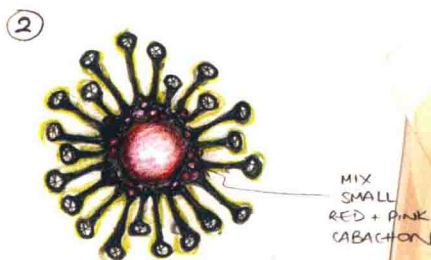
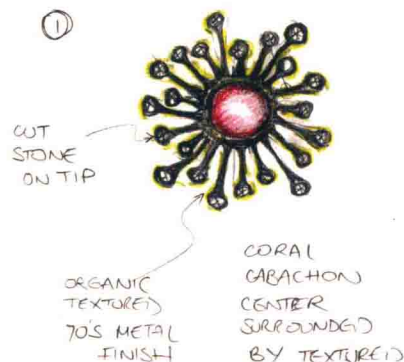
But it's Bittar's signature line, Lucite, that has become his leading lady. Each piece is made from blocks of acrylic that are whittled down into chunky cuffs, elaborate earrings and fanciful cocktail rings. Colours and patterns are then hand painted, and embellishments such as crystals, studs or gilding are manually applied. Despite the couture nature of his work – every piece is hand sculpted and painted – Bittar claims that fashion's ready-to-wear model is what informs his outlook. 'Anyone can crank out crap but I prove that you can sell to 600 stores worldwide and create jewellery that is thought-provoking. Not in a life-changing way but just to make people stop and look and say 'Wow, I've never seen that before.'

The stop-and-stare nature of his work has led to a handful of high-profile fashion

collaborations over the years. In 1999 he designed Burberry's first couture jewellery collection, painting the brand's iconic plaid onto bold Lucite pieces. For Michael Kors' ss08 catwalk collection he created coloured resin pieces and metal shapes that were 'late 60s: Barbarella meets Woody Allen's Sleeper' and in the same season his muse for Tuleh's show was 'an Italian woman during the 60s in an amazing coral necklace'.

Asked where he gets his drive from, Bittar says it's borne of a desire to keep creating: 'I work all the time and I think incredibly quickly, so much so that when I'm explaining to my assistants I have to try not to talk in tongues. We do three collections twice a year so I don't really have time to do an amazing watercolour for each piece. And anyway, I'm so A.D.D. that I move on straight away. When it comes to the possibility of creating something new and pushing the envelope I'm like a little kid.'

WWW.ALEXISBITTAR.COM



**PREVIOUS PAGE** THIS ELABORATE NECKLACE, CREATED BY ALEXIS BITTAR FOR TULEH'S SS08 SHOW, WAS INSPIRED BY A VINTAGE PIECE OF CORAL JEWELLERY

**THESE PAGES CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT** A SELECTION OF PIECES FROM AW08:

'CELESTIAL OCEAN' HOOP EARRINGS & BUTTON EARRINGS FROM THE 'LUCITE' COLLECTION; SKETCH FOR TULEH SS08 CATWALK JEWELLERY COLLECTION; 'GRACE' CUFF IN ROSE GOLD FROM THE 'MISS HAVISHAM' COLLECTION; LARGE 'TILDA' WOOD EARRINGS FROM THE 'ELEMENTS' COLLECTION; A SELECTION OF BANGLES FROM THE 'LUCITE' COLLECTION; 'LOVERS KNOT' NECKLACE FROM THE 'MISS HAVISHAM' COLLECTION; HAND-CARVED & HAND-PAINTED 'GRAFFITI' BANGLES EMBELLISHED WITH CRYSTALS FROM THE 'LUCITE' COLLECTION



‘That image, with my glowing jewellery, went worldwide and suddenly everyone understood how alluring Lucite could be.’

