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Ingenious mechanical jewellery pieces made for the selfie generation

Syl Tang



Moveable feast: Doyle & Doyle's spinning locket

At Loot, the New York Museum of Art and Design's October jewellery show, the main draw was a bracelet by Asagi Maeda, the Tokyo-based designer.

Designed to look like a series of silver "buildings", the linked bracelet opens to reveal miniature dioramas of life inside the tiny homes behind panes of glass. Ms Maeda is one of the high-end designers whose pieces are part of the trend for mechanical – or moving – jewellery.



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The fair – in which about 100 designers exhibited – also featured the work of Louis Velasquez, who demonstrated a ring mounted with a spinning disk with a spiral pattern, resembling hypnosis patterns from the early 20th century.

"The idea of moving parts or mechanical aspects is an old idea, [that of] machine-age parts. It has trickled down into art jewellery and to a younger consumer," says Mr Velasquez.

Mechanical jewellery can also be found among the current ranges of leading designers such as Jade Jagger, Patricia Madeja, Amrapali, and Wendy Brandes, where pieces feature hinges or parts that spring open.

Ms Brandes drew inspiration from a macabre tale from history. "I have a series called Juana Peekaboo Skulls Lockets and Poison rings, inspired by Juana la Loca [queen of the Spanish region of Castile in the 1500s]," she says. "She was married to Philip the Handsome, and after he died, legend has it she kept peeking into his coffin at the remains. So you can peek into my locket at the skull."

Demand has increased for other mechanical items in her range, such as a locket with an acorn and squirrel inside.

With such designs, she is responding to changes in consumers' tastes and shopping patterns stimulated by technology and social media, she says. "I noticed a

profound difference. We're all taking selfies and sharing information. You're not just a canvas any more for the piece, you're not a shelf for a designer to come along and put a big gem there."

Jade Jagger's work also appeals to those looking for pieces that make for novel selfies. "It's human nature to want something to toy with," says Ms Jagger, who made rings featuring spinning balls for her Disco Diamond collection.

Others suggest mechanical jewellery may be a reaction against such self-absorption. "It's about secret-keeping" says Laura Schneider, head of publicity for [1stdibs](#), the high-end collectables online retailer. "Everything now is so public and out-there that you wouldn't be far off saying designers are creating these items as a reaction to the selfie generation.

"Everybody looks the same. The world is such a smaller place. Everyone is wearing the same shoes. Style in New York and style in London aren't that different any more. This is against that."



Asagi Maeda's 'buildings' bracelet

Doyle & Doyle, the New York vintage jewellery retailer, has noted an uptick in mechanical jewellery. It co-founder Elizabeth Doyle agrees with Ms Schneider. "I see more and more selfie sticks [the telescopic handheld devices to aid filming and photography with a mobile phone]. Some people have completely embraced [technology] and nothing is sacred,

whereas others are accepting it but want to retain some things for themselves," says Ms Doyle.

The retailer stocks a locket, which springs open on a hinge to display two sides and a spinning compartment in the middle. Other pieces that are selling well are moving charms, such as scissors that cut, a phone that dials, and gimmel rings with hidden inscriptions.

Even at mass-market level, consumers are demanding mechanical pieces. "Consumers want to interact with their designs," says Nathalie Colin, creative director and executive vice-president of communications for Swarovski consumer goods business. "They want to be coaxed and seduced by a unique experience."

But the trend for mechanical items may be impossible to sustain. Classic vintage designs, such as the mouse on a ring chasing a piece of cheese around the band, are expensive to make in contemporary collections.

"Most of these things have to be machined for the precision, you have to make a lathe or a die so if you're not going to sell many of these pieces, it doesn't pay if you can't spread the cost," says Ms Doyle.

Ms Brandes makes the same point: consumers are entranced by mechanical jewellery, but it is not cheap. The squirrel and acorn locket in gold costs \$16,000.

Mechanical creativity has led to challenges. Beverly Hills-based designer Liv Ballard's most popular items are the moving globes she first created in 2005.

"It was a good thing I didn't know how complicated [they would be to make]," she says. "There's a mechanism that allows it to rotate really smoothly; it's all gold; it's a three-dimensional object; it's sculptural – so it's much more challenging than making something flat and putting pavé on it. It has to be pleasing from every angle, work properly and be durable."

The globes range in price from \$33,000 to \$100,000 depending on customisation. Customers have requested stones be placed in certain positions to personalise the pieces.

But Ms Ballard says such playful pieces are well worth the labour and expense. "You don't tire of it. It is more than just decorative. It's attractive to people other than the wearer, so it brings people close to you, they want to touch it, play with it and ask about it. It keeps it fresh."

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