

## WHAT IS JEWELRY, *Really*? by Warren Feld, Jewelry Designer



*"Tibetan Dreams", Feld, 2010*

### **Abstract**

*We create and wear jewelry because we do not want to feel alone. But "not wanting to feel alone" can mean different things to different people. The jewelry artist must have insight here. The artist needs to understand what jewelry really is in order to make the kinds of successful choices about forms, materials, design elements, inspirations, techniques, arrangements, public presentations and exhibitions and the like. There are different frameworks from which the artist might draw such understanding, including the sensation of jewelry as OBJECT, CONTENT, INTENT or DIALECTIC. All these lenses share one thing in common – communication. Although jewelry can be described in the absence of communicative interaction, the artist can never begin to truly understand what jewelry really is without some knowledge about its creation and without somehow referencing the artist, the wearer, the viewer and the context.*

### WHAT IS JEWELRY, *Really*?

Simply put, we create and wear jewelry because *we do not want to feel alone.*

But “*not wanting to feel alone*” can mean different things to different people. The jewelry designer, in order to make the best choices and the most strategic choices throughout the process of designing a piece of jewelry, requires some detail and clarity here. What does it mean to say that we create and wear jewelry *so we do not want to feel alone*?

We might want to reaffirm that we are similar (or different) than someone else or some other group or culture. We might want to signal some connection (or disconnection or mal-connection) with a higher power or mystical source or sense of well-being or with some idea, concept or meaning. We might want to express an intent or feeling or emotion.

We might want to differentiate what it means to be yourself relative to something else, whether animate or inanimate, functional or artistic, part of a dialectic conversation with self or other. We might want to signal or differentiate status, intelligence, awareness, and resolution. We might want to separate ourselves from that which is sacred and that which is profane.

Whatever the situation, jewelry becomes something more than simple decoration or adornment. It becomes more than an object which is worn merely because this is something that we do. It becomes more than a functional object used to hold things together. It is communicative. It is connective. It is intentional. And concurrently, it must be functional and appealing and be seen as the result of an artist’s application of technique and technology.

The word *jewelry* derives from the Latin “*jocale*” meaning plaything. It is traditionally defined as a personal adornment or decoration. It is usually assumed to be constructed from durable items, though exceptions are often made for the use of real flowers. It is usually made up of materials that have some perceived value. It can be used to adorn nearly every part of the body.



*Prehistoric Necklaces 40000 B.C*

One of the earliest evidences of jewelry was that of a Neanderthal man some 115,000 years ago. What was it – and we really need to think about this and think this through – which made him craft the piece of jewelry and want to wear it? Mere decoration? Did it represent some kind of status? Or religious belief? Or position or role? Or sexuality and sensuality? Or was it symbolic of something else? Was this a simplified form or representation of something else?

Did this Neanderthal have concerns about craft and technique? Did the making of it require some special or innovative technology? Did the cost of materials come into play? Was this an expression of art? Self? Power? A show of intelligence and prowess? A confirmation of shared beliefs, experiences and values? Was it something he made himself, or was it something given to him as a gift or token of recognition?

Picture yourself there at this very moment. What happened at the point this Neanderthal man put this piece of jewelry on? Did this reduce or increase social and cultural barriers between himself and others? Did this define a new way of expression or a new way of defining the self? Did this impact or change any kind of outcome? Did this represent a divergence between craft and art? Was this piece of jewelry something that had to be worn all the time? Were the purposes and experiences of this Neanderthal man similar to why and how we design and adorn ourselves with jewelry today?

We know that jewelry continued in importance. Jewelry mattered. It was an object we touched. And it was an object we allowed to touch our bodies. The object had form. The form encapsulated meaning. We allowed others to view the jewelry as we wore it, and when we did not.

Making and wearing jewelry became very widespread about 5,000 years ago, especially in India and Mesopotamia, but worldwide as well. While some cultures banned jewelry or limited its forms and uses (*see medieval Japan or ancient Rome, for example*), they could not maintain these restrictions over time. People want to support the making of jewelry, the wearing of it, the exhibiting of it in public, and the accumulating of it. People want to touch it. Display it. Comment about it. Talk about it with others. Collect it, trade it, buy it, sell it.

As jewelry designers, we need to understand the why's ... Why make jewelry at all? Why develop different techniques and use different materials and come up with different arrangements?

We observe that jewelry is everywhere, worn by all types of people, on various parts of the body, in many different kinds of situations. Jewelry must possess a kind of inherent value for the artist, the wearer, the viewer and the society as a whole.

So we have to continue to wonder, Why is jewelry so coveted universally? Why is it important? How is understanding *what jewelry is really* necessary for making the kinds of successful choices about forms, materials, design elements, inspirations, techniques, arrangements, public presentations and exhibitions and the like?

Let us review the range of definitions and justifications for jewelry before fine-tuning any ideas and conclusions. Each understanding leads us in different directions when filling in the blanks of this constructive phrasing:

*Jewelry means to me ..... therefore,*  
These are the *types of choices I need to make* as a designer

to know my pieces are finished and successful,  
including things like .....

These different definitional frameworks about jewelry are things  
characterized by the:

**SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *OBJECT*:**

1. **ROUTINE:** Something that we do with little or no reflection
2. **MATERIAL:** Objects that we use as materials characterized or sorted by design elements, such as color, pattern, texture
3. **ARRANGEMENT AND FORMS:** Materials are sorted by various Principles of Composition into arrangements and forms, expressing things like rhythm, focus, and juxtaposition of lines and planes
4. **TECHNIQUE:** Techniques we use to assemble and construct
5. **FUNCTIONALITY:** Things which have a useful purpose and functionality

**SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *CONTENT*:**

6. **MEANING:** Things to which we assign meaning(s) and such meaning(s) transcends materials, functions and techniques
7. **VALUE:** Things to which we assign monetary and economic value, particularly materials

**SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *INTENT*:**

8. **ORDER OUT OF CHAOS:** A sense-making attempt to control and order the world
9. **SELF-IDENTITY:** An agent of personality

**SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *DIALECTIC*:**

10. **INTERACTION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS:** A way to create, confirm and retain connections through interaction and shared understandings

Yet, no matter what the framework we use to try to makes sense about what jewelry really is, all these lenses share one thing in common – jewelry is more than ornament and decoration; it is *communication*, as well.

Although we can *describe* jewelry in the absence of knowledge about its creation, we cannot begin to *understand* what jewelry really is without somehow referencing the artist, the wearer, the viewer and the context.

### **SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS OBJECT**



Too often, ideas about communication and meaning and intent get too messy and complicated. We seek a simpler framework within which to understand what jewelry is all about. We try to fit the idea of jewelry into the confines of a box we call “object”. It is decoration. Jewelry succeeds as “object” to the extent that everyone everywhere universally agrees to what it is, how it is made, what it is made from, why it was made, and in what ways it is used.

**Jewelry As Something That We Do.** Wearing jewelry might simply be something that we do. We put on earrings. We slip a ring onto a finger. We clasp a necklace around our neck or a bracelet around our wrist. It is habit. Routine. Not something to stop and ask why. A necklace is a necklace. An earring is an earring. We mechanically interact with decorative objects we call jewelry.

**Jewelry As A Material.** Sometimes we want to get a little more specific and describe what this object or ‘box’ is made of. It is some kind of material. Jewelry encompasses all types of stones and metals, in various shades and colors, which the artist has taken tools to them to shape and sharpen. Sometimes we want to further delineate the character of

materials within and around this box. We refer to this as selecting various design elements such as color, pattern, texture.

**Jewelry As Arrangements and Forms.** Sometimes we want to even further elaborate on our placement in terms of Principles of Composition which refers to arrangements and organized forms to create movement, rhythm, focal point, balance, distribution. We apply this framework in a static way. Jewelry is reduced to an object, somehow apart from its creator and disconnected from any wearer or viewer.

**Jewelry As The Application of Technique(s).** We can also understand jewelry as object in a more dynamic sense. It is something which is created by the application of one or more techniques. The techniques are applications of ideas often corralled into routines. The object is seen to evolve from a starting point to a finishing point. As object, it is reduced to a series of organized steps. These steps are disconnected from insight, inspiration, aspiration or desire. There is no human governance or interference.

**Jewelry As Function.** In a similar dynamic way, the object may be seen to have function. It may hold up something, or keep something closed. It may, in a decorative sense, embellish a piece of clothing. It may assist in the movement of something else. It is not understood to have any meaning beyond its function. As it coordinates the requirements of form to the requirements of function, it plays a supportive, practical role, not a substantive role. As such, it is unimportant. It might allow the wearer to change position of the necklace on the neck. It might better enable the piece to move with the body. But it should not demand much insight or reflection by creator, wearer, or viewer.

## SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *CONTENT*



However, as we get closer to defining the object as one that is sensed and experienced and which evokes an emotional response, it becomes more difficult to maintain that the object does not reflect meaning, does not result from some kind of thought process and intent, and does not communicate quite a lot about the designer, the wearer, the viewer and the situation. Jewelry when worn and which succeeds becomes a sort of identifier or locator, that can inform the wearer and the viewer about particular qualities or content, such as where you belong, or what you are about, or what your needs are.

Jewelry without content, after all, can skew to the superficial, boring, monotonous and unsatisfying. Without meaning and value, jewelry has little to offer.

**Jewelry As Meaning.** Jewelry when worn signals, signifies or symbolizes something else. It is a type of recognizable short-hand. It is a powerful language of definition and expression. By representing meaning, it takes responsibility for instigating shared understandings, such as membership in a group or delineating the good from the bad. It might summarize difficult to express concepts or emotions, such as God, love, loyalty, fidelity. It might be a stand-in marker for status, power, wealth, connection and



commitment. It might visually represent the completion or fulfillment of a rite of passage – puberty, adulthood, marriage, birthing, and death.

Sometimes, the sensation of jewelry as meaning derives from energy and powers we believe can transfer from the meaning of the materials the jewelry is made of to ourselves. These might be good luck, or good fortune, or good health, or good love, or good faith or protection from harm. Various gemstones, metals and other materials are seen to have mystical, magical and supernatural qualities that, when touching the body, allows us to incorporate these powers with our own.

**Jewelry As Value.** When we refer to meaning as having power, sacredness, respect, significance, we are beginning to assign a *value* to it. A sensation of value may emerge from how rare the item is – its material rarity or the rarity of how it was constructed or where it came from or who made it or who was allowed to wear it. It may emerge from how bright it is or the noteworthy arrangement of its elements. Its value may emerge from how pliable or workable the material is. Its value might be set from how tradable it is for other materials, objects, access or activities.

By assigning value, we determine things like importance, uniqueness, appeal, status, need, want, and demand. We establish control over how and how often a piece of jewelry will change hands. We establish some regulation over how individuals in a group, culture or society interact and transact with one another.

## SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS *INTENT*



Someone has to infuse the object with all this content, and this proactive act leads us to the idea of *intent*. Often this imposition of meaning begins with the jewelry artist. Jewelry becomes a means of self-expression. The artist, in effect, tells the world who the artist is, and what the artist wants to happen next. The artist might be subdued or bold, colorful or monochromatic, simple or complex, extravagant or economical. The artist might be direct or indirect in how meanings get communicated. It is important, in order to understand the meaning of an object, to begin by delineating the artist's inspiration, aspiration and intent.

The jewelry artist begins with nothing and creates something. The unknown, the unknowable, the nothingness is made more accessible.

The artist fills in a negative space with points, lines, planes, shapes, forms and themes. Color, pattern and texture are added. Things get organized and arranged.

Though often unstated, it becomes obvious that of all the possible choices the artist could have made in design, that some choices were ignored and excluded, while others were not.

The question becomes, what influences that artist's selections? Successful jewelry reveals the artist's hand.

**Jewelry As Creating Order Out Of Chaos.** Partly, what the artist does is attempt to order the world. The artist looks for clues within him- or herself (inspiration and intent). The artist formulates concepts and a plan for translating inspiration and intent into a design. The artist determines whether to take into account the expectations of others (shared understandings) about what would be judged as finished and successful.

Jewelry is an object created out of chaos and which has an order to it. The order has content, meaning and value. It has coherency based on color and texture and arrangement.

Jewelry as an organized, ordered, coherent object reflects the hypotheses the artist comes up with about how to translate inspiration into aspiration, and do this in such a way that the derived jewelry is judged positively. The artist anticipates how others might experience and sense the object on an emotional level.

It reflects the shared understandings among artist, wearer and viewer about emotions, desires, inherent tensions and yearnings and how these play out in everyday life.

The artist makes the ordered chaos more coherent, and this coherence becomes contagious through the artist's choices about creative production and design. The artist lets this contagion spread. To the extent that others share the artist's ideas about coherence, the more likely the work will be judged finished and successful. And no one – not the artist, not the wearer, not the viewer – will feel alone.

The process of bringing order to chaos continues with the wearer. The wearer introduces the piece of jewelry into a larger context. We have more contagion. The jewelry as worn causes more, ever-expanding tension and efforts at balance and resolution. There is an effort to figure out the original artist intent and ideas about coherence as reflected in design.

Unsuccessful efforts at design, where the artist's intent becomes obscured, reverse the process, and the object – our piece of jewelry – then brings

about *decoherence*. Decoherence may come in the forms of bad feedback, inappropriate feedback, less than satisfying feedback, or no feedback at all.

Decoherence means the wearer may not get that sense of self s/he seeks. S/he may feel less motivated to wear the piece. S/he may store the piece or give the piece away. As this decoherence filters down to the level of the artist, any necessary support in design may be lost. There will be fewer clients, fewer opportunities to display the works publicly, and fewer sales. The artist's motivation may diminish.

**Jewelry As An Agent of Personality.** People wear jewelry because they like it. It becomes an extension of themselves. It is self-confirming, self-identifying and self-reconfirming. Liking a piece of jewelry gets equated with liking oneself, or as a strategy for getting others to express their like for you. Jewelry makes us feel more like ourselves. We might use jewelry to help us feel emotionally independent, or we might come to rely on jewelry for emotional support and feedback, leading us down the path to emotional dependency.

Jewelry may have personal significance, linking one to their past, or one to their family, or one to their group. It may be a way to integrate history with the present. It is a tool to help us satisfy our need to affiliate.

Jewelry may help us differentiate ourselves from others. It may assist us in standing out from the crowds. Conversely, we may use it to blend into those multitudes, as well.

Jewelry fulfills our needs. If we look at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, after meeting our basic physiological needs such as for food and water, and our safety needs, such as for shelter, we can turn to jewelry to meet our additional social needs for love and belonging and self-esteem. Designing and creating jewelry can form an additional basis for our needs for self-actualization.

We may derive our personality and sense of soul and spirit from the qualities we assign the jewelry we wear. If ruby jewelry symbolizes passion, we may feel passion when wearing it. We may use jewelry as an expressive display of who we feel we are and want to be seen as in order to attract mates and sexual partners. We use jewelry in a narcissistic way to influence the alignment of the interests and desires among artist, weaver, viewer, collector, exhibiter, and seller.

In similar ways, we may derive our sense of belief, devotion and faith to a higher power or spiritual being or God from wearing jewelry. It may help us feel more connected to that religious, spiritual something within ourselves. It may remind us to stay on our religious path.

As an agent of our psychological selves, jewelry is used to resolve those core conflicts – Who are we? Why do we exist? How should we relate to other people around us? Jewelry orients us in coming to grips with our *self-perceived* place within critical contradictions around us. Trust and mistrust. Living and dying. Good and evil. Pleasure and pain. Permission and denial. Love and hate. Experience and expectation. Traditional and contemporary. Rational and reasonable.

### **SENSATION OF JEWELRY AS DIALECTIC** **Jewelry As Interaction and Shared Understandings**



Jewelry is a two-way street. It is a way to create, confirm and retain connections. At its very core, it is communicative. It is more an *action* than an *object*. Jewelry can start a conversation. Jewelry encapsulates a very public, ongoing matrix of choices and interactions among artist, wearer and viewer, with the purpose of getting responses. It is a dialectic.

The optimum position to view jewelry is on a person's body, where and when its dialectical power is greatest. Again, it is very public, yet concurrently, very intimate. We exhibit jewelry. It forces reaction, response and reciprocity. Jewelry helps us *negotiate, in relatively non-threatening ways*, those critical tensions and contradictions in life, not merely define them.

It very publicly forces us to reveal our values, delineate tensions and contradictions which might result, and resolve all those betwixt and between qualities which occur as the artist, wearer, viewer, marketer, seller, exhibitor and collector try to make sense of it all. Conversely, jewelry, as worn, may signal that any negotiation would be futile, but this is a dialectic, communicative act, as well.

Jewelry expresses or implies things, the relevance of which emerges through interactions. There is an exchange of meaning. There is some reciprocity between the artist expressing an inspiration with the desire for a reaction, and the wearer evaluating the success of the piece and impacting the artist, in return.

Jewelry is persuasive. It allows for the negotiation of influence and power in subtle, often soft-pedalled ways. It helps smooth the way for support or control. Compliance or challenge. Wealth and success or poverty and failure. High or low status. Social recognition. An expression of who you know, and who might know you. Jewelry is a tool for managing the dynamics between any two people.

Jewelry is emotional and feeling, with attempts by the artist to direct these, and with opportunities for others to experience these. It is not that we react emotionally to the beauty of an object. It is not mechanical or

fleeting. It is more of a dialectic. The jewelry is an expression of an artist's inspiration and intent. We react emotionally to what we sense as that expression as it resonates from the object itself. This resonance ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes, over time as the object is worn in many different situations.

Jewelry draws attention. It becomes a virtual contract between artist and wearer. The artist agrees to design something that will call attention to the wearer and that wearer's preferred sense of self. The wearer agrees to wear something that reaffirms the artist's insights for all to witness and experience and draw support.

Jewelry may cue the rules for sexual and sensual interactions. Nurturing and desire. Necklaces draw attention to the breasts. Earrings to the ear and neck. Rings to the hands. Jewelry, such as a wedding band, may confirm a relationship, and signal permission for various forms of touching that otherwise would not be appropriate. The silhouettes and placements of jewelry on the body indicate where it may be appropriate for the viewer to place his gaze, and where it would not.

### **Knowing What Jewelry Really Is Translates Into Artistic and Design Choices**

Knowing what jewelry really is better connects the artist to the various audiences the artist seeks to reach. It results in better outcomes. More exhibits. More sales. More collections. Better self-esteem. Better representation of self in various contexts and situations.

Jewelry asks the artist, the wearer and the viewer to participate in its existence. In a somewhat subtle way, by allowing communication, dialog, evaluation, and emotion, jewelry allows each one not to feel alone. It allows each one to express intent, establish a sense of self, and introduce these intents and self-expressions into a larger social context.

Jewelry judged as finished and successful results from these shared understandings among artist, viewer and wearer, and how these influence their subsequent choices. These choices extend to materials and arrangements. They extend to how the artist determines what is to be achieved, and how the work is talked about and presented to others. These anticipate the reactions of others, beliefs about saleability, assumptions about possible inclusions in exhibitions, knowing what is appealing or collectible.

The artist is always omnipresent in the jewelry s/he creates. The artist, through the jewelry, and how it is worn on the body, to some extent, arbitrates how other sets of relationships interact, transfer feelings, ideas and emotions, reduce ambiguity, influence one another, and make sense of the world around them.

These sets of relationships, through which jewelry serves as a conduit, include:

- artist and wearer
- wearer and viewer
- artist and seller
- seller and client
- artist and exhibiter
- artist and collector
- exhibiter and collector

In the abstract, jewelry is a simple object. We make it. We wear it. We sell it. We exhibit it. We collect it. But in reality, jewelry channels all the artist's and wearer's and viewer's energy – the creative sparks, the tensions, the worries, the aspirations, the representations, the assessments of risks and rewards, the anticipations of influence and affect. Jewelry becomes the touchstone for all these relationships. It is transformational. It is a manifestation of their internal worlds. An essence resonant in context.

The better jewelry designer is one who anticipates these shared understandings about what makes a piece of jewelry finished and



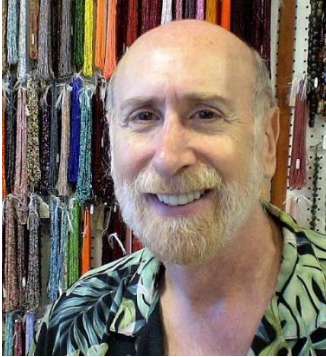
successful, and can incorporate these understandings within the jewelry design process s/he undertakes.

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For Warren Feld, Jewelry Designer, ([www.warrenfeldjewelry.com](http://www.warrenfeldjewelry.com)), beading and jewelry making have been wonderful adventures. These adventures have taken Warren from the basics of bead stringing and bead weaving, to wire working, wire weaving and silversmithing, and onward to more complex jewelry designs which build on the strengths of a full range of technical skills and experiences.

Warren leads a group of instructors at Be Dazzled Beads ([www.bedazzledbeads.com](http://www.bedazzledbeads.com)). He teaches many of the bead-weaving, bead-stringing, wire weaving, jewelry design and business-oriented courses. He works with people just getting started with beading and jewelry making, as well as those with more experience. Many of his classes and projects have been turned into kits, available for purchase from [www.warrenfeldjewelry.com](http://www.warrenfeldjewelry.com) or [www.landofodds.com](http://www.landofodds.com). He conducts workshops at many sites around the US, and the world.

Join Warren for an enrichment-travel adventure on [Your World Of Jewelry Making Cruises](#).

His pieces have appeared in beading and jewelry magazines and books. One piece is in the Swarovski museum in Innsbruck, Austria.

He is probably best known for creating the international [The Ugly Necklace Contest](#), where good jewelry designers attempt to overcome our pre-wired brains' fear response for resisting anything Ugly.

He is currently writing a book – *Fluency In Design: Do You Speak Jewelry?*

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FOOTNOTES

Grosz, Stephen, *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves*, NY: W.W.Norton & Company, 2014.