

## **CONTEMPORIZING TRADITIONAL JEWELRY: Transitioning From Conformity To Individuality by Warren Feld, Jewelry Designer**



*Etruscan Collar and Inspired Contemporary Pieces*

### **Abstract**

*Many people, jewelry designers among them, draw inspirations from traditional jewelry styles. The common inspirational thread here is a feeling of connectedness, coupled with a desire to feel connected. But the core issue for jewelry designers today, striving to achieve jewelry which is more contemporary than merely a replay or reworking of traditional preferences and styles, is how to contemporize it. That is, how to construct ideas into objects, challenge history and culture, produce that which is in opposition to standardization and monotony. Contemporizing Traditional Jewelry has to do with how designers take these particular traditional forms and techniques, and both add in their personal style, as well as make them more relevant to today's sense of fashion, style and individuality or personal expression. The challenge for the designer, when contemporizing traditional jewelry, is how to marry personal artistic intent with traditional ideas, keeping the jewelry design essential and alive for today's audience.*

## **CONTEMPORIZING TRADITIONAL JEWELRY: Transitioning From Conformity To Individuality**

Many people, jewelry designers among them, draw inspirations from traditional jewelry styles. These styles could be ancient, like those of Egypt, Peru, Persia, India and China. These styles could be more recent,

like those of Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and Modern. These styles could be primitive, like those of tribal cultures in the rain forests of Brazil or the savannas of Africa or the Native American traditions in North, Central and South America.

The common inspirational thread here is a feeling of connectedness, coupled with a desire to feel connected. These styles strongly reflect particular premises, cultures, moralities, characters, and perspectives. People not only identify and connect with these, but use these style traits – almost ideologies – to explain and position themselves within the larger social contexts in which they find themselves.

Traditions represent reasons. Reasons justify everyday life. These reasons are the conditions and shared understandings necessary to regulate ideas, to generate opportunities for success, and to minimize the risk that comes from making choices about what to do next. Traditions justify thought and action, and because many people share these traditional understandings, living life becomes safer, easier, clearer. Traditions help people to understand each other and predict their behaviors. Traditions are often expressed within the designs of jewelry.

Jewelry, then, often signifies certain traditions through imitation or reference, and when mirroring them, reaffirms the wearer's thoughts, actions, self-identity, and self-reflection. Jewelry design which recognizes tradition feels more understandable. It feels safer and less risky to say out loud that it is beautiful, knowing that others will think so, too. It is no wonder that many jewelers resort to traditional forms and themes of expression, traditional techniques, traditional materials, traditional uses of color, texture, pattern, point, line, plane and shape. It feels like a short-cut to success.

But the issue for jewelry designers today, striving to achieve jewelry which is more contemporary than merely a replay or reworking of traditional preferences and styles, is how to contemporize it. That is, how to construct ideas into objects, challenge history and culture, produce that which is in opposition to standardization and monotony. *Contemporizing Traditional Jewelry* makes sense because this mirrors how most people live

their lives today. They adhere less rigidly to societal and cultural norms, and moreso create their own. Jewelry, and its identify-reconfirming role it plays for the wearer, should reflect this.

The contemporary jewelry designer who wants to incorporate traditional elements or styles in some way, must come to grips with...

1. How Traditional jewelry differs from Contemporary Jewelry
2. Why so many people draw inspirations and connectedness to traditional styles
3. How literal the designer should be when contemporizing a traditional piece

### **Contemporizing Traditional Jewelry**

*Contemporizing Traditional Jewelry* has to do with how you take these particular traditional forms and techniques, and add both your personal style to the pieces, as well as make them more relevant to today's sense of fashion, style and individuality or personal expression. The challenge for the designer, when contemporizing traditional jewelry, is how to marry personal artistic intent with traditional ideas, keeping the jewelry design essential and alive for today's audience.

This may be trickier than it might first appear. To what degree should you reference the traditional design elements in your contemporary piece? Just the colors? The colors and the pattern? The materials? The stitching, stringing or other techniques? The structural components, as well? How do you break down the traditional piece, in order to better understand it? And how do you use this understanding to figure out how and what you should manipulate, as you design and construct your contemporary piece?

If you walked into a Museum of Contemporary Art, you would find some things that were abstract, but other things that were realistic or impressionistic or surrealistic. You would find a lot of individualized expression – works associated with a particular artist, rather than a particular culture. You would find a wide use of modern materials and techniques and technologies. You would find unusual or especially noteworthy assemblages of pieces or materials or colors or textures. You

would find pieces that in some way reflect modern culture and sensibilities – fashions, styles, purposes, statements. The exhibits would change on a regular basis, and you would also find something new and different to experience and marvel at each time.

Traditional Art, on the other hand, suppressed individualized expression. Instead, whatever the art form, traditional art emphasized a restatement of its cultural narrative. That is, artists, working within that cultural tradition, would use similar materials, similar designs, and similar motifs. The artwork was a symbolic representation of that culture's values and self-image. The "doing of the artwork" was a reaffirmation of one's place within that culture. Simply, if you did the same kinds of things in the same kinds of ways as everyone else, this reaffirmed your membership within that group and culture. And if you visited a Museum of Traditional Art, there would be many displays of wonderful, sometimes elaborate, pieces, but the exhibits would never have to change.

### **Approaches To Contemporizing Traditional Jewelry**

There are many approaches jewelry designers use to contemporize traditional jewelry. Some approaches rely on mimicking traditional visual styles, techniques and materials. Some approaches rely on modifications. Still others seek to reinterpret traditional elements or introduce new elements into traditional designs. And yet other approaches attempt to create a completely different aesthetic starting from some traditional core.

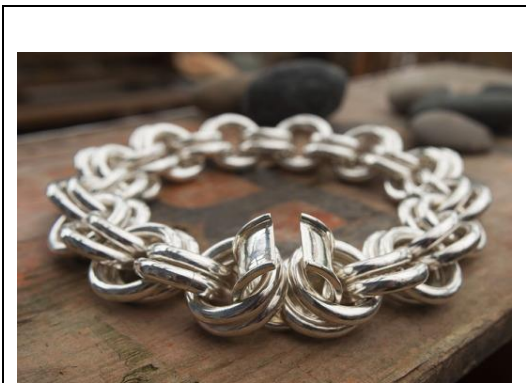
I want to develop a very narrow, legitimate lane for what should be called "Contemporized". I want to differentiate the thinking and practice that underlies *Contemporizing*, from other things artists do when addressing traditional design in contemporary pieces.

The way these different approaches get defined in the literature can get very muddled, so I want to begin with some simple categorization before elaborating more on ideas about contemporizing traditional jewelry. It is important to know how *literal* the artist should be. It is equally as important to know how much of the *artist's hand* should be reflected in the new piece.

<b>APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING TRADITIONAL DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY PIECES</b>			
<b>APPROACH</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>DEGREE <u>NOW</u> FROM <u>THEN</u> IS DIFFERENTIATED</b>	<b>RISK FOR THE CONTEMPORARY DESIGNER</b>
<b>ARCHAEOLOGICAL</b>	Preserving the style and techniques of historic artisans, characterized by attention to duplicating and mimicking period styles, craftsmanship, and materials.	All about what existed <i>then</i> , and what should be preserved.	No risk
<b>HISTORICISM</b>	Imitating or recreating the work of historic artisans, characterized by attention to accurate period detail and thinking. Very literal. If new elements are added, these do not compete with or overshadow the historic vernacular.	Primarily about what was relevant <i>then</i> , and what should be imitated or copied <i>now</i> .	Very little risk
<b>REVIVAL (sometimes referred to as CLASSICAL)</b>	Begins with an existential or sentimental romanticism of feelings about lifestyles, beliefs, imagery, symbols, cultures strongly associated with a particular historic group, society or period. Characterized by use of traditional themes, materials and styles based on inspirations from the past. Mostly literal with opportunities for reinterpretation and expression.	Often emphasizes some contrast between antiquity and modernity, industrial and hand-crafted, power now vs. power then, <i>then</i> and <i>now</i> .	Some risk, but does not create a barrier or roadblock to design
<b>DECONSTRUCTIVE</b>	Here the artist begins with traditional pieces, components and materials, and breaks them up to form new pieces, components and materials. The new piece results from the parts of the old piece, but that is the only connection. Nothing is literal; everything is reinterpreted.	Emphasizes the <i>now</i> , not much of the <i>then</i> .	High risk

<b>CONTEMPORIZED</b>	The artist imbues the design with inspirations from a rich cultural past, but creates a piece that has the sense it belongs in contemporary time. Characterized by how tradition is leveraged to conceive new ideas and forms.	Emphasizes the <i>now</i> , sometimes with reference to the <i>then</i> , but not really a matter of differentiating <i>now</i> from <i>then</i> .	Considerable risk, where artist substitutes his/her ideas and values for those extending from various traditions.
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### Archaeological Approach



*Zoe Davidson recreated this Pictish Necklace (circa 600 AD) using original techniques and materials*

The *Archaeological Approach* seeks to replicate and preserve the original ways of making jewelry and the original materials used to make them. The goal is to bring to life how things were thought about and constructed back then for a new contemporary audience. New techniques, technologies and materials are not introduced. There is a purity of belief in the traditional craftsmanship, norms and values reflected in these pieces of jewelry.

Often the Archaeological Approach requires years of detective work. There is a sense of urgency to rescue the past before it decays or fades away.

There is an accompanying assumption that this is what people who make and wear jewelry want to see happen today. This assumption seems to bear out because so many people express some kind of connectedness to these pieces and how they were originally crafted. They draw a line from the past to the present, and the clearer and cleaner that line is, the more legitimate the present seems to be.

### **Historicism**



*Castellani Jewelry  
Company, Italian, circa  
1927, reproduction of  
Roman piece to  
commemorate historic  
occasion*

*Historicism* seeks to recreate or imitate the work of artisans in past periods of time, culture and society. There is great attention to accuracy of period detail. They might use new materials or modern equipment and technique, but these should never replace or overshadow the historic visual vernacular and grammar.

Historicism may draw parallels between the *then* and the *now*, but these are not sentimentalized or romanticized, as in Revival or Classicism approaches. In Historicism, the emphasis is on thoughts and reasons. History is presented as an analogy between then and now. It creates a logical linkage. Characteristics are specific and shared. *(This is in contrast to Revival or Classicism, where the emphasis is on feeling)*. In Historicism, the past is presented as metaphor for now. As it was then, so it is now. It creates a meaningful, felt linkage. Characteristics are not necessarily literal, but are to be interpreted and experienced. Again, in contrast to Historicism, Revival styles *(discussed below)* more easily and powerfully evoke emotions, which is one of the primary goals of artists.

### **Revival or Classicism**



*Isadoras, Etruscan Earrings, 2015, created with the look and flourishes of gold, metal work, granulation, turquoise stones strongly associated with Etruscan style and culture, but befitting current earring styles, as well*



*Revival or Classicism* approaches reflect the influences of pivotal fashion eras. The goal in Revival or Classicism styles is to evoke a personal emotional experience, rather than something that is learned from afar or as part of an intellectual exercise. The romanticized experience is like a call to conversion or rebirth, with a radical change in one's sense of identity and existence. There is a sense of a revived spirit in relation to the standard, dull, repetitive and boring jewelry seen all over. Often revival jewelry evokes a reaction against modern technology, materials and ways. Sometimes there is a call or push to connect the present day to some glorious past.

Revival approaches begin with inspirations from traditional themes and jewelry. The past is felt as a simpler and purer time, where the individual was much closer to the earth and the earth's spirit. Inspiration is coupled with the natural curiosity of peoples around the world, their events, and their pasts. The jewelry is not only an opportunity to express a personal identify and emotion, but a chance to explore something other than the everyday mundane and routine. There is always this underlying tension of comparison and contrast between the past and the present, the current situation and situations faced by others, the advantages and disadvantages of modern life and antiquity.

The use of hand-craft, rather than machine-craft, is highlighted, even when the pieces are actually manufactured by machine. Jewelry is defined as art-centered and artist-centered, one-of-a-kind, again, in spite of the fact that it is often machine made and mass produced.

Revival approaches often capitalize on the use of representative motifs and symbols. These are evocative elements. Often they are anti-Industrial. As often, they are used to either impose or ease restrictions upon the female form and expressions of sensuality.

## Deconstructivism



*Pieces by Walid, for CoutureLab, 2009*

*Deconstructivism* tears apart old pieces, and repositions all the parts into a new design. It is a play on evoking those feelings of connectedness and recognizability in the wearer, but forcing that wearer to redefine or somehow rethink those feelings in terms meaningful for this individual and at the moment or within a context.

Deconstructivism anticipates the shared understandings of its various audiences about what contemporized jewelry should reflect, which include,

- a) An appreciation for hand-craft
- b) Equating things of wealth and value with elegance and status
- c) Disengagement from, then a new re-engagement with ideas and values
- d) Sense of eccentricity and individuality – uniqueness in a cookie-cutter era
- e) Ephemeral – Here today, gone tomorrow

## Contemporizing



*Etruscan Collar and Inspired Contemporary Pieces (Feld, 2012)*

*Contemporizing traditional jewelry* really has nothing to do with nostalgia for a bygone era. It might reinterpret tradition, but not preserve it. It may strategically utilize tradition and leverage something about it in the current context. While contemporized jewelry designs may be imbued with inspirations and symbolism from a rich cultural past, the design is kept contemporary. That means, the piece is seen as belonging in a contemporary time.

The contemporized traditional piece is conceived as a new idea with new forms emerging from the inspirations of an individual artist and with aspirations to be judged by various contemporary audiences as finished and successful. The jewelry designer, in effect, is bringing together modern aesthetics with traditional craftsmanship, to give a fresh outlook on contemporary individual and/or group culture. The jewelry designer is using a visual grammar, partly rooted in tradition, to portray or reveal a different narrative.

The difficulty for the contemporizing artist is how to disconnect or divorce the wearer from the memories and traditions of the past, while still representing inspirations and influences of tradition within the piece. The past provides a visual alphabet and a strong and established sense of legitimacy of meanings that is difficult to compete with and overcome.

The jewelry designer must address and manage all the identify issues people have when viewing and experiencing traditional designs, or contemporary designs with traditional components. The ultimate goal is for the jewelry designer, through the design and implementation of the piece, to establish new ideas and meanings about identity, history, culture, the present, perspectives, challenges, moralities, values, and characterizations. This involves recognizing and managing the shared understandings among various client groups.

### Contemporizing Etruscan Jewelry: Process and Application



*Etruscan Collar (circa 300 B.C.)*

I was contracted to do a series of workshops in Cortona, Italy regarding Contemporizing Etruscan Jewelry. I began with examining several pieces of Etruscan jewelry. For the Etruscans, jewelry was a display of wealth and a depository of someone's wealth maintained and preserved as jewelry. Jewelry tended to be worn for very special occasions and was buried with the individual upon her or his death. One piece, an Etruscan Collar, (*see above*), was one I immediately connected with.

The challenge, here for me, was to create a sophisticated, wearable, and attractive piece that exemplified concepts about contemporizing traditional jewelry. I began to interpret and analyze it.

I first broke it down in terms of its ***Traditional Components***.

The use of Traditional Components serves many functions. When the whole group uses the same design elements -- materials, techniques, colors, patterns and the like -- this reinforces a sense of membership and community. Often Traditional choices are limited by what materials are available and the existing technologies for manipulating them. Traditional choices also reflect style and fashion preferences, as well as functional prerequisites.

If you were contemporizing a traditional piece, the first thing you would need to do would be to re-interpret the piece – that is, *decode* it -- in terms of its characteristics and parts. These are the kinds of things you the designer can control: colors, materials, shapes, scale, positioning, balance, proportions, # of elements, use of line/plane/point, silhouette, etc.

*Traditional Components in our Traditional Etruscan Collar included:*

- *Gold metal* plates, pendants and chain. The use of metal, especially precious metal was important to the Etruscans. They had a strong preference for gold.
- *Linearity*. In traditional work, there is often a regimented use of line and plane, with a greater comfort for simple straight lines and flat planes. The Etruscans did not often use many variations of the line, such as a wavy-line or spiral.
- *Predictable, regular, symmetrical sequencing and placement* of rectangular metal objects, pendant drops, centered button clasp, and chain embellishment. Balance and symmetry are always key.
- *Flat*. The surface is flat, and there is little here that intentionally pushes any boundaries with dimensionality.
- *Rigidity* – seemed that, while it definitely makes a power statement, it would be uncomfortable to wear
- *Silhouette*. Brings attention to the wearer's face. Traditional silhouettes were often drawn to the face.
- *Focal Point*. Often resorted to clearly defined and centered focal point.
- *Wire and metal working* techniques. There were not many choices in stringing materials. Wire working, by creating links, rings, rivets, chains and connectors secured individual metal components. The metal plates were created using repousse.

The designer would also try to surmise who, why and when someone might wear the piece. A final assessment would be made about how finished and successful the Traditional piece would have been seen at the time it was made.

I researched what jewelry meant to the Etruscans, and how their jewelry compared to other societies around them.

There is considerable artistry and craftsmanship underlying Etruscan jewelry. They brought to their designs clever techniques of texturing, ornamentation, color, relief, filigree, granulation and geometric, floral and figurative patterning. While their techniques were borrowed from the Greeks and other Mediterranean cultures, the Etruscans perfected these to a level of sophistication not seen before, and not often even today.

While Roman law outlawed the wearing of more than one ring or more than ½ ounce of jewelry at any one time, the Romans loved their jewelry, and wore many pieces, in spite of this. Most Roman jewelry designs were rigid interpretations of Greek and Etruscan jewelry.

I reflected on what might it mean to contemporize these Etruscan and Roman pieces? In other words, how would we manipulate the design elements to end up with something that was contemporary, paid some kind of reference or homage to the traditional piece, and was also a satisfying work of art?

I designed each of these two contemporized pieces, each taking me in a slightly different direction in what it means to Contemporize Traditional Jewelry. The *Vestment* is definitely more literal, with a mix of Revival and Contemporized approaches. The *Collar* is more Contemporized.



*Vestment, Feld, 2012*

*Materials: Japanese seed beads, cube beads, delicas, Swarovski 2mm rounds, 14KT findings, Lampwork glass bead, fireline cable thread*

*Two overlapping and staggered layers of Ndebele stitched strips*



*Detail*



*Etruscan Collar, Feld, 2012*

*Materials: Japanese seed beads, cube beads, delicas, Swarovski 2mm rounds, 14KT findings, fireline cable thread*

*Two overlapping and staggered layers of Ndebele stitched strips*



*Detail*

*To contemporize the traditional Etruscan Collar, I wanted to:*  
*- Simplify design.* Reference the overall sense of the design, but simplify the overall appearance a bit. Contemporary pieces find that point of

parsimony -- not too many elements, not too few -- that best evokes the power of jewelry to resonate.

- *Use contemporary materials.* I wanted to use glass seed beads and cable threads, with the addition of gold ornamentation and clasp.

- *Make it more feminine.* I wanted my piece to have a sexy-ness about it.

- *Give it a curvilinearity,* rather than a flatness and straightness.

Dimensionality and curvilinearity are very characteristic of Contemporary design. Here two Ndebele bead woven strips are layered, overlapping and staggered to get a curved edge.

- *Coordinate color choices,* but not feel forced to match them.

- *Challenge strict linearity.* Keep the general symmetry, but with a lighter hand – for example, overlapping, staggered layers that don't conform as tightly to an outline boundary. I wanted less social conviction and more artistry and the representation of the artist's hand.

- *To break the sense of rigidity and predictability,* I used the Ndebele Stitch, which is very fluid with an unexpected patterning, and stitched two overlapped, staggered layers of beadwork together.

- *Use of simultaneity color effects.* The application of more involved color theories and tricks to create more of a sense of excitement, as well as more multi-dimensionality. There is a complex interplay of colors within either strip of Ndebele bead work, as well as between each strip, as one lays on top of the other.

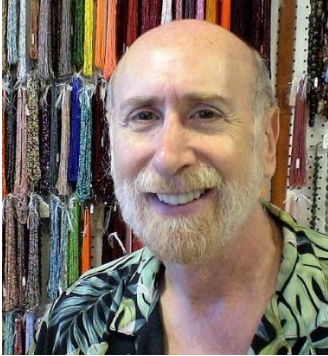
- *Use of contemporary techniques.* The use of bead weaving techniques which result in a soft, malleable, piece that drapes well and moves well. The result with bead weaving is something much more cloth-like.



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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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