



Trashmagination Podcast #106 – Buttons

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about buttons – and by this I mean the devices on our clothing that go in button holes, not the kind that you pin on your lapel, and not the kind that you find on an electronic device.

I have a fabulous button collection mostly because of my mom who gave me her button collection when she was downsizing. It is sorted by color into about 15 jars.

She had such a huge collection of buttons because she used to teach a class on how to make button necklaces. She made all different designs for different shapes of buttons. Most of her necklaces had a thin elastic cord that went around the neck and then the buttons were either attached directly to the cord through the holes or groups were attached to the cord with metal rings.

This year, I made a small denim quilt from scraps and on each square I sewed a piece of velvet from an upholstery sample book. And then on each piece of velvet, I sewed a beautiful button. I only need to make about 100 more of these quilts to use up my buttons. Or I could get inspired by some of the projects I'll share in today's podcast episode.

Now you might be thinking – why are we talking about buttons on a podcast about creative reuse of trash? Are buttons trash? Well, I can tell you that if you get into the practice of upcycling clothing, you are going to be removing buttons, and then you'll have too many buttons. So buttons are kind of an outcome of creative reuse that requires its own creative reuse solutions.

When I used to teach art at my children's schools, we always did a unit on pointillism, which is a technique of making tiny dots in order to make a larger image. It was created by George Seurat who experimented with putting dots very near to each other or even overlay different colors to see how it would affect how the brain saw the colors. His goal was to make the color even more luminous. The students always enjoyed working on this unit.

Making art with buttons definitely is connected to pointillism. If you view each button as a little dot of color, and then you group them together, you can play with color in the same way. You'll see how the artists I feature today play with this concept of both color and placement in their work.

Artists Who Creatively Reuse Buttons

One of the most well-known artists who works with buttons is Jane Perkins [<https://janeperkins.wordpress.com/>]. Over the years that I have been doing creative reuse, many people have sent me photos of Jane's work. She does very realistic portraits with buttons of famous people such as Frida Kahlo and she also re-creates classic artworks but with buttons. She doesn't share on social media, so the best place to see her latest work is her website. Jane uses a glue gun to attach her buttons and other plastic items to her pieces.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tsV87WgovE> – short video about impressionist pieces she made
- <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=293154741594103> – BBC interview

The next artist you should check out is Deniz Sagdic [<http://www.denizsagdic.com/>]. She works often with denim to make portraits and then she has also made portraits using the many buttons that she removed from the jeans. Those buttons come in many shades of metallic colors. If you have ever tried to remove a button from a pair of jeans, then you

know it is not easy. They are attached using a metal rivet. To make her portraits, she punches the posts from the rivets in a pattern on a base piece of cloth and then attaches the right colors of metal jean buttons to make her design. Deniz is from Turkey and she was featured in that Turkish documentary TV show that I mentioned in a previous episode all about artists who work with recycled materials. Unfortunately it's not translated into English, so I don't know what she is saying, but it is fun watching her process.

- <https://www.instagram.com/denizsagdicart/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDQOfPDMqB0/> - video showing how she applies the buttons
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN32xoOmDtw> – long documentary by that Turkish recycling show

The next artist who works with buttons is Ran Hwang who builds huge images of palaces, dragons, birds and plum blossom trees [<https://www.ranhwang.com/>]. She tells a story about how she was living in Brooklyn during 9/11 and the ash from the burning buildings landed in her backyard. It reminded her of a gate in Korea that also burned down to ash. Her buttons are like tiny pieces of ash that build up into a larger image.

Ran attaches each button in place with pins, hammering them into a wooden or plexiglass panel. She describes this repetitive act of hammering buttons in place as something like a meditation. When she hammers the button into the panel, she doesn't hammer the pin all the way in. It sticks out from the panel and then she can slide the button so it is very close to the panel, mid-way down the pin or near the head of the pin. This is the type of work where it is inspiring to look at it from close up and then also from far away to see the level of detail and texture.

In other sculptures, Ran incorporates string connecting the buttons and pins. Her piece called The Spider's Strategem uses the string to look like the spider webbing connecting the buttons. She also incorporates crystals to make her sculptures shine. Another way that her sculptures shine is when she incorporates video in her exhibitions. This makes the sculptures look like they are moving. For example, it might look like blossoms are falling from the trees, or water is rushing through the sculptures. The light reflects off the shiny buttons. The sculptures are suspended in the room with a screen behind, so the light shines through and makes patterns on a screen behind the sculptures.

- <https://mymodernmet.com/ran-hwang-button-installations/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/ran-hwang-ode-to-beads-buttons-pins/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/buttons-and-pins-ran-hwang-11/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A922UNEGiy8> – interview with Ran
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDHQmchoaB4> – showing video effects
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuEDVRBWAVo> – great video showing many pieces close up and far away

Finally we are going to talk about an artist who actually sews her buttons into her artwork with thread. Ann Carrington made a series called the Pearly Queens which were images of the Queen on postage stamps blown up to a very large size and made from buttons on a red or black velvet [<https://www.anncarrington.co.uk/>]. Often she uses shiny buttons like pearl, gold and silver. She was asked to make a banner for the Diamond Jubilee in 2012 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth. This large banner was displayed on the Royal Barge as it travelled up the River Thames. You can see a time-lapse video showing how this banner was made and then how it was displayed on the barge. The banner was sewn by a team of sewists. It looks like an exhausting job.

- <https://mymodernmet.com/ann-carrington-pearly-queens/>
- <https://www.anncarrington.co.uk/the-royal-jubilee-banner>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fINif4c2FYA> – time lapse of Royal Banner creation

All these artists make their artwork by attaching buttons to a flat surface. But our next artist does something completely different. Augusto Esquivel makes two- and three-dimensional sculptures by suspending buttons on strings [<https://www.augustoesquivel.com/>]. He builds a transparent acrylic box and the top of the box is a grid of holes. He then attaches one clear monofilament string from each hole. He then slides the buttons on to the strings so they make a shape. It's like each button is a large pixel in a three-dimensional image.

Another thing that he does which is quite different from the previous artists is that he spray-paints his buttons so they are exactly the same color. That makes sense because he's already asking you to process something that might seem abstract with these buttons hanging down from strings, and he relies on the buttons being exactly the same color so your brain can process that this is meant to be a singular object. He would never be able to find enough buttons just naturally the same color without driving himself around the bend. He has also made celebrity portraits using only black, white and gray buttons.

Augusto says his first goal is to make you smile and evoke feelings from childhood, not to speak to a deeper issue. He started making art from buttons because it reminded him of his grandmother who he was very close to.

- <https://www.instagram.com/augustomuchogusto/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/augusto-esquivel-suspended-button-sculptures/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx8Cms8m9Hc> – process video
- <https://www.facebook.com/buttonsculpture/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/augusto-esquivel-sewing-button-portraits/>

Button Creative Reuse Projects

So those are the stories about the artists who work with buttons. If you are inspired to make art from buttons, there are so many examples on Pinterest, and I invite you to the Trashmagination Pinterest board on buttons [<https://www.pinterest.com/trashmagination/buttons/>]. There are also multiple Facebook Groups dedicated just to making crafts from buttons. There are many designs for making holiday ornaments. A pink button makes the perfect snout for a pig. A great way to creatively reuse buttons is to make them into a wedding bouquet, combined with costume jewelry.

There are also people who collect antique buttons. Chances are that none of the buttons in your sewing basket or at your thrift store are antique, but if you find a button that is clearly not made from plastic, you could contact the National Button Society for their expertise [<http://www.nationalbuttonociety.org/>]. Some examples of vintage buttons are:

- Bakelite and Lucite buttons which were considered to be the first plastic products
- Perfume buttons which had a velvet backing where Victorian ladies could put perfume that was too irritating to apply directly to their skin – also Civil War soldiers took them into battle to remember their loved ones
- Buttons with political messages, such as those which were made for Washington's first inauguration

Another type of button craft that I find interesting is making handmade buttons. These are sometimes called thread buttons or Dorset buttons. Some people make these buttons for re-enactments and other historical costumes [<https://youtu.be/hNOXLVvfyMY>]. There are intricate tutorials for how to make your own thread buttons using ordinary embroidery thread [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC2ko3-B-QI>].

- Vintage Button Expert Martha Welch - <https://www.facebook.com/Vintage-Button-Jewelry-by-Martha-L-Welch-155976344455340/> or <https://www.etsy.com/shop/VtButtonJewelry>

In terms of reusing buttons these days, many people have been sewing them to headbands or hats so you can hook your mask around the button instead of your ears. This is especially helpful for people who are sensitive about having the elastic around their ears, such as people with autism or people who have to wear a lot of protective gear for many hours. Another way people reuse buttons is to sew them on to padded hangers to keep dresses and tank tops from sliding off on to the floor.

Thank You for Listening!

Thank you for listening! If you have made something cool from recycled buttons or you have seen art made from recycled buttons, please let me know at trashmagination@gmail.com Until next time, may you see buttons as a source of art in your life!