



Trashmagination Podcast #59 – Bicycle Parts

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

This week's episode is about creative reuse of bicycle parts. National Car Free Day is September 22, so maybe you can celebrate that day by making art from bicycle parts! We'll give the word "upcycle" a whole new meaning!

I first experimented with making art from bicycle parts in high school. I found a bucket filled with loose bicycle parts at a thrift store and I loved the diversity of shapes. I didn't have access to welding tools or tutorials, so I decided to knit a sculpture incorporating bicycle parts. This did not work because I was not that great at knitting, and the yarn I was using did not hold the heavy bicycle parts well.

I was curious to see if other artists had the same idea but no luck. However I did find many artists who love to combine bicycles and knitting. An inventor named George Barratt-Jones invented the Cyclo Knitter, which is a system that allows you to knit a scarf in five minutes by pedaling on a bike [<https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2018/06/cyclo-knitter-a-bicycle-based-machine-that-knits-a-scarf-in-five-minutes/>]. He came up with the idea as a way to keep warm while waiting for the train.

A few years ago at a local Maker Faire, I met **Asma Chaudhary** [<https://asmachaudhary.carbonmade.com/>] – who is one of the most upbeat humans I ever met. She wraps many repurposed objects in bright colors of yarn. She wrapped a bicycle in yarn as well as a shopping cart, and attached them together. Asma makes pieces related to the word "home-maker." Her pieces are inspired by Bollywood as well as Indian and Pakistani handicrafts.

Betz White used her knitting machine to yarn bomb an entire bicycle, and now she displays it around town near me in Alexandria, Virginia [<https://www.instagram.com/p/BhgkPbIDfs0/>]. She also makes "pomdeliers" [POM-deh-leers] which are like chandeliers with pompoms hanging down. She uses wooden quilt hoops to make those but you could make some with recycled bicycle rims [<https://www.instagram.com/p/Biz3uLBhrmb/>]!

This is starting to sound like an episode on knitting, which will be a great future topic, so let's get back to bicycles!

Many artists have incorporated bicycle parts into their work [<http://www.artnews.com/2013/07/18/art-museums-embrace-bicycles/>]. The bicycle is a symbol of the every-day person living a regular life. It was part of a sculpture by Marcel Duchamp to challenge the meaning of art [<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81631>]. So I hope by the end of this episode, you might consider bicycles to be your newest art inspiration!

Where to Bring Functional Bicycles

First let's talk about what to do with functional bicycles. Options will be region-specific, here are three types of organizations you can research near you.

- If you want **someone to come get the bike**, there are national organizations like Vietnam Veterans of America [<https://pickupplease.org/donate-bikes-bicycles/>].
- Other organizations schedule **bicycle pick-ups around the community** such as Bikes for the World [<https://www.bikesfortheworld.org/donate-a-bike>].

- I am a big fan of organizations who **train youth mechanics as a community service project**, such as Phoenix Bikes in Arlington, Virginia [<http://www.phoenixbikes.org/get-involved/donate-a-bike/>] or Gearin' Up in Washington DC [<http://gearinupbicycles.org/how-to-give/>].

Some organizations ask for a monetary donation with your bicycle so they can use that money to fix up bikes that need a tune-up, which I think is totally fair. But what can you do with a bicycle that is too far gone for riding? When I started to research this part of the podcast, it reminded me of when I was in elementary school learning about how different native peoples in the Plains regions would use every part of the buffalo. When it comes to creative reuse of bicycles, we're going to tackle ideas part-by-part, and hopefully use every single bit! The parts I'll tackle are:

- chains
- spokes
- rims
- gears
- brake cables
- handlebars
- pedals
- seats and
- frames.

I'm not going to talk about tires or inner tubes because I have a future episode planned on that topic.

Where to Find Bicycles to Creatively Reuse

You might have one or two bicycles to creatively reuse, but for many project ideas – you need a whole pile of bicycles. Where could you find them?

Last week, I was bringing items to my local waste transfer station. My miter saw finally gave out after 20 years of projects. I brought it to an area with a giant pile of twisted metal shapes. Many bicycles were sticking out, so I might start with my county if I was doing bicycle creative reuse. Another option might be a local bicycle store, where they might have bicycles that people bring in to fix but realize it's not worth it.

What to Make with Bicycle Chains

Bicycle chains can be sculpted into many shapes. For example, **John T. Benedict** arranges a bicycle chain in the shape of a seahorse, and then welds on other recycled metal bits to make an impressive sculpture [<https://www.instagram.com/damifiknow/>].

Carolina Fontoura Alzaga makes chandeliers from bicycle chains and rims that sell for thousands of dollars [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/facaro>]. I'll share a video showing her process, and she says the perfect Trashmagination quote. She says, "You can make beautiful things out of unlikely materials, and out of trash, because it's not trash. I mean it's trash because it no longer serves its original function, but that doesn't mean it can't have another function altogether. And that's where our creativity needs to come into place." Preach!

Young-Deok Seo welds bicycle chains into human forms [https://www.instagram.com/youngdeok_seo/]. Some of these are regular human size and some are much bigger – or sometimes it's just the face or head of a person. Many look like ancient Greek sculptures except instead of being carved in stone, they are made from chain.

These folks are doing next-level art with bicycle chains – but what is a beginner project? First you need to buy a tool called a chain breaker. This allows you to adjust the length of chain. These cost about \$12 US.

- **Bracelet** – The simplest idea involves cleaning the grease from the chain and then threading a cord through the holes of the chain components

- **Holiday ornament** – You can make a simple star or reindeer ornament from a bicycle chain [https://www.instructables.com/id/Make-Holiday-oranments-from-bicycle-chain/].

For most bicycle chain crafts, you need to do welding. In the show notes, I'll share a video that shows the basics [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8-Lg9Nm_h0]. This instructor notes that welding bicycle chain is messy because even when you degrease the chain, some remains inside, so you are welding oil which makes smoke. This needs to be done in a well-ventilated area. Something people love to make by welding bicycle chains are **signs in cursive script**, such as people's names or inspiring words, as well as keychains, mirror frames and candle holders.

What to Make with Bicycle Spokes

My favorite items made from bicycle spokes are bracelets, which involve twisting the spoke with a pair of needle nose pliers. One end of the spoke has a hook in it already. You twist the other end like a lasso and it clips on. You can add beads as well. Another craft that involves twisting spokes is Christmas ornaments in shapes like a tree or stocking [https://www.etsy.com/listing/117931150/bicycle-spoke-christmas-tree-ornaments] such as those by Jean Rubin of WinterWomanDesigns in New Hampshire [https://www.etsy.com/shop/Winterwomandesigns].

An artist named Steph at Re_cycle_on made a kalimba from bicycle spokes. A kalimba is a small handheld instrument. Here's how it sounded [https://www.instagram.com/p/BiAelwblhmJ/]

What to Make with Brake Cables

Brake cables are really thick cables with a colorful part at the end that looks like a small bead. Jewelry designers cut it into lengths and create necklaces and earrings. Check out the designs by Recycle & Bicycle - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Blllh2WHxuF/>.

Bicycle Pedals from Recycled Materials

We're talking about what to make from bicycle parts, but I did not find any projects that specifically use old pedals. However, I did learn about pedals made from recycled materials, including wood, leather and even a bioplastic made from 70% rice husks and 30% recycled plastic bottles [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wsyfpmjx5IE]. Let me know if you make something from pedals!

What to Make with Bicycle Rims

Now in terms of creative reuse of rims, check out my Bicycle Parts Pinterest board that I made [https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/bicycle-parts/]. I love the furniture designs by **Andy Gregg** who has a company called Bike Furniture in Marquette, Michigan [https://www.bikefurniture.com/].

- **Tree of Life sculpture from wire** - <https://www.hometalk.com/22686194/repurpose-a-bicycle-wheel-to-make-a-tree-of-life>
- **Tree of Life sculpture from t-shirt yarn** - <https://acraftymix.com/blog/2017/01/09/t-shirt-yarn/>
- **Wreath** – attach whatever items you want around the edge instead of using a bent metal hanger - <https://www.createcraftlove.com/metal-flower-bicycle-wheel-wreath/> - I will link to an example by Create, Craft, Love where they made the wreath from flowers created with recycled aluminum cans
- **A display for cards**, such as holiday cards – you attach the cards to the spokes with clothespins - <http://justimagine-ddoc.com/crafts/old-bike-wheels-reused/?pid=10255>
- **Pot rack** - <http://813fort.blogspot.com/2006/07/recycled-pot-rack.html>
- **Christmas tree** – If you have a bunch of bicycle rims in various sizes, you can make a Christmas tree by sliding the largest rim at the bottom a pole and then adding smaller and smaller rims to make a cone shape [https://www.instagram.com/p/iNL_x_kYF4/]. You wouldn't be the first to make a Christmas tree from bicycle parts. There have been a few giant Christmas trees made from bicycles around the world – and you can learn more about that in the podcast episode I did on making Christmas trees from recycled materials [https://trashmagination.com/christmas-trees-from-recycled-materials/].

- **Crocheted design in a round frame** – Anything that would look great in a round frame could go in a bicycle rim – I love crocheted items stretched in a bicycle rim such as the ones by Sophie at Un Rêve en Coton [<https://www.etsy.com/listing/626818526/decorative-bicycle-wheel>]. If you love to crochet, I found a pattern that allows you to crochet a piece to go over your back wheel as a skirt guard from the spokes [<https://www.etsy.com/listing/278190496/vintage-crochet-pattern-to-make-a-super>].
- **Stained glass spinner** – If you do stained glass, this is a fun project to attach triangles of color to the spokes for a garden decoration - <http://www.fleamarketgardening.org/2013/05/07/make-a-stained-glass-garden-spinner/>.

Speaking of your garden – there are ways to use bicycle rims to make structures for plants to climb – such as beans, sugar-snap peas or clematis.

- **Pole Trellis** where the rim is mounted on the top of the pole so the rim is laying flat, and strings hang down for the plants to climb - <http://www.suitedtotheseasons.com/2010/09/peas-and-raspberries.html> - The same structure can be used to build a small clothesline - <http://www.borganic.net/blog/?p=4495>.
- **Fence Trellis** - This involves attaching a series of bicycle rims artfully up a wooden fence. You can even wrap the wheels with lights so they become an outdoor decoration at night [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RqAV6YO2ts>].

For an ambitious garden project, you can build a dome or sphere from bicycle rims. You start by standing a circle of wheels in the ground and then attach them side by side with zip ties [<https://www.instructables.com/id/Bicycle-tire-dome/>]. Plants grow over the structure to make an enclosed room or it could be a greenhouse if you covered it with recycled plastic. There is an artist who lives in the Yukon Territory, Canada named Philippe LaBlond who makes spherical sculptures from bicycle rims [<https://www.yukon-news.com/business/bike-dome-rises-again/>].

What to Make with Bicycle Gears

Bicycle gears are so beautiful once you get all the grease off them. People make all kinds of wall hangings, wind chimes and clocks. The artist VeloGioielli makes giant suncatchers from bicycle rims and gears along with stained glass [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/VeloGioielli>].

There is a program here where I live in Virginia where people make giant letters of L-O-V-E, often from recycled materials. I plan on doing a podcast episode on that, but for now I'll mention a LOVE sign in Leesburg made from recycled bicycle gears designed by Mike Clay [<https://www.virginia.org/Listings/TheArts/LOVEworkinLeesburg/>].

What to Make with Bicycle Handle Bars, Seats and Frames

Picasso set the standard for the creative reuse of handle bars and seats when he made a sculpture that looked like a stylistic bull's head from these materials [<https://www.pablocicasso.org/bull-head.jsp>]. Many people have copied that idea to make home décor pieces to hang up your coat, hat or even your bicycle. They are presented as if it is an animal's head that has been mounted by a taxidermist. I found two companies who make these – one called Upcycles in the Netherlands (which they call the “Velodeer”) [<http://upcycles-wunschrad.de/shop/>] and one in San Diego called Upcyclist Art [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/UpCyclistArt>].

If you have ever looked at a bicycle seat (also called a “saddle”), you'll notice it has a wider section at the back and a thinner section at the front. I saw some cool benches made by lining up seats back to front. They look a bit lumpy, but definitely interesting!

On my Pinterest board, you'll find a lot of furniture and lamps made from bicycle handlebars, seats and frames [<https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/bicycle-parts/>].

What to Make with Whole Recycled Bicycles

I have a few inspiring stories about artists who make pieces using entire whole bicycles.

Tylur French made an arch in Memphis, Tennessee from 300 recycled bicycles, tricycles and wheelchairs [<http://www.memphisart.org/artwork/bicycle-gateway/>]. I wonder if this project could be emulated by other communities to celebrate the joy of bicycling.

Jarbas Lopes has made a series called Ciclovía aérea or “Aerial Bikeway” which involves weaving wicker structures around bicycles. I love how the wicker forms on the bicycle transform it so it almost doesn’t look like a bicycle, but then it is.

The most popular episode of Trashmagination so far was about recycled art contests [<https://trashmagination.com/recycled-art-contests/>]. In that episode I talked about a contest in Maryland where I met **David Clement from Jemicy Upper School**. He had welded bicycles together to make very unusually-shaped bicycles. He learned his welding skills as part of a program at his school where students participate in the Kinetic Sculpture Race, an annual event in Baltimore which involves human-powered works of art that travel on land and by water [<http://www.kineticbaltimore.com/>]. I have mentioned before that I am worried that many people are not learning how to manipulate materials in school today and I’m thrilled to learn about a high school with a welding program. Trends indicate we need more trained tradespeople.

Amazing Experiences on Bicycles

My goal is not only to help you make more stuff from bicycles, but to have more amazing experiences. Here are three examples of people designing experiences from bicycles.

The **Austin Bike Zoo** makes giant animals with bicycles as their base [<https://austinbikezoo.org/blog/>]. When my family attended the World Maker Faire in New York in 2013, we had the opportunity to ride some of their bicycle butterflies, which are bicycles with giant painted wings. They are beautiful to watch and beautiful to ride. It was actually a huge thrill to ride them. The Austin Bike Zoo has many other creatures too, such as an 80-foot long snake which moves because six cyclists work together which lights up at night. There is a praying mantis, a bat, an eagle, an owl and an armadillo. I really hope you will go check out the video in the show notes of the Austin Bike Zoo [<https://vimeo.com/251709628>].

The music composer **Steven Baber** composed a song called Bespoken made from sounds that he gathers from bicycles [<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2014/02/01/269457757/wheels-on-the-bike-go-round-and-round-to-make-music>]. The sounds are gears changing, whirring and braking. He also plays the spokes with a violin bow and drags a guitar pick on a rotating bicycle tire. Here’s a sample of the music. He said his goal for the project is for “more people to look at every day object with curiosity and wonder.” Sounds like Trashmagination, right?

Another music composer named **Merche Blasco** [MER-che] composed a song to be played with bicycle bells. She wore a helmet with different colored lights on it. A group of people would bike together and each would be assigned a color according to what note their bell made. When you saw the light flash that matched your bell, you rang your bell. The group biked along together playing a composition called “Blink” [<https://youtu.be/ZYJ6Flydob0>].

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear about your creative reuse projects at trashmagination@gmail.com. You can also send questions and ideas for future episodes. Be sure to share whatever inspired you in today’s podcast with your friends and family! Until next time – may you see bicycle parts as a source of art in your life!