



Trashmagination Podcast #60 – Chewing Gum and Gum Wrappers

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

This week's episode is about creative reuse of chewing gum and gum wrappers. September 30 is National Chewing Gum Day. And maybe the idea of creatively reusing chewing gum sounds disgusting – but it's actually just another type of plastic recycling because most chewing gum is made from plastic.

Throughout history, people chewed substances that were not plastic. Ancient Greeks chewed a resin from the Mastic tree, Mayans chewed a tree resin called chicle, and many native peoples chewed spruce gum. Around 1850, people started chewing paraffin wax, which is made from petroleum. Today, most chewing gum is made from a type of plastic called polyisobutylene, which is the same material as you find in bicycle inner tubes.

So now that you know chewing gum is made from plastic refined from petroleum, you also know that every piece of gum you ever chewed is not going anywhere fast. Imagine the trillions of plastic gum bits on the planet. That doesn't even begin to address the plastic packaging that came with the gum.

So big picture message – please stop chewing gum! But on a more positive note, let me tell you some cool stories about chewing gum. We'll talk about:

- a company that is making plastic from used chewing gum
- chewing gum options that are not plastic
- ways to creatively reuse chewing gum packaging
- artists who incorporate gum and gum packaging into their work

Companies Recycling Chewing Gum

When it comes to chewing gum recycling, the most exciting story is a company called Gumdrop [<http://gumdropltd.com/about/>]. British designer Anna Bullus decided she wanted to find a way to recycle chewing gum. She knew that it costs many municipal governments a lot of money to scrape chewing gum off sidewalks. If there was a better way to collect chewing gum, people would be less likely to drop it on the ground.

The first place she tested her idea was the University of Winchester. She designed a pink spherical container called a Gumdrop made from recycled chewing gum. She also ran an education program showing plastic cups made from recycled chewing gum. It takes 42 pieces of chewing gum to make a cup. The university noticed a drop in gum litter and is still running the Gumdrop program¹.

Anna went on to make sneakers or running shoes where the sole is made from recycled chewing gum [<http://www.gumshoe.amsterdam/>]. It's called GumShoe and the sole of these shoes is pink. It's the world's first shoe sole made from gum. The upper part of the shoe is made from leather. They currently cost more than \$200 a pair. The company is now also making rubber boots.

¹ https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-43198104?mc_cid=306bfd0ba2&mc_eid=f45c97936b

Some governments have been considering taxes for gum companies to address issues of gum litter, so those companies have been contributing to Anna's projects as well. To hear more about the project, check out the BBC podcast People Fixing the World in the episode from March 6, 2018 [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p060664z>].

Non-Plastic Chewing Gum Options

If you really love gum, but want to stop chewing plastic, here are some companies who make gum from chicle and who package their gum in plastic-free packaging:

- Glee Gum [<https://www.gleegum.com/>] – located in Rhode Island – some packaging is plastic (gum pouches) – they also sell Halloween-sized packages in cardboard
- Simply Gum [<https://www.simplygum.com/>] – located in New York City
- Chicza [<https://www.chiczausa.com/>] – located in Mexico – there is some foil in the packaging

How to Creatively Reuse Chewing Gum Packaging

Chewing gum wrappers have inspired a lot of artists.

Have you seen the commercial by Extra Gum that shows a romance over the years that is all about gum wrappers? [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLpDiIVX0W>] It's called "The Story of Sarah and Juan." It starts in high school, and after each encounter, Juan draws a little photo on a gum wrapper. We see their relationship progress through the years, and after each event – Juan draws art on a gum wrapper. The commercial ends with Sarah encountering an art gallery filled with all of Juan's gum wrapper art and he asks her to marry him. As a note, the music playing in the background is "Can't Help Falling in Love," which is my parents' love song. So you could follow Juan's idea and draw on your gum wrappers. Or here are a few other project ideas:

Make a dress or purse from folded chains

Maybe you have heard about people who have made prom dresses from gum or candy wrappers. They are using a technique that involves folding wrappers repeatedly and then slipping the pieces inside each other to make a chain. They sew a bunch of chains together to make a dress or purse. I'll share a few tutorial videos in the show notes. If you really love that technique, you could try to get a Guinness world record for longest gum wrapper chain, but you'll be competing against Gary Duschl (dushel) who like me lives in Virginia but grew up in Canada [<http://www.gumwrapper.com/>]. As of March 2018, his chain is more than 100,000 feet long or 19 miles long (that would be about 30 kilometers).

Make a coiled vase or bowl

There is another technique to make items from gum wrappers that doesn't involve making long chains, but instead involved rolling them in a long flat strip that you coil and glue [<http://savedbylovecreations.com/2011/07/recycled-paper-wall-art.html>].

- Gum wrapper vase - <http://savedbylovecreations.com/2011/09/candy-wrapper-magazine-page-vase.html>
- Gum wrapper bowl - <http://savedbylovecreations.com/2011/09/coiled-magazine-page-dish-with-lid.html>

Make collage art from the foil wrappers

Some artists make art pieces on a canvas using only the shiny foil gum wrappers. This involves tracing an image like a silhouette of a person or letters in a word and then gluing down the wrappers. For the smaller parts, they cut the wrappers but to fill in the background, they glue down the whole wrappers. An Etsy artist named Charlie DeCano (also known as Awkward Charlie) makes celebrity portraits using this method [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/AwkwardCharlie>]

For a tutorial - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qXRZoS8RzU>

Decoupage a pair of shoes

You can take a pair of ho-hum shoes and liven them up with gum wrappers by using a technique called decoupage to attach the wrappers. This could be the foil type of wrappers or even the branded kind for something more colorful [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr5ph6w4hm8>].

Decorate your fingernails

Some people take fingernail painting to the next level and decorate with many items, including foil gum wrappers. You can see a tutorial for how to do that in my show notes [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSu26Kzsmcl>]

Start a fire in an emergency

I was surprised to learn that you can make a quick firestarter with a battery and a foil gum wrapper. This only works with the foil gum wrappers and you have to cut it a specific way. It might be a good idea to put these items in your emergency kit [<https://youtu.be/ttPyIRAfHEQ>].

Artists Who Make Art with Chewing Gum & Packaging

Finally, I'll share stories about four artists who incorporate chewing gum or gum wrappers into their art.

Maurizio Savini sculpts chewing gum into large pink sculptures, mostly showing animals. However, Maurizio does not make his sculptures from chewed-up gum. He takes brand new sheets and softens them with a hair dryer. So his work could not really be described as creative reuse [<https://youtu.be/ml8V6itopljg>].

Sophia Matveeva makes portraits on canvas and she does chew all her gum. She also gets her friends and family to help chew the gum. The art pieces are beautiful, but again, I don't think they are great examples of creative reuse because she and her network are chewing the gum to make the art and so it's not a great example of creative reuse [<https://randommization.com/2013/03/01/portraits-made-from-chewed-pieces-of-gum/>]

The only chewing gum artist who I would describe as truly doing creative reuse is Ben Wilson. He lives in the United Kingdom and he travels around painting little pieces of art on gum that is stuck to sidewalks and streets. The final result looks like a colorful little sticker. He sets up shop on the ground beside a squished piece of gum. He then starts drawing and painting on the gum. When it's done, he applies a layer of varnish to protect the art. If you search on the hashtag #chewinggumart on Instagram, you will find hundreds of photos that people have taken of Ben making his art on the street. I will share a video in the show notes that shows him making a piece sped up so it takes only a minute [<https://youtu.be/FVkB5IHHJrc>]. When Ben was younger, police tried to charge him with a crime, but since he was painting trash and not actually defacing public property, there was no way to charge him. He has made more than 10,000 of these paintings all over the world, but mostly in his home neighborhood of Muswell Hill which is located in north London. He also makes other types of sculptures and paintings [<https://youtu.be/U7GoTJCzqvs>].

The last artist I'll mention is Luisa Caldwell who makes art from colorful recycled gum wrappers [<https://luisacaldwell.com/>]. She attaches them together in a giant quilt-like tapestry. Her most recent piece was shown in an outdoor festival in St. Petersburg, Russia.

And not to end on a note of disgustingness – but I thought you might email me about this if I didn't mention it. There is a wall in Seattle where people stick their chewed-up gum. It's called the Market Theater Gum Wall. It's considered to be a tourist attraction now because there is so much gum stuck on there. I think that sounds nasty.

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 chewing gum and gum wrappers as a source of art in your life!