

The Symbolism and Emotional Expression of Swansea Memorial Benches in Narrative Jewelry

1. Introduction

An outing in Swansea, England, led to a keen interest in memorial benches and the author's desire to create a unique intersection of public remembrance and personal expression through the use of this monumental and symbolic everyday object in jewellery making. The relationship between objects and personal narratives has become a rich and vibrant area of exploration in the field of contemporary art and design (Dudley, 2012). Contemporary jewellery, as an important branch of contemporary art and design, in exploring the narrative relationship between people and objects, has termed this genre of jewellery as narrative jewellery (Cunningham, 2007), where jewellery artists infuse personal stories and emotional experiences through the medium of wearable art, and by incorporating these objects into their jewellery, they are able to create a tactile and portable form of memory that can be worn and shared with others, allowing the wearer's personal narrative to persist in their lives. And by embedding elements of remembrance into personal objects, jewellery becomes more than just a decorative object, it becomes a vessel for intimate storytelling (Groenewald, 2015). The memorial benches explored in this paper are usually found in public spaces and the chairs are inscribed with names, dates, and personal inscriptions that become material markers of memory, passing, and tribute; such objects serve as heavy symbols of personal lives and experiences, reminders of lives and emotions that have passed (Stocking, 2022), and the authors do not intend for such heavy symbols to come across as mournful in the emotion they give to the viewer, downcast, but more to bring the view in front of the bench to the audience and form a hopeful and positive emotional attitude towards a better life.

In this study, a combination of practical and theoretical approaches will be used to develop a key framework for understanding how materials and symbols can be used to elicit emotional responses in jewellery. The practical component involves the creation of a series of jewellery pieces inspired by memorial benches, whilst the theoretical component explores the wider significance of personal objects in narrative art; how memorial benches can be transformed into symbols recognisable to the viewer within the jewellery making practice (Tilley, 2012); and explores how everyday objects, such as memorial benches dedicated to the dead, can be transformed into intimate, wearable art of deep emotional significance. At the same time, the relationship between practice and theory in this project is not merely contingent, but foundational. The creation of the jewellery is itself a process of exploring materials and emotions (Versteeg, 2016), in which the manipulation of materials and the incorporation of emotions reflect the author's in-depth reflection on the subject matter and, through the accompanying design report, articulate the theoretical underpinnings of the practice's work, establishing a clear link between

the process of creation of the Memorial Bench series of jewellery and the conceptual framework of a personal emotional narrative. In addition to exploring the symbolic and emotional dimensions of the Memorial Bench, this study aims to highlight the importance of practice-based enquiry within the field of art and design. As a medium, jewellery allows for an in-depth exploration of emotional and narrative potential, in which materials and techniques are as important as the concepts represented (Pitri, 2003). By combining the practical process of creating jewellery with theoretical discussions around memory, remembrance and emotional expression, this project contributes to the discussion of the role of art in processing and expressing personal experience.

The aim of this project is to explore how the symbol of the memorial bench can be incorporated into jewellery design to convey personal emotional expression. Through a process of material manipulation and design experimentation, this project aims to reveal how objects of public memory can be re-imagined as tools for personal narrative (De Nardi, 2019). The creation of these works will involve experimentation with formal, material and symbolic elements, breaking down the boundaries of traditional jewellery design and focusing on storytelling through materials that bridge the gap between personal memory and collective identity.

In summary, this study explores the emotional power of narrative jewellery by focusing on the symbol of the memorial bench as a metaphor for personal loss, memory and emotional expression. Incorporating this public symbol into a personal, wearable object provides a unique opportunity to explore how art can be both a personal and public reflection on memory. By combining practical creation with theoretical exploration, this study aims to contribute to the discussion of emotional narratives in contemporary jewellery design, offering new insights into how personal stories can be told through materials and forms. This approach not only highlights the importance of practice-based research in the arts, but also provides a meaningful pathway to engage with the common human experience of memory and monumentality through the intimate medium of jewellery.

2. Literature Reviews

This paper explores narrative jewellery as a medium for personal memory and emotion, deeply rooted in the broader context of jewellery's narrative function, objects and memory, and personal emotional expression. Over time, several art and design disciplines have examined how objects can serve as vehicles for storytelling and memory, contributing to an evolving dialogue about personal identity and social connection. This literature review draws on scholarship in the fields of narrative jewellery, monumental art and emotional expression in design to construct a theoretical framework for the significance of the memorial bench as a means of personal emotional expression in jewellery design.

Firstly, the evolution of narrative jewellery can be traced back to the Arts and Crafts

movement and the Bauhaus School, with designers such as William Morris and Marianne Brandt emphasising the importance of craftsmanship, storytelling and emotional resonance in design (Woodham, 1997). Their work has provided contemporary jewellery designers with new ways of experimenting with symbolic objects. Narrative jewellery, a branch of contemporary jewellery design that is a medium for artistic and personal expression, has developed significantly over the past century, gaining attention in the contemporary art world for its ability to convey complex stories and emotional pictures through wearable objects. Scholars such as Cunningham (2007), Cohn (2009) and Lignel (2015) have explored the ways in which narrative jewellery creates a deeply personal connection with both the wearer and the viewer through form, material and symbolism. Cunningham (2007) describes narrative jewellery as ‘a dialogue between creator, wearer and observer’. This in fact indicates that in narrative jewellery, the creator, wearer and observer are closely related to each other, and it is this characteristic that makes jewellery itself play an important role: the creator conveys emotions through the jewellery, the wearer receives emotions through the jewellery, and the audience perceives emotions through the jewellery. He also believes that narrative jewellery is about exploring big themes with small objects, making bold statements and asking valuable questions. Like poetry, it is an art of visual reproduction that condenses and distills ideas into a simplified form. What is interesting about the idea of analogising the narrative of jewellery to poetry is that it refers to the immediate visual component of jewellery - like a novel or a short, concise story - which opens up the narrative of jewellery from concepts and ideas to symbols. As mentioned earlier, the narrative of the jewellery is not only about the maker, but also creates a connection with the wearer and the viewer - in the act of wearing, a new narrative emerges. Each piece acts as a narrative relic, carrying multiple layers of meaning that are profoundly moving, albeit often invisible (Bolens, 2012). Yet narrative requires the viewer to have a deeper understanding of its meaning and content, which leads to the observation of a process of interpretation (Besten, 2006). This requires designers to value aesthetic and perceptual experiences based on materiality (Marjorie Schick, 2008) in the creative process, and as Pereira (2012) recounts, the creation of narrative jewellery requires perception to overcome stereotypical thinking and create innovative solutions.

Secondly, memorial benches are commemorative objects that play an important role in public space as materialised representations of memory and remembrance. Studies of memorial art, particularly those of James Young (2000), have focused on how memorial objects serve as cultural icons that represent individual and collective experiences of loss and nostalgia. And Doss (2008), who also argues for the nostalgic function of such objects, sees them not only as markers of grief, but also as public invitations for others to participate in the narratives of loss they represent. At this level, memorial benches are functional in their own right, both as chairs that can be used, and as mourning objects, and their placement in public space allows the public to use the benches and engage in acts of mourning at the same time, which fits with

Young's theory of 'memory landscapes': memorials Memorials exist in a network of social meanings, both shaping and being shaped by the communities they touch. Narrative jewellery also fits within this theory, as the jewellery itself has a wearable function, a decorative effect, and at the same time allows the wearer to generate emotions about the piece of jewellery, and research by scholars such as Véronique Pouillard (2011) has further pointed out that, although memorials are often found in public spaces, they often have a deeply personal significance. So it is that memorial benches are somehow at the intersection of the personal and the public, which makes them powerful symbols of the intersection of personal emotions and social narratives in narrative jewellery. Pouillard also explores the relationship between memory, place and object, arguing that the emotional resonance of memorials often transcends their surface contexts and creates a connection between the object of remembrance and the person who comes into contact with it. This intersection of personal and collective memory is a key theme in this study, where the memorial bench is both a symbol of personal loss and a vehicle for public reflection in wearable form. Pierre Nora (2008) explores the notion of 'memory places', where objects and spaces become the memory of collective memory. Nora argues that these objects often act as a focus for public remembrance and personal reflection. This idea has important implications for the use of memorial benches in jewellery design, where the bench as a symbol of public remembrance is transformed into a personal, wearable object. Similarly, Benedetti (2021) explores how public symbols are recontextualised in personal art forms. Her study of memory in contemporary craft notes that artists often use public images to explore deeply personal themes, creating a dialogue between the personal and the public. In this sense, the incorporation of the memorial bench into jewellery design not only personalises the public object, but also transforms it into a medium for personal emotional expression.

Finally, affective design theory emphasises how good design triggers specific emotional responses (Norman, 2005). Norman's framework of instinctive, behavioural and reflective design provides a useful lens for understanding how memorial objects, such as benches, can be incorporated into jewellery. His suggestion that objects are capable of triggering emotional responses on multiple levels - from immediate surface appeal to deeper reflective engagement - fits with the notion of narrative jewellery, whose emotional and symbolic value often transcends its aesthetic or functional value. In the field of jewellery, Roberta Bernabei (2017) develops Norman's ideas further, focusing on how jewellery can stimulate emotional responses through material choices and design narratives. She argues that emotionally driven jewellery often transcends traditional aesthetics or values and focuses more on the personal connection between the jewellery and the wearer. This connection is particularly important in the context of monumental jewellery, as objects are not just decorative, but also act as emotional carriers, uniting memory, grief and emotional reflection. Furthermore, Rebecca Ross's (2016) research in the field of affective design emphasises the role of personal experience in

shaping the emotional meaning of objects. Ross argues that objects that are strongly connected to personal narratives typically carry greater emotional weight than those that are mass-produced or unrelated to personal experience. In this sense, narrative jewellery creations that incorporate memorial benches allow the wearer to access a highly personalised emotional expression through a deep connection to their personal memories and cultural understanding.

3. Practical Work

This series of narrative jewellery pieces was inspired by a profound experience at Clyne Gardens. The setting was fairytale-like and serene, and I was drawn into the atmosphere upon first entering. What really struck me, however, were the many benches scattered throughout the gardens. These benches are engraved with words or metal plaques bearing the names of deceased people, and are a way for families to honour their loved ones. This emotional way of remembering inspires a deep respect in me. When I returned to this garden, I gazed at these memorial benches and felt as if the deceased had invited me to sit and share the beauty before me. This touch led me to explore the story behind these benches and discover that they are called memorial benches and are used by families to remember the deceased. As someone who had never experienced this type of remembrance before, I became intrigued. As a jewellery designer, I began to think about how I could respond to this shared emotion through my work. The benches in the park symbolise the family's tribute to the deceased, and through these benches, the deceased continues to share with visitors the places they loved most during their lifetime. As I sat on these benches, I felt a deep connection to these deceased people, as if they were sharing their final romance and warmth with me through the view in front of me.

This experience made me think about how to convey this warmth of memory and emotion to a wider audience through jewellery design. Through my work, I hope to make more people feel the preciousness of life and evoke their thoughts on the meaning of death. Through narrative jewellery, I aim to translate the emotions carried by these memorial benches into a wearable art form that establishes an emotional connection between the past and the present, between the living and the dead (Fareld, 2016). In turn, jewellery provides a unique form of personal narrative, with the materiality of the piece reflecting the emotional and psychological state of both creator and wearer (Marjorie Schick, 2008). Therefore, I also hope that the image of the memorial bench can serve as a vehicle for connecting my own personal emotions and memories, forming a narrative symbol.

Firstly, the memorial bench is one of the most central design elements in the whole jewellery piece. Therefore, in the early stage of the design process, I started to research the distribution, materials, appearance and environment of memorial benches in public places. I systematised the research process by taking photographs, recording text and making sketches. Key areas of research included Swansea's seafront and parks, such as Swansea Beach, Clyne Gardens and Parc Singleton Park,

which were chosen for their open spaces and natural environments, echoing the bench's symbolism of openness and sharing.

Through my research, I found that memorial benches in seashores and parks are usually set up along roads, with the seats facing open natural landscapes, an arrangement that not only facilitates passers-by to take a rest, but also symbolises the continued connection of the deceased with nature and people. The appearance of the benches varies from place to place, but generally remains consistent, especially in the choice of materials, which are mainly wood, metal and stone. There are some slight variations in the design of the benches from one era to another, but the basic functional design is generally retained. Inscriptions are an important feature of the design of the benches, usually engraved on metal plaques on the back of the bench or carved directly into the wooden surface, with basic information about the deceased and phrases of remembrance. In addition, some benches are flanked by flowers, further enhancing the emotional atmosphere of remembrance.

Through this research data, I summarised the design features of memorial benches and categorised two main types: with and without armrests. These observations provided a clear direction for my subsequent jewellery design, and I will be showcasing design elements from both types in my final work.

In terms of material selection, I decided to use brass as the main material for the jewellery. Brass is commonly used in monuments and sculptures, and its inherent historical and monumental qualities make it a symbolic choice (Orr, 2023). In addition, the texture and colour of brass makes it visually consistent with other commemorative objects, a material choice that evokes potential associations with commemorative objects for the viewer. However, in order to avoid the cold and shiny feeling associated with metallic materials, I abandoned the traditional polished finish in favour of a thermal oxidation process. This treatment creates a warm tonal change on the brass surface, adding visual warmth to the piece to express a positive, warm emotional attitude.

In terms of the landscape, another important element of the design, I initially envisaged fixing the photographs of the landscape on the metal surface through the metal corrosion process to convey a visual message. However, due to the weight of the jewellery and the comfort of wearing the jewellery, I eventually adjusted this plan and adopted the elements of flower windows in Chinese gardens instead. By distorting the original image, I formed a partially hollowed-out metal frame to hold the landscape photographs and fixed it with epoxy resin. This design not only reduces the weight of the jewellery, but also retains the visual narrative, successfully finding a balance between practicality and aesthetics.

In terms of emotional expression, my two final pieces establish a deep connection to memory and narrative in different ways. The first work uses the landscape in front of the memorial bench as a design element, and the memorial bench serves as a carrier of collective memory, allowing the work to connect with the viewer in mourning and

emotional resonance. By transforming public objects into cultural symbols (Schudson, 1989), I explored how jewellery as an art form can create narrative relationships, inviting the viewer to reflect on the meaning of life and death at the intersection of personal and social memory.

The second work is more personal, bringing together experiences from my life in Swansea, printing these memories as photographs and using the memorial bench as a vehicle for my personal memory. This work emphasises more on the connection between private memory and art making (Van, 2013), exploring the artist's self-narrative relationship with the work. In this way, I not only reflect on my own connection to the work, but also attempt to build a bridge between the viewer and the artwork across cultures and personal experiences, further deepening the expression of narrative jewellery.

In the final exhibition, I received a lot of feedback about the work, and a very interesting phenomenon was that viewers from Western backgrounds were able to easily understand the content and emotions I conveyed through the memorial benches. This is perhaps because memorial benches have become widespread in Western culture as symbols of public memory and mourning, and people have a deep emotional resonance with this form of remembrance. However, the Chinese garden window and flower elements in the work were not accurately interpreted by these viewers. This highlights the variability of cultural symbols across different cultural contexts (Chu, 2003) - Western audiences lacked the cultural background knowledge of flower and window designs in traditional Chinese architecture and therefore struggled to perceive their symbolism.

In contrast, viewers from Eastern backgrounds were more likely to interpret these flower window images. They were more familiar with the cultural background of the windows and were able to understand their function as a landscape viewer and a narrative space builder in Chinese gardens. This feedback made me aware of the importance of cultural symbols in cross-cultural communication, especially in designing narrative jewellery, and how to balance local culture and universal emotional expression in the context of globalisation.

Another area of reflection during the exhibition was the limitations of the format in which the works were displayed. Due to the small size of the jewellery, it is difficult for the audience to clearly see the specific details in the landscape photographs. I originally envisioned projecting the images onto the wall through a spotlight, creating a unique light and shadow effect to enhance the visual impact and sense of space. However, due to the opacity of the paper, the images could not be successfully projected, and in the end I had to display the images in the form of A2 posters. This is a pity, but it also provides new ideas for future iterations of the design. I plan to try using materials such as glass or enamel to enhance the light transmission of the images in my subsequent designs, in order to better realise the expressive effects of light and shadow, and to enhance the narrative and audience experience of the work.

4. Discussion

In the context of narrative jewellery and the use of public memorials as symbols, this project builds on the core ideas discussed in the literature review, particularly the research around memory, material culture and emotional expression. As Erika Doss' research on memorials points out, public monuments such as memorial benches serve as powerful symbols of individual and collective memory, effectively conveying feelings of mourning and remembrance. In this project, the memorial bench is transformed into a wearable narrative object that allows the viewer to reflect on the memory of the deceased through this everyday public object.

From a design perspective, the incorporation of the memorial bench into narrative jewellery design reflects the tendency of contemporary narrative jewellery to use objects that trigger personal memories (Landsberg, 2022). And discussions on affective design suggest that jewellery can evoke emotional resonance through a deep connection with the wearer's memories. In this project, the memorial bench serves as an emotional carrier, not only visually symbolic, but also guiding the audience to deep emotional reflection.

At the same time, the combination of the Chinese garden window design element further expands the dimension of cultural memory, echoing Rebecca Ross's research on design as a bridge between cultural and personal experience. This cross-cultural introduction of symbols gives a deeper cultural context to the narrative jewellery, but also exposes the impact of cultural differences on the interpretation of symbols (Blake, 2000), as seen in the previously mentioned reflection section, where the flower windows were understood differently by Western and Eastern audiences.

The relationship between the practical work and the report of this project is interdependent and complementary. In the practical section, the jewellery design based on the memorial bench is a materialisation and visual representation of the theoretical discussion, while the theoretical framework established in the literature review provides a deeper interpretation of the practical work. By transforming a public monument into a wearable art form, the work empowers the viewer with the opportunity for personalised reflection, which in turn deepens the connection between public memory and personal emotions (Joslyn, 1997). The report's exploration of the memorial bench as a symbol lays the groundwork for the practical component, allowing the work to move away from being merely a visual creation and become a medium for conveying emotions and stories. By combining theory and practice, this project demonstrates how narrative jewellery can go beyond its decorative function (Jessop, 2013) and become a vehicle for emotional expression and storytelling.

The creativity of this project is reflected in its unique combination of public monuments and narrative jewellery design. By combining public monuments with personal wearable objects, it explores how public objects from everyday life can be recontextualised in an intimate setting. This unique combination offers a new perspective on the possibilities of jewellery as a meeting point between public and

personal memory. This fusion not only demonstrates an ability to deeply understand material culture, but also challenges the traditional boundaries between public memory and private emotions. The originality of aesthetic choices, such as the use of oxidised brass and Chinese flower windows, not only lends a sense of history and warmth to the materials, but also fits in with the project's theme of reflecting on life and death, whilst demonstrating a deep consideration of how form, material and symbolism can work together to create complex emotional narratives. This attention to detail ensures that each piece is not just a work of art, but a medium that can stimulate thought and dialogue with the viewer. Further adding to the complexity of the work is the introduction of Chinese garden windows, which symbolise a cross-cultural approach to remembrance as the deceased and the living share a view through the landscape. Through these aesthetic choices, the project highlights the interplay of symbols and spaces of remembrance between cultures and individuals.

Looking ahead, there are several directions that the project can continue to explore and develop. One important direction is the further expansion of material choices. During the reflection process, it was mentioned that the limitations of the materials prevented the use of light and shadow effects to display design details. Future iterations of the design could explore the use of more transparent or translucent materials, such as glass or enamel, in order to achieve enhanced narrative effects through light and shadow. This would make the work more dynamic, with viewers experiencing different emotional levels of the work in different light.

Another direction to explore is how narrative elements can be further enhanced through digital technology. For example, the use of AR technology could allow the wearer to access more contextual information through the jewellery, further expanding Rebecca Ross' research on digital media and memory expression. Through such technological applications, narrative jewellery will gain a more interactive and participatory feel.

By introducing public monuments into narrative jewellery design, this project expands the function and meaning of jewellery, challenging the traditional notion of jewellery as merely decorative, and redefining it as a vehicle for personal and collective narratives. By incorporating elements of public memory, the project provides a new perspective on emotional design, demonstrating how everyday objects can carry deep emotional resonance. At the same time, the two different modes of narrative construction (collective and individual) open up new possibilities for the exploration of narrative jewellery in terms of expression. In addition, the project introduces a cross-cultural perspective, especially through the element of Chinese windows and flowers, demonstrating how different cultural practices can be integrated within the same design framework. This cross-cultural approach offers new ideas to existing academic research, demonstrating how art and design can build bridges between cultures by exploring universal emotional experiences such as mourning and remembrance.

From this project combining art, design, psychology and sociology, the project demonstrates how narrative jewellery can be a bridge across disciplines. The exploration of public memory in this paper touches on sociological themes, while the discussion of emotional design aspects is closely related to psychological research on mourning and memory, not only enriching the project itself, but also highlighting the potential of art and design in gaining a deeper understanding of the human experience (Lyll, 2011). The insights gained in the practical application have important implications in practical applications such as education, therapy and cultural criticism. In educational settings, projects can be used as case studies to help students understand how art and design can interact with themes such as memory and mourning. In the therapeutic field, narrative jewellery can be used as a tool to help individuals deal with loss (Gibson, 2008), providing a way to connect with emotions through personal memory. In addition, the project's focus on public memory can provide new ideas for cultural criticism, prompting reflection on the ways in which public spaces and objects shape collective histories and social emotions.

5. Conclusion

This project demonstrates the potential of narrative jewellery as a medium of personal and collective memory, creating a profoundly emotional experience by combining cultural symbols with emotional narratives. Using the memorial bench as a central element, the project successfully bridges the gap between public remembrance and private reflection, demonstrating how objects of everyday memory can be re-contextualised as wearable works of art. By drawing on the literature of affective design and material culture, the research further reinforces the idea that jewellery is not only decorative, but also serves as a vessel for carrying emotions and narratives.

The introduction of Chinese garden windows adds a cross-cultural dimension to the project, demonstrating how different cultural practices can enrich narrative jewellery. However, the design poses certain challenges in terms of audience interpretation, emphasising the importance of cultural context in cross-cultural design. The choice of materials, particularly the use of oxidised brass, demonstrates a careful design that balances emotional resonance through visual warmth and memorial symbols.

Looking forward, the project could further expand the interactive and narrative nature of the work by exploring new materials and techniques such as glass or augmented reality. Overall, the project contributes to the ongoing dialogue between art, design and memory studies, offering a new way of exploring mourning, remembrance and cultural memory through the intimate medium of jewellery. It highlights the intersection of art, psychology and sociology, demonstrating its potential for a wide range of applications in education, therapy and cultural criticism.

6.Reference

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