

Over Twenty Years of Making Upcycled Chandeliers

By Madeleine Boulesteix



I've been making chandeliers from reclaimed kitchen items for over twenty years.

I've always liked making things. If you like making things, generally you appreciate how things are made.. So it's very hard to throw a nice object away even if it has become redundant. The ideal thing is to give it a new lease of life somehow.

I started quite by chance after finding a bag of chandelier glass drops in some rubbish, at first I really didn't want to make a chandelier with them because I thought it too obvious, but after a while I hadn't done anything with them so then decided to make a chandelier for my own home.

I never considered anything other than working with existing objects, not just because I didn't have much money but also because I prefer to adapt things; it's a challenge and I like the immediacy of the transformation as well as not wanting to put any new objects in the world, that is I don't want to create a demand for new raw materials. I rather give an existing object new employment.

Design

I started looking for things to make a main structure for a chandelier with and in the late 1980s I was visiting a local scrap yard regularly with a sculptor friend and always scouring boot sales, charity shops and flea markets for any handsome, old metal objects.

I found that plenty of useful components already existed – mostly kitchen items; steamers, tart tins, pastry cutters, toast racks, tea strainers, jelly moulds, lots of circular things just the right scale that I could drill holes in and adapt pretty easily. There were plenty of them and it was as if they were just waiting for me to find and assemble them.

I liked the familiarity and jaunty characters of kitchen utensils but they weren't very useful in their traditional role. I'd never used a pastry cutter for pastry or a toast rack for toast. They seemed to have more potential, so I liberated them from their domestic duties by incorporating them in my chandeliers.

I found the crinkly shapes of the tart tins and pastry cutters really humorous and they were already decorative. A lot of these objects were fantastic because they do several jobs; for example; a tea strainer has holes in it; they allow me to thread wire through, the holes have a purpose but they also have a pattern and they let light through. So if I sit a tea-light in a glass pot in the tea strainer, the wax illuminates and the light comes through the holes.

I can't even remember deciding to use the glass teacups that have become my signature. I must just have been hunting for something to hold tea-light candles in that I could attach to stay upright and so the handles would be useful for this.

One of the things that drove me was the idea of making something apparently opulent out of objects of little worth, to transform the humble objects into a pastiche on luxury. I thought this would be fun and the principle was rooted in the punk movement of my early teens. I loved that the punk aesthetic questioned value; a bunch of safety pins make a brooch, an old metal kettle is a handbag, a big zip becomes a tie. Who's to say these are less beautiful than the orthodox versions? In my opinion they are much more beautiful because they are so full of spirit and spontaneity, you can relate to them and they poke fun.

When I started I actually thought I'd make asymmetric, dramatically shaped chandeliers in strong colours but what came out was alarmingly delicate and feminine! I realised that symmetry would balance - literally - and the glass colours I found were all gentle greens, salmon pinks etc. so rather than work against this I followed the thread. I also realised that a twist on a classical style worked really well. I never studied or looked at existing chandeliers I made a version of the shape I had in my minds eye.

I always wanted to make a lasting object, something that wouldn't look dated quickly and working with classical proportions and shapes made the chandeliers look antique at a glance but also comfortable aesthetically and not screaming at you loudly. I try not to be 'on trend' so as not to become 'off trend'!



Making

I took apart anything I'd made that I wasn't happy with and re-used the components as these had value to me, not just in themselves but the time that went into collecting them. They're joined in such a way that I can do this. I don't like things that are permanently fixed I prefer to work with my components a bit like Meccano; it keeps your options open and allows for tweaking design. It also allowed me to recycle all my early work. I also don't really like glue, it's too brittle – I use a minimum of glass bond.

My ways of joining are really simple using wire and chain links and little nuts and bolts, I can re-use all of it – so I like to think that after the hurricane destroys a chandelier you can use the cups to drink from.

I also have a minimum intervention policy; drilling holes in the objects is about the most I do to them. I like them to retain their character, if not I may as well be designing something new from scratch.

I think it's important with re-using to make the new object a lasting one. I always wanted to go further than just bunging a load of objects together and going "Hey look how wacky I am". I hate that sort of stuff. I wanted to make something much more sophisticated aesthetically, where the combining of objects, colours and shapes are integrated and look like they belong together.



Influences

The chandeliers also grew out of a lifestyle of not having much money and not wasting. I inherited wartime and post-war thrift from my parents and we had very little to spare or waste growing up in the 60s and 70s.

I lived for 30 years in a self-managing housing co-operative in a Victorian mansion block in central Brixton, south London. It was a completely DIY existence. We all furnished our flats from furniture found in skips; for many years the pickings were good.

Having been evicted in 2014 I realise what a huge influence the now rare lifestyle and the building were on my work; the faded grandeur, style and proportions of the building, the freedom to put lots of hooks in the ceiling and set up studio, the quirkiness and individuality in the way we lived and having to be practical in finding cheap solutions to maintenance etc.

Evolution

Today upcycling is everywhere and everyone is sitting on an upturned crate and has made a lamp out of another object but the really impressive stuff is where the potential is pushed much further with a lot of imagination and inspiration. That's what I always aspired to.

A big difference between when I started and now is the demand for all things "vintage", the word used to be for cars and wine only and the stuff we loved was just called second hand and generally that meant it was considered less desirable.

Nobody wanted the metal pastry cutters I used to find at car boot sales, they were filthy, smelly and still had pastry on them, but now the objects I use are collectible and called kitchenalia.

I've gradually been introducing different items into my work. Both because some of the things I work with are now harder to find and pricier, but also to move forward. I recently incorporated bits of old clay pipe found mudlarking on the Thames beaches also pearl and plastic buttons and old ceramic electrical accessories.

I could never justify producing a new object from scratch, partly because I'm too impatient to delegate to a fabricator and want to get stuck in and see results quickly but also because I don't want to contribute to the abundance of stuff already in the world.

