



A stitch in time

With a love of both the artistic and the practical, Judith Brown has founded a jewellery business with a simple embroidery stitch at its heart

With a slew of design shows, the launch of a new range and a fresh collaboration with Jennifer Collier, it's been a busy 18 months for Judith Brown, the founder and namesake of Judith Brown Jewellery. 'At the beginning of last year, I made a conscious decision that I needed to be more proactive, certainly about marketing,' she says. The result, she says, has been months of hectic activity.

A large part of the business is attending craft fairs, which are scattered around the country. Then there are the trade shows where she meets commercial buyers. Add to this, orders from the British Museum and more recently the V&A, and the days can be very long. It's no wonder she says she's 'trying to hold back a bit this year'.

But the real reason that Judith Brown is so busy is not simply the result of marketing but the appeal of her jewellery to women who adore the individuality of her pieces. Her most popular range is Vintage Noir – an intriguing collection of ornate wire jewellery with a dramatic hint of Victoriana. But there's also a surprise twist – a central part of the design is a humble hook and eye, the ordinary, utilitarian type our mothers would be familiar with. 'Most people don't recognise what they're made from,' says Judith. 'I usually put out cards of hooks and eyes and then they realise. Once they're wearing it, people find the jewellery a good talking point.'

Vintage Noir is just one of several collections that Judith creates by hand. Each is sold under its own name. She shows me a beautiful carved pearl button about the size of a 50 pence-piece that will likely become part of her Vintage Mother of Pearl collection. These pieces are made with pearl buttons that are up a century old, and are finished with mother of pearl bead drops and silver wire.

The Vintage Petite collection is similar but is fashioned from smaller buttons. The Vintage Lace collection is created around handmade lace and there are also the Contemporary Colour and Contemporary Black collections. But it was the mother of pearl buttons that started it all off says Judith. 'Literally – it was to do with my mother's button tin. There was a really pretty button and I remember looking at it thinking what shall I do with it? Can I make something with it? Can I bear to part with it?'

As well as elegance and a magpie eye for translating vintage objects into stunning jewellery, the factor that unites these collections is their construction, which is based on the adaption of a simple embroidery stitch: 'I use buttonhole or blanket stitch using wire to create each piece.'



Opposite: *Alessandra* necklace. From top: *Lorena* earrings with drops; *Tiny Lorena* long earrings (left). All from the Vintage Noir collection



Above: Judith with her jewellery at a recent craft event
 Right: Jewellery by Judith Brown and presentation boxes by Jennifer Collier

Opposite, top row:
Vintage Fiori Wire Bouquet with ribbons

Middle, from left: *Vintage Round Button Hairband; Pierced Button Pendant; Vintage Button Bracelet*

Below: *Vintage Button Necklace and Vintage Buckle Cuff*. All from the *Vintage Mother of Pearl* collection



www.judithbrownjewellery.co.uk

Rather than threading the wire through a needle, Judith uses her fingers to make each stitch. 'I take a length of wire you could sew with and begin as if I'm sewing. I make a couple of twists around [the eyelet in this case] and then it's just literally buttonhole stitch back on itself. A lot of people think it's crochet or knitting; it's rare that somebody will know what it is. Although I don't tend to use the word embroidery, I describe what I do as 'hand stitched wire jewellery' – that's because the hand stitching element is really important.'

While the description might sound simple, the final pieces are highly polished and she is busier than ever. The walls of her office are adorned with price lists, and boxes of antique buttons, samples of Irish lace and haberdashery are stacked around the room. Propped up in a corner, there's an ornate picture frame with a selection of vintage press-studs cards, hooks and eyes, buttons and other ephemera, the kind that has inspired the journey to where she is today.

Judith Brown Jewellery might be established now but Judith

says 'it grew organically'. Growing up she says there were 'always bits of fabric lying around'. Her mother taught her to sew, first by hand and later using a sewing machine. Her family, she says, was practical rather than arty, her grandfather a signwriter and her father, now retired, a gardener at Ness Botanical Gardens on the Wirral, where Judith still lives.

Growing up in the '70s – 'when people made things' – had an impact on the young Judith. 'At secondary school I would get clothes and think how do I copy that?' After dismissing studying jewellery for her degree ('I went off to look at the jewellery course at Birmingham and they were all sitting there drawing. That doesn't work for me.') she settled on embroidery at Manchester.

It was there that she learned the technique she uses today. 'We did a workshop with Anne Morrell, which was called 'stitching without fabric' exploring buttonhole stitch. I kept my sample book and I remembered the technique.'

After graduation, Judith moved to Sicily, teaching English as





Far left: The button tin belonging to Judith's mother that inspired it all

Above: A selection of Judith's *Vintage Button and Buckle Brooches*

Left: Examples from the *Vintage Button Ring* range

Opposite, far right: *Chiara* earrings from the *Vintage Lace* collection and *Double Carved Button Pendant* from the *Vintage Petite* collection



EVENTS

You can see Judith Brown Jewellery in 'Found' at Unit Twelve, Staffordshire from 2 August-27 October; 'Brocade & Beyond' at the Beetroot Tree, Derbyshire from 15 September-28 October and at Made By Hand at Tredegar House, South Wales from 30 November-2 December

marketing, to building a website. 'Since October people have been able to buy from me direct: it's going really well.'

It takes a lot of hard work to build a business but even more determination to remain the creative beating heart of your own venture. 'I've been making the Vintage Noir collection for about two years and it's definitely the most popular collection but I'm

trying to move things on. 'I'm really pleased that Jennifer Collier suggested working together. She's making presentation boxes from the display cards that have had the hooks and eyes removed. The idea is to create a range that is more high-end. We don't know exactly where it's going but it's good because it's made me come up with some new ideas.'

Judith shows me a large black necklace, along with bracelets and earrings she prototyped a week earlier. 'There's probably going to be about four new pieces, plus the boxes. I've got ideas ticking over but you can be kicking ideas around for months before you have time to do anything about it.'

Whilst a large part of Judith's focus is making the business work, there is also a real story at the heart of her products. Drawing from her experiences, her jewellery is a marriage of the practical and the artistic, of nostalgia and modernity, of timelessness and individuality.

'I mentioned my Mum's button tin as a starting point, and I suppose the forgotten button tin or sewing drawer represents many things to me. A generation or generations of women who sewed and made things for themselves or for their families out of necessity or love, who carefully cut off the buttons and saved them to recycle them in the times of make do and mend, or who saved something from a favourite dress or coat to remind themselves of a special time. I really like to think that those women would be pleased that their forgotten work or sewing drawer was being recycled into jewellery.' We can't help but think that they would be. ●

Jo Hall

a foreign language, staying for five years. Returning to England in 2002, she considered what to do next. Turning to the internet, she stumbled across a range of coloured wires and placed an order. During the sixth form, she had made jewellery and sold it to friends and family as a hobby and thought she'd try it again. 'It's a product I could sell. I hadn't done any research into the market but I started with a craft fair.'

The first designs were simpler and the stitching much looser but early sales suggested there was potential. 'Craft fairs are a good vehicle. You can see what people buy and get a bit of feedback. Looking back I think I learned as I went along – what people liked, how to display my work – all through doing lots of small events.'

Today as a one-woman enterprise Judith has a hand in every aspect of the business, from sourcing materials and