

THE TOOL BELT

A Masculine Jewellery Practice

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Jewellery + Corpus
Master, Essay
Spring 2014
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ABSTRACT

This essay is built upon the argument that the tool belt is a piece of jewellery and it investigates where and how the tool belt affects social dynamics in society. It explores the intersections between equipment, accessory, and adornment; where practical and social functionality coexist in a symbiosis.

The text adopts a critical gender perspective on jewellery and masculinity; it examines the strategies employed in masculine environments in order to be able to wear jewellery without the risk of feminization. It describes a process of myth creation, surrounding an idealised masculinity built upon rationality and resourcefulness, glorifying the professional construction worker.

Acknowledging the tool belt as a piece of jewellery diversifies and enriches the jewellery field. It also expands the perspective on jewellery and masculinity, while opening up for further investigation of the relationship between adornment and gender dynamics.

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JEWELLERY IN SOCIETY

One of the key reasons jewellery forms a fundamental part of society is the role such adornments play as an alternative communication medium alongside language and writing. In many societies, personal ornaments act as an individual, social or ethnic marker, conveying information about the status of the individual visually. From their jewellery, an individual's life story can be read.¹

This quote is from Talya Underwood, a MPhil student in Human Evolutionary Studies at Pembroke College; it shows the importance of jewellery in human cultures from an anthropological viewpoint. The author describes jewellery as a *social marker*, pointing out jewellery's strong influence on how people are recognised as individuals in society.

In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, jewellery is defined as “*objects of personal adornment*”, which “*during much of its history has been worn as a sign of social rank, and as a talisman to avert evil or bring good luck*”².

So, jewellery is a type of personal adornment; people *adorn* their bodies with jewellery. The act of adorning is commonly connected with making something or someone beautiful or attractive³; but that is just one aspect of the powerful social agencies of these adornments. Jewellery signifies social positions of individuals in society, and plays an active role in structuring social hierarchies.

Marian Unger – a PhD in art history and an important figure within the field of contemporary jewellery – writes that people first and foremost use body adornment to establish a social position relating to others, to build up a sense of belonging; to set oneself apart from others, and distance yourself from a group by stressing your own position is affordable only after this belonging is established⁴. She argues that jewellery is not only used to structure individuals vertically – in hierarchies – but also used to structure social life in a personal and horizontal plane.

All the sources above describe how jewellery is used for social positioning within groups, and how this often involves hierarchies. These hierarchies are built around various biological, cultural and social categories of people. Jewellery is, and has been throughout history, deeply involved in the construction and maintenance of gender and class differences; this becomes clear when reading *Gender and Jewelry* by Rebecca Ross Russell. In her book the author writes that jewellery is inescapably political and how far it is from an arbitrary aesthetic expression. She describes how jewellery plays a big part in the construction of gender and power dynamics in society; how jewellery can be seen as a method of socialization – one of many methods used to inculcate difference, in status and in self perception⁵. The wearing of jewellery is not only affected by gender normative structures, it is an agent active in their maintenance.

This essay will build on this research about the social agency of jewellery, and investigate the relationship between jewellery and masculinity.

¹ Underwood, 2011, p. 18

² Encyclopaedia Britannica, jewelry 2013

³ Merriam-Webster, 2013

⁴ Unger, 2011, p. 312

⁵ Russell, 2010, p. 4

Jewellery and Masculinity

Jewelry usages, like those of other forms of dress, develop in large part to construct appropriate gender expression in each generation, and jewelry denoting honor and status represents society's positive reinforcement for conforming.⁶

From the viewpoint of anthropology and art history⁷, jewellery is often seen as a feminine practice. Marjan Unger criticises this attitude, and believes that many art historians are ignorant when stating that jewellery principally is meant for women only. She gives examples of how many powerful historical rulers *wore more prestigious jewellery than their womenfolk*, and that men in fact always have worn jewellery, mostly for the same reasons as women⁸.

Rebecca Ross Russell paints a more complex picture of the difference in how jewellery is – and has been – worn by men and women. She describes how men wearing jewellery in many cases only can do so when they are positioned far up in patriarchal power hierarchies. Only then can they adorn themselves without the risk of being seen as feminine. This acts as a declaration of being powerful beyond the risk of feminization. Russell criticises the belief that men wearing jewellery have subversive values, and that it is a force against the gender normativity in society. She writes that “*there is still a long way to go before ornamentation can be presented to men without being heavily gendered to contrast the unacceptable taint of feminization*”⁹.



Fig. 1: Emperor Franz I of Austria in his Coronation Robes, painted by Friedrich von Amerling 1832.



Fig. 2: Laurence Tureaud aka Mr. T, wearing large amounts of golden jewellery and flexing his biceps.

⁶ Russell, 2010, p. 12

⁷ Russell, 2010, p. 2

⁸ Unger, 2011, p. 310

⁹ Russell, 2010, p. 52

THE TOOL BELT AND ITS MYTHOLOGY

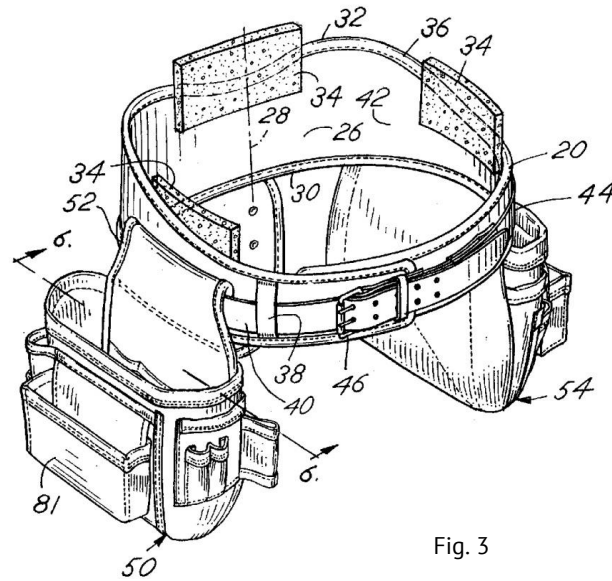


Fig. 3

A tool belt is a belt worn around the waist, retaining pockets and loops made to contain tools and equipment. Tool belts are worn in many professional trades and other activities, and are typically used to transport and maintain tools and material used at a worksite¹⁰. These belts are often made out of leather or strong textiles, with metal parts and rivets where extra strength is needed.

Construction workers and carpenters in many countries wear tool belts at work, as well as electricians, gardeners, hair dressers and many other professionals that are mobile in their working patterns. The belts are also widely used by non-professionals, in various DIY-practices and hobbies.

The tool belt is an object imbedded in various contexts surrounding labour and professionalism. In the case of construction workers and carpenters, the tool belt and its accompanying tools are of great importance for many individuals. Among construction trades in the United States you can find examples where it is seen as mandatory to wear a tool belt at work¹¹. One apparent reason for this is to prevent workers from spending unnecessary time going after tools and equipment¹²



Fig. 4:

Wearing a tool bag for me equates to being efficient and methodical. It means having the necessary tools on my person to complete the task.

-Robert Rubillard, Pro Tool Review Magazine¹²

¹⁰ Godshaw & Rednitz, 2002

¹¹ Andrews, 2011

¹² Rubillard, 2013



Fig. 5: Ironworkers erecting the steel frame of a new building, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, USA. Photo taken 2006



Fig. 6: A carpenter wearing a tool belt from Occidental Leather, one of the most renowned tool belt producers in the US.



Fig. 7: Two iron workers wearing tool belts, while working at considerable height without fall protection equipment.

It is obvious that within many trades, the tool belt is a vital piece of equipment. The practicality of not having to go after tools is a legitimate explanation for using it, but there are other reasons why the tool belt is so important; this accessory is a vital part in the construction of a labour culture. The tool belt acts as a uniform, communicating values like professionalism and resourcefulness. It also seems to direct the worker towards the labour she/he is intended to be engaged in; to motivate and guide individuals into their role as professionals. This post from an online forum¹³ illustrates this motivational functionality:

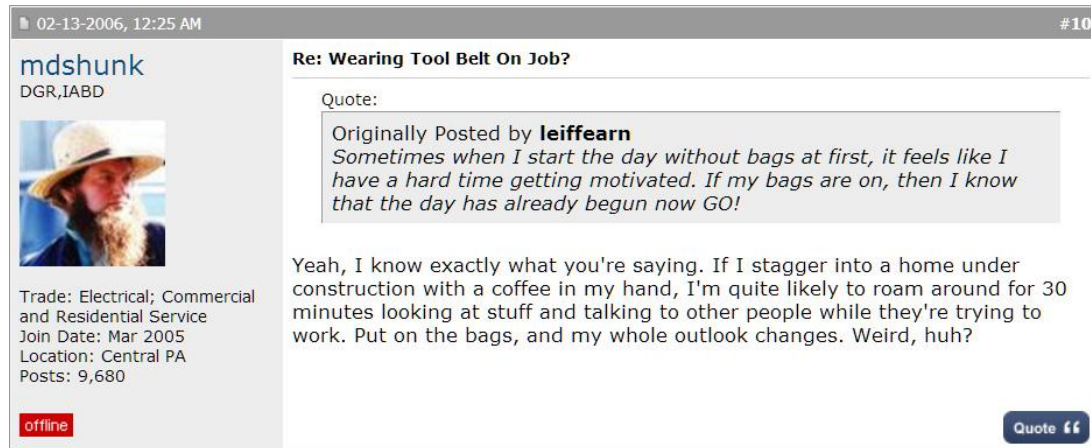


Fig. 8

Many of the construction trades where tool belts are used have a strong male dominance. In 1995, 2.3% of the construction workers in the US were women¹⁴, and the situation was similar in Sweden in 2006, where 97% of construction workers were men¹⁵. In these contexts – and many others – the tool belt and its tools have strong connections to masculinity.

The construction worker's tool belt is in my view a participant in the construction and maintenance of a mythology¹⁶ around an idealised masculinity, where abilities such as handiness and resourcefulness are being glorified. This mythology is created by giving new cultural meaning to the tool belt and its tools, a meaning that has connections to their practical functionality, but that surpasses them and gives them new functionalities. The tool belt becomes a symbol of male practical knowledge and skill, with connections to a wide spread theme in patriarchal ideology that men are rational while women are emotional¹⁷. This mythology of masculinity is hegemonic; it depends on the construction of a gender hierarchy to function.



Fig. 9:

This boy is wearing a tool belt his mother has made for him. He is posing for the camera with toy tools in his hands. The print on his t-shirt reads "MY DAD IS THE MAN", and has an illustration of a wrench.

By serving the boy with these accessories, he is being guided into a social position connected to his gender; this is a good example of the mythology of masculinity in action.

¹³ Ryan313, 2013

¹⁴ Sugerman, 1999, p. 3

¹⁵ Hedström, 2011, p. 17

¹⁶ Barthes, 2012

¹⁷ Connell, 2005, p. 164

The work sites of the professional construction trades could be where the mythology of the tool belt is the most active/evident. The website *contractorstalk.com* is an online networking forum for construction workers, and it is filled with intense discussions between these individuals. The forum has a big amount of threads concerning tool belts (or tool pouches, tool bags or simply bags – they carry many names). The threads have headings like “What tools are in your tool belt?”, “What Type Of Tool Belt/bags Do You Wear?” and “Any One Got Any Pictures Of You'r Tool Bags”. These discussions show how passionate these individuals are about their tool belts, and how important they are in their work.

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Construction tool belts are also widely used by non professionals, in various DIY-activities and hobbies. They are used when something broken needs to be fixed, or during home renovations. The mythology of masculinity is very present also in these activities.

These activities are sharply described by Karin Erhnberger, a Swedish designer and researcher, in a section from her master thesis about design and gender:

“The hand tools on the market are the extended arm of the man. Their design is not only meant to attract the man, but to also enhance his manliness. The so called targeted measures in the home, i.e. the occasions when something has to be repaired, fixed, or mounted, is to a predominate extent done by the man. This becomes something like a male ritual with male essence.”¹⁸



Fig. 12

The shape of the construction tool belt and its tools are often used as a symbol for this handiness-culture, without actually having a practical function; this can be seen for instance, in costumes and toys for children. These versions of tool belts are idealizing the construction worker, and they play an active part in the creation and maintenance of this mythology.

Fig. 13:

This is a DIY tool belt costume, sold at spirithalloween.com. This is their text about the article:

“Men at work are a sight to behold. Make it work for you when you create or complete your costume with this authentic looking tool belt. We provide the tools - it's up to you to know how to use them.”



¹⁸ Erhnberger, 2006, p. 37



Fig. 14: The tools in this belt are stripped from their original practical functionality, and uses it only as a reference. The child can imagine that the saw can saw, but it lacks the ability to actually saw. When these children grow up, they can use real tools, until then, they are given representations to train with.



Fig. 15: This infant is too young even to play with the tools on the belt, so the belt is clearly symbolic. The function of this particular belt could be to guide the surrounding adults in their attitude towards this infant.

The usage of construction tool belts in media is in many ways similar; in TV shows like *Home Crashers* the tool belt is used as theatre props to build a handiness-credibility around the characters. Even though these tool belts are fully functional carpenter tool belts they seem to not be used for almost any practical work, but rather function more as parts of a costume than as practical tools.



Fig. 16: This is Josh Temple, an actor and a TV personality. He has been the host of *Home Crashers*, *Ultimate Treehouse*, and *Dude Room*.

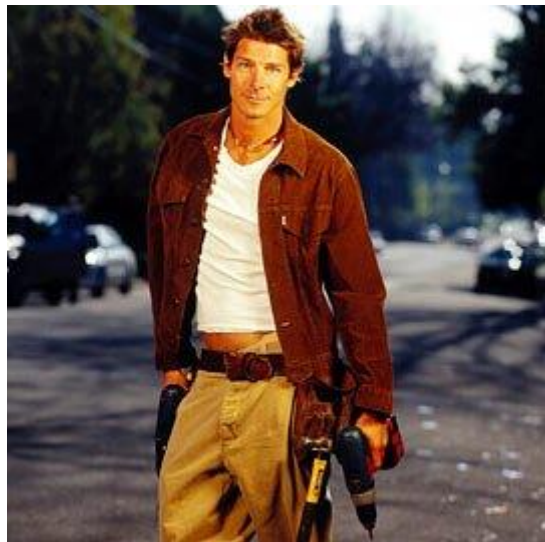


Fig. 17: This is Ty Pennington, a TV personality in the US. He has been the host of the show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. He worked part time as a carpenter earlier in life, and has had a career as a model.

The Tool Belt – A Piece of Jewellery

There is no questioning that practical functionality is an important feature of the tool belt, but – as described in the previous chapter – this accessory also has other functionalities. The tool belt practice/phenomenon is a method of socialization, with the function of positioning the wearer in a social hierarchy. The tool belt shapes the bodily self perception of its wearer. It uses symbolism to give values to its wearer, and acts as a body oriented communication medium between people. My conclusion is that this phenomenon is a vibrant practice of body adornment, loaded with cultural, social and political meaning: it is jewellery.

If the tool belt is an object of personal adornment, a piece of jewellery, how does the wearing of construction worker's tool belts relate to other jewellery? The act of adornment is, as written earlier, often described as very feminine and here is a piece of jewellery actively involved in the mythopoesis of masculinity. How does this masculine jewellery practice relate to traditional masculine jewellery? Are these wearers also in such high positions in patriarchal hierarchies that they are powerful beyond the risk of feminization?

One clear difference between the tool belt and many other kinds of jewellery, is in its materiality and in how it is made. Jewellery is commonly associated with precious metals and stones, and made by goldsmiths; the tool belts are made out of leather or textiles, and their making is more connected to leather craft and bag making than to other kinds of jewellery.

The wrist watch is – just as the tool belt – a practical tool worn on the body. The watch is also an instrument of control and measurement, just like the try square or the measure tape. Still, the wrist watch is often categorised as a piece of jewellery¹⁹. The reason for this might be that many watches are made with goldsmith techniques and in precious metals and precious stones.

The watch is only one example of practical utensils typically categorised as male jewellery; the cufflink holds the cuffs of the shirt together, and the tie pin holds the neck tie in place. Is practical functionality another method for masculine individuals to avoid feminization when using adornment?



Fig. 18





Fig. 19

¹⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013

On the website *artofmanliness.com* – a site with connections to the mythopoetic men's movement²⁰ – there is a man's guide to wearing jewellery. This guide shows examples of this male anxiety of feminization that Rebecca R. Russell described earlier. Antonio Centeno, the author of this guide, writes that "*precious stones need to be kept to a minimum. They're like purses – no matter how egalitarian you want to get about it, they're still feminine to most.*"²¹ Centeno's advice to men wearing jewellery at work is to "*not rock the boat; to conform to the status quo.*" Businesses that ask you to wear tasteful and appropriate jewellery prefer it to be limited to traditional masculine styles. These include tie accents, watches, cuff-links, wedding bands, and lapel pins.

Tool belts are not commonly classified as jewellery, and they are not included in jewellery collections of museums but, as we see, there are many other practical objects that are. There are even some varieties of jewellery so similar to tool belts, that they sometimes are identical; these are called chatelaines.


Search the Collections



Chatelaine

Place of origin: London, England (made)
England, Great Britain (made)

Date: ca. 1850 (made)

Artist/Maker: Banks Durham, Joseph (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Cut steel

Credit Line: Given by Mrs Gilbert Russell

Museum number: M.10:1 to 9-1971

Gallery location: Jewellery, room 91, case 19, shelf C

Public access description

This chatelaine was greatly admired by the exhibition jury and won a Prize Medal. Their report commented: " a beautiful chatelaine, entirely of wrought steel: it is composed of twelve pieces, adjusted with extreme care, and covered with faceted ornaments; several of the pieces, such as the étui, the key, the tablets and the almanack, have required very long and skilful work and twelve months were required to complete this chatelaine. It was made entirely in London, and not a single piece of it was stamped."

Chatelaines were decorative but useful waist hung fashion accessories. The system of clips and chains, attached to the belt, kept small but necessary items such as sissors, keys and money easily accessible for housewives and housekeepers. Before the 1850s pockets were uncommon in women's garments and chatelaines were a versatile and ornamental alternative. The huge numbers of increasingly large and elaborate chatelaines made in Britain and America was ridiculed in satirical publications like Punch magazine.

Fig. 20

²⁰ Kimmel & Kaufman, 1993

²¹ Centeno, 2012

The Chatelaine

Chatelaine, ornament, used by both men and women and usually fastened to belt or pocket, with chains bearing hooks on which to hang small articles such as watches, keys, seals, writing tablets, scissors, and purses.²²

The existence of the Chatelaine is not well known among the general public today, but this accessory was very popular in many European countries during the 19th century²³. Very little research exist on the subject and the descriptions you find in the usual encyclopaedias are short and vague²⁴. The most extensive publication about the chatelaine I have found, is a book called *Chatelaines, Utility to Glorious Extravagance* by Genevieve E. Cummins and Nerylla D. Taunton. The authors have done a very impressive research on the subject.

The French word *Châtelaine* was originally used to describe the mistress of a castle, and appears in literature as early as 1196²⁵. The word later became more associated to the accessory that was her symbol of office: the waist hung ornament that carried the keys of the castle. This accessory – effectively a *key chain* – was later in history used as a reference, when creating what we now generally associate with the word: an accessory carrying a collection of utensils or equipment, needed for various kinds of work or activities. This accessory is said to have been worn by both men and women and could look very differently depending on its context.

In Cummins & Taunton's book you can see numerous examples of the various utensils that could be attached to the chatelaine: many examples carry needles and thimbles, scissors, psalm books or perfume bottles; others carry very specific items used in sports activities, for instance the tools 19th century women needed for practicing archery²⁶.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22

²² Encyclopaedia Britannica, chatelaine, 2013

²³ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 88

²⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, chatelaine, 2013

²⁵ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 11

²⁶ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 232

The chatelaine is a special kind of jewellery; it can even sometimes fail to meet the criteria of what jewellery historians can accept as jewellery. The art historian and jewellery critic Liesbeth den Besten writes that “*jewellery is a surplus, an extra; it is not part of the clothing and it has no other function than completing the clothing and attracting attention from others*”²⁷, and that clearly rules out the chatelaine. Den Besten is with that sentence ruling out all jewellery with practical functions, among these the signet ring (which is used to seal letters and documents with wax²⁸), and it is clear after doing some research that this statement is not representative of any consensus.

This statement by den Besten is disputed by Marcia Pointon, who writes that “*the idea of jewellery functioning exclusively as adornment is relatively new [...] a lady of the house in an elite family would have owned a chatelaine [...] it worked as an ornament, a useful device and a status symbol.*”²⁹ The chatelaine is also commonly institutionalized as jewellery in museums, and is as shown earlier well represented in the Jewellery section of The Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Even though a chatelaine's tools and utensils were symbolic of the social status of the wearer, most chatelaines still maintained a practical functionality. In most cases, the tools were not mere symbolism, but also had an ornamental quality and a practical use. This way, the chatelaines managed to join the world of jewellery with the world of practical utensils.

Most sources of today tell that there where chatelaines made for men, but it is unclear if these male accessories were ever actually called *chatelaines* at the time they were made; the ones that were aimed for men seem to have been called “*Chains*”, “*Fob Chains*”, “*Watch Chains*”, or “*Norwegian Belts*”³⁰. So, the habit of wearing objects that at the time were called *chatelaines*, seems to have been exclusively feminine. The modern literature on chatelaines is also almost exclusively describing it as a feminine practice.

When reading through the book by Cummins & Taunton, the one example that can be found of a contemporary writer using the word chatelaine in a masculine context, is provided by an article in the *Punch* magazine written in 1849. The British author is mocking the French men using chatelaines. This author describes how these chatelaines carry decorative objects of little practical use, and that “*if the English gentlemen ever lend themselves to the use of Chatelaines, let the absurdity be applied to an useful end*”³¹.

This shows the same pattern as afore mentioned *Man's guide to wearing jewellery*: a conflict between masculinity and adornment without any practical function.



Fig. 23: Photo of a man, taken around 1897 in Göteborg, Sweden. The chain of what probably is a pocket watch is visible.

²⁷ den Besten, 2011, p. 24

²⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, ring, 2013

²⁹ Pointon, 2013, p. 199

³⁰ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, pp. 35,40

³¹ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 82

The Chatelaine and the Tool Belt



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

Cummins and Taunton's book contains some interesting examples of chatelaines that are strikingly similar to tool belts; one of these is the chatelaines made for nurses. These chatelaines not only resemble tool belts in their utensils and their body placement, but also in their materiality; the nurse's chatelaine was often made out of leather and steel³². The tools included in many nurses' chatelaines are also commonly present in tool belts, for instance pliers and scissors³³

"The peak enthusiasm for all varieties of chatelaine started in the 1880s and extended beyond the concept of being for the 'lady of the castle'. Several occupational groups adopted the wearing of the chatelaine for its practicality. The housekeeper, nanny, and governess wore a more basic version of the standard chatelaine, but nurses had their specific requirements. It has always been necessary for the competent nurse to have the tools of her trade close to hand and the nurses' chatelaine was an obvious neat and effective way of achieving this end."³⁴

The important feature of the nurses' chatelaine was *to make the tools of her trade close to hand*; but although they were seen as less important, the aesthetical qualities were of value as well. This seems to perfectly fit the description of a tool belt.

If the practical functionality had an ostensibly higher priority than the adorning function, could the accessory still be called a chatelaine? Apparently yes; according to the records from the times, which Cummins & Taunton have reported in their research, this was not a contradiction.

"There were two major varieties of chatelaines worn by nurses – a steel waist plaque with multiple chains, or a leather fitted pouch with metal waist plaque. The steel variety appears to be the earlier and in a Down Bros. catalogue of 1869 is the version labeled 'a chatelaine', whereas the leather pouch was called a 'satchel or sabretasche'. Later, however, Truax in 1899, Allen & Hanburys in 1901 and S. Maw, Sons & Sons in 1903, all refer to the leather pouch variety as chatelaines."³⁵

³² Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 221

³³ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 224

³⁴ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 220

³⁵ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 221

One other example is found in the same book, but from the chapter called *Chatelaines for Sports and Recreation*. This time the subject is chatelaines for gardening, and again, these accessories share materiality, shape and type of tools with many tool belts. In another context, it would seem strange to categorize these objects as body adornment.

"Gardening has always been considered an acceptable and elegant exercise for even the most refined of ladies. In 1873 during the initial period of wild enthusiasm for chatelaines, Walter Thornhill designed the 'garden chatelaine'. It is probable that this included miniature and dainty garden tools probably more for show than function. However, a more practical waist-hung 'Canvas Bag for Garden Tools' was presented in *The Queen* of 1877. This was considered suitable for both amateurs and professionals and was made of strong sailcloth. Spaces were provided for individual tools such as a small fork, throwel, shears, and penknife, loops to hold twine, and pockets for labels and seeds."³⁶

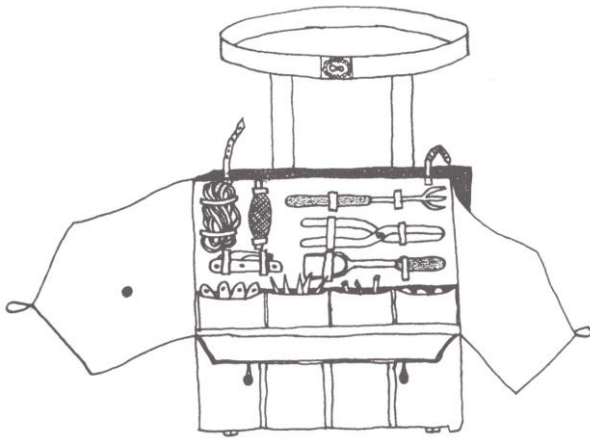


Fig. 26: Sketch of 'Canvas Bag for Garden Tools'. Spaces were provided for small garden requisites. From a magazine called *The Queen*, 1877.



Fig. 27: A gardening tool belt made in textile material, with plastic garden tools.

These examples show that it is the context of the tool belt and the chatelaine that affect what functions and meanings we assign to them, not so much their actual properties. The chatelaine is labeled as jewellery, and manages to keep this label even in its most practical versions. The tool belt is viewed from a different cultural perspective and is seen as equipment, not jewellery. Even though these objects are strikingly similar, their connotations are very different.

³⁶ Cummins & Taunton, 1996, p. 235

ANALYSIS

The construction worker's tool belt is a masculine piece of jewellery, with connections to other masculine jewellery. The obsession with practical functionality and the anxiety of feminization is present in both cases. The masculine relationship to traditional jewellery is a constant fight against the risk of feminization. Masculine jewellery avoids this risk with either practical functionality or minimization of decoration. The construction worker's tool belt is different from masculine traditional jewellery; it is not made out of traditional jewellery material, and not with traditional jewellery techniques. The risk of feminization by wearing construction tool belts is eliminated because of their practical functionality and non-jewellery materiality, so this culture of adornment can thrive in mythopoetic masculine environments.

The construction tool belt is a chatelaine, with other intended wearers and other connotations. The chatelaine is seen as feminine, and because of that, difficult to incorporate in masculine practices. Tool belts are chatelaines, but defeminised enough to be used comfortably in masculine environments.

The culture of adornment is a gendered practice; it is involved in the normative structures that direct people in society. Adornment with jewellery is widely seen as a feminine practice, and because of this, the adornment within the mythopoetic masculine environments is structured to fit within their specific norms. Within these masculine environments – where the biggest danger of all is to be feminized – wearing jewellery is still such a vital method of socialization that rather than avoiding it, this culture has created a way to soak its jewellery in masculinity.

This masculinised jewellery is guiding individuals how to navigate through normative structures built upon dichotomised gender stereotypes. The workers, the DIY- practitioners, the children playing with toy construction tool belts; they are all being directed by this practice into certain gender roles.

Analysing the construction workers tool belt as jewellery opens up for a wider and richer study of the relationship between masculinities and jewellery.

The inclusion of the tool belt into the field of jewellery enriches the analysis of this field. It gives a wider perspective of where and how jewellery can be seen as an active force in human societies. The field of contemporary jewellery also gains from this inclusion. The area of social interaction can expand beyond the borders of convention and the possibility to address new audiences is made visible.

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