

CREATIVE LAB



Ruth Tomlinson outside her Hatton Garden atelier.
Right: Working on a new piece

EVERYDAY WONDER



Jeweller Ruth Tomlinson thinks differently about perfection.
Kate Youde discovers how she works



Collected curiosities provide inspiration

The Time Capsule ring was one of a set of four called the Thames OffeRings collection, created using materials found while mudlarking on the banks of the London river. She cast the three other rings back into the water, for future generations to find.

Tomlinson was 11 when she started collecting beads and making jewellery from airy modelling clay. Within a few years, she was selling her pieces in a handful of what she describes as “hippy shops” in her hometown of Morecambe and nearby Lancaster, and in her family’s pharmacy.

She began working with metal, glass, wood and ceramics at Manchester Metropolitan University, where she studied three dimensional design. For her degree show, she made a porcelain jewellery collection that incorporated “spontaneous finds” such as leaves and flowers. “I like to respond to my immediate environment, and look for preciousness there,” she explains.

Tomlinson was accepted onto a master’s degree in goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork and jewellery at the prestigious Royal College of Art (RCA) in London in 2003. It was there that she developed her unique style.

A “happy mistake” inspired the Encrustations collection that kickstarted her career. She was exploring electroforming – a process where objects are submerged in liquid electrolytes so that layers of metal build up – but one of the RCA’s technicians left one of her rings in the tank for days instead of hours. The result was the “most incredible, beautiful jewel”, she says, that looked as if it had lain on a sea bed for hundreds of years. The finished silver, quartz crystal and porcelain ring, made in 2005, is the second of her three rings the V&A has just acquired.

Now juggling all the commitments of running a business with creating the pieces, she can only settle down in her denim apron for two

Finding beauty in the unexpected is at the heart of Ruth Tomlinson’s approach to fine jewellery. The British designer set rusted metal, broken glass, shells and beads into 18ct gold to create the Time Capsule ring, one of three pieces recently added to the V&A’s collection.

Tomlinson, who heads an all-women team of 12 at her workshop in Hatton Garden, London’s historic jewellery district, uses precious materials differently, too. She says she embraces “nature’s imperfections” by using “included” stones in some designs. These are stones that had other materials trapped inside when they formed – commonly crystals or gas bubbles, but it can be almost anything. “Uniqueness and rarity are precious, but not the rarity of a massive white diamond, because that doesn’t really interest me,” she says. “I prefer to bring life to gems that may be overlooked.”



Clockwise from top: Ring, 2005, from the Encrustations series, sterling silver with porcelain flowers and a quartz crystal; inspiring “oddties” in Tomlinson’s collection of gems; Time Capsule ring, 2021, objects from the Thames forshore set in gold, with a flint hagstone weight



Tomlinson (standing) at work with colleagues Jen Hughes (left) and Laura Loayza

Gems

These are my inspiration gems that I've collected over the years. They're oddities. Each one is a memory or something I've found that I've really loved. Something could inspire me for its unusual cut, engraving, inlay or setting.

Tools

These are made from bone and my grandma used them to make ceramics. I love that connection to her. I started using them when creating ceramic jewellery in Manchester and now I use them for the wax work.

Sketchbook

I take this with me when I go travelling and always have it by my bench. A lot of new concepts start with writing and drawing. I make notes for myself, such as: "Make things I would like to wear." You have to remind yourself sometimes.



Inspiration

If I'm needing a bit of input, I have a look, a hold and a study of some of these little curiosities in my inspiration box. I'm a collector of small inspiring materials and I channel it through my work.

Wax

I love the fluidity of the material and the way that you can sculpt and manipulate it. The wax pen has a very fine nib so you can do really detailed work to melt the wax.

Rings on display at Tomlinson's showroom, open by appointment

days a week. She works at a bench designed by her husband Gareth Neal, a furniture designer whose work is also in the V&A. "I forget about everything else when I'm making," she says. "It's like meditation."

Her starting point is always the stones, she says: diamonds and gems including multicoloured sapphires and tourmaline. "Those are my paint," she says. She jots down initial thoughts and makes quick pencil sketches but finds it easier to "think three dimensionally" and bring an idea to life as she works.

She likes to use raw, uncut diamonds, "appreciating what nature has made and working with it, rather than having to cut and facet it into a traditional, sparkly jewel". The third Tomlinson ring that the V&A has acquired is a 9ct gold ring from her Lustre collection. Made in 2010, it has a raw central diamond flanked by smaller grey and brown rose-cut diamonds.

The ring's setting creates the impression the metal is "cupping" each side of the gem, achieved through lost wax casting. This involves Tomlinson "spontaneously" creating freeform shapes out of wax, using wires and a heatpen, to make settings for the stones. She sends the models to a foundry, which makes a plaster cast from her model, then burns out the wax in a kiln. The mould is finally flushed with molten gold.

Sometimes Tomlinson sets tiny diamonds into the wax as they can withstand the kiln's heat. The end result is that the stones "can look really embedded," she says. This idea came from a discarded piece of lead encrusted with tiny rocks that she found in some gravel at a boatyard. She keeps it with other collected treasures, including her father's gold dental filling and some of a school friend's hair in an "inspiration box" in her workshop.

Tomlinson works with different carats of recycled white and yellow gold, particularly favouring 14ct yellow gold for its "warm, antiquey



feel". Like all gold jewellery, Tomlinson's is assayed and hallmarked, which means that if and when her three lost Offerings wash up, the lucky mudlarkes will know what treasure they have found. "Someone might find one of these mysterious rings in 100 years' time and, if they do, it will always have our hallmark and the year [hand punched on it], so they'll be able to trace it back," she says.

Tomlinson's processes are lengthy and experimental: it can take 10 weeks to make a single ring. She continues to explore how she might use new technologies to enrich her work. But, she says, she remains true to her original mission: "I'll always be looking out for an unusual beauty."

Kate Youde writes about jewellery and the arts

Photos: Sarah Weal; Caiyang Yin; Stacey B

Ones to watch

Three young craftspeople are taking their art form in intriguing directions. Selected by V&A jewellery curators Clare Philips and Emeфа Cole



Balashova wears her Floating Leaves earrings, 2022

Eve Balashova

Balashova wants to "push the boundaries" of 3D printing in jewellery. She designs pieces digitally before sending the information to a 3D printer. A laser fuses white nylon powder together in layers to form the jewellery. She then hand dyes the tactile nylon pieces with colourful fabric dye. "Originally my inspiration was purely based on geometry," says the Glasgow-based designer, 28, who hand makes the jewellery's gold and silver components. "But now the more I work with it, the more I am excited by the possibilities the material gives." Her latest collection, Floating Leaves, features interlocking designs with a chainmail-like structure.

Caiyang Yin

Rather than limiting himself to specific materials, 30-year-old Yin centres his work on ideas. He explores state of mind in our fast-paced society, and is particularly interested in the impact of the pandemic and development of mobile internet technology. He designed interactive silicon rubber pieces to help people relieve stress, similar to fidget spinners. His CAD-modelled sterling silver Loading collection is a reflection on working from home and dealing with a poor internet connection. "I try different things because playfulness is really important," says Yin. "If I can't have fun as a creator, how can I expect my audience to be entertained?"

Green Cushion ring, 2022, sterling silver and laser-cut silicone



Brown's woven hoops in 9ct gold and silver

Megan Brown

Brown is inspired by the techniques used in her family's textile mill, Alfred Brown, which her great, great-grandfather founded in Bramley, Leeds, in 1915. Rather than creating worsted fabric, however, the 27-year-old hand weaves fine metal chain into elegant gold and silver jewellery. In her latest work, Brown draws from Hasir Bafi, a mat weaving technique from Iran. She swaps the delicate chain for strong wire to make "more sculptural" pieces, using different precious metals to recreate the different textures, patterns and colours of textiles. "Once I've woven the metal fabric, I can start changing it," she says.