



accessory to the time

Can you name last season's "It" bag? If not – and I bet most people can't – it's probably because autumn 2007 was defined in many people's minds not by a handbag or even a pair of shoes but, rather, by a necklace (Lanvin's distinctive "ribbon" necklace) and a cuff (most notably Chanel's highly sought-after "mosaic" version). Suddenly, the accessories grabbing the limelight, the finishing touches that possess that all-important "It" factor, are not bags and shoes but designer-label costume and semiprecious beads, bangles and necklaces. Unveiled on the catwalk, these statement pieces – not to be confused with the haute joaillerie ranges that several fashion houses now boast – are designed to complement spring's haute hippie clothes and (hopefully) inspire a similar shopping frenzy as handbags once did. For while most fashion buyers agree that the "must-have bag" phenomenon is on the wane – to the extent that some now talk of the "anti-It" bag – costume jewellery is very much in the ascendant.

"Jewellery is huge," says Tina Lamb, Harvey Nichols' international accessory and shoe buyer. "We're seeing very big sales growth in all the collections, particularly Yves Saint Laurent and Lanvin. Costume jewellery now accounts for nearly 50 per cent of accessories sales, including bags. These are collector's pieces. Cool but beautiful, they are the sort of thing you pass on down the family."

Certainly, luxury goods houses have raised their jewellery game with an explosion of designs adding decadence and interest to the spring catwalks: necklaces that sit on the

For once, the accessory of the season is not a designer handbag. Instead, the biggest buzz is coming from catwalk costume jewellery, reports Karen Walker.

collarbone like exuberant garlands, attention-grabbing brooches, super-sized pendants, chandelier earrings and even hairclips, headpieces and jewelled belts. As Chris Sanderson, cofounder of trend prediction agency The Future Laboratory, points out, "Most of the emphasis in the past two decades has been on vintage pieces. Not since the 1960s and 1970s has there been such an explosion of instantly recognisable, designer-branded jewellery using interesting, unusual mixes of materials."

"It's a continuation of the must-have accessory story," says Bridget Cosgrave, fashion director of Matches boutiques, who believes that Lanvin, YSL and Hermès initiated the vogue for bold bijoux. Lanvin started creating a buzz with its flamboyant necklaces last year. Featuring pearl, resin, colourful enamel flowers or polished wooden and metal discs, all strung on a signature black ribbon, they were flagged up in fashion magazines and have quickly become as synonymous with the brand as its starkly beautiful dresses. For spring, the Paris fashion house has created similarly audacious

designs including a red and black choker with pendant (about £820), paste and crystal bracelets (from about £900), necklaces of metal (from about £565) and diamanté rings (from about £225).

Significantly, Yves Saint Laurent designer Stefano Pilati chose not to showcase any handbags on the catwalk for spring but made a statement with costume jewels instead, thereby continuing the tradition for ebullient jewellery started by Yves Saint Laurent's muse and jewellery designer for several decades, Loulou de la Falaise. Pilati and his design team used a star motif for Plexiglas earrings, belts, hairclips and brooches (from £140) and, most spectacularly, a necklace (£1,795) featuring large multicoloured or monochrome black stars. Such pieces can elevate the plainest of outfits and it would be a mistake to think of them as only for evening. As Lamb says, "You can wear an amazing necklace with jeans and a T-shirt. Costume jewellery allows for individuality."

Other accessories, such as Hermès calf-skin or crocodile cuffs (from about £170),

transcend spring's key trends and work well with both the ruffles, flowers and tie-dye of the neo-hippie look and the strong parallel shift towards tailoring. The common denominator of this new designer jewellery is a kind of fierce flamboyance – very much in evidence in Lanvin's pieces – that differentiates it from the polite ropes of beads and glass brooches beloved by our grandmothers. Unusual juxtapositions of materials give these designs much more of an edge than the costume jewellery of old. Marni, the Italian label known for its whimsical designs, started the trend some years ago, fashioning idiosyncratic necklaces from a quirky melange of wood, beads and bits of fabric. Now Louis Vuitton has taken the idea of mismatched components one step further with limited-edition, handmade necklaces (from about £745 to £5,225) assembled from a colourful and eccentric patchwork of materials including fake pearls, leather, strass (coloured glass), mother of pearl, horn, wood and glittering clusters of Swarovski crystals. The result is unexpectedly beautiful. Vuitton's accessory range also includes chain-link belts (about £2,240) which feature different materials spliced together, and a striking regal-inspired brooch (about £560) in icy blue Swarovski strass.

But for many, the sumptuous beaded necklaces (from £285 to £835) unveiled on Dries Van Noten's runway are spring's most desirable fashion accessories of all. Made from semiprecious materials including malachite, tiger's-eye, lapis, rose quartz, white onyx, amber, jade, amethyst and carnelian, they are constructed from either large monotone





Clockwise from far left: Lanvin strass and crystal necklace, £tktktk; Yves Saint Laurent Plexiglas star necklace, £1,795; Lanvin black choker, about £820; Louis Vuitton Collier necklace, about £5,225; Yves Saint Laurent mini Plexiglas star and tin earring, £105 pair; assorted beaded necklaces featured on Dries Van Noten's spring/summer catwalk 2008; Chanel resin and fibreglass cuff, from £4,000.

stones or stones mixed randomly for a bohemian, multicoloured effect. And, although the necklaces might look like they have been casually strung together, in fact they have been carefully calibrated by the designer to "complement the décolleté of a woman while respecting the boundary of the clothing worn". Piled on the collarbone (currently the most fashionable length) they work perfectly with the printed silk pyjama bottoms and kimono tops in the new collection. Even if you are not planning to go down the tribal or neo-hippie route, a string of these lustrous beads is enough of a nod to spring's key clothing trend. Cuffs and bracelets (from £145 to £285), meanwhile, reflect the trend for using a quirky hotchpotch of materials – in Van Noten's case, strips of printed silk with semiprecious stones, pieces of sterling silver and paillette sequins.

Chanel, whose catwalk has always been something of an accessory fest, has ratcheted up the luxe factor with its Maison d'Art collection which features the work of renowned couture ateliers, including the costume jewellery of Desrues, the embroidery of Lesage, the feather designs of Lemarié and silver by Goossens. Although Maison d'Art was established in 2002, following Chanel's acquisition of seven specialist couture ateliers, its profile was significantly upped by the catwalk show in London in 2006. The collection of couture accessories includes all the Chanel leitmotifs – the camellias, chain belts and the two interlocking "C"s – while standout pieces include a

silver feathered necklace by Goossens (£4,930) and resin and fibreglass brooches (from £695) by Desrues, featuring flamboyant Maltese crosses. The designs are limited editions and do not go on sale until June, but one imagines eager customers will preorder.

But can costume jewellery really trigger a stampede to the sales counter? The answer, it seems, is yes. In addition to Lanvin's pearl and twist ribbon necklace, Christopher Kane's glittering, serpent-like necklaces and bracelets designed for Atelier Swarovski (a standalone capsule collection of catwalk jewellery now in its third season) had to be reordered almost instantly at Harvey Nichols in the autumn, while Chanel's signature cuffs are understood to have triggered a rush to its boutiques. According to Sanderson at The Future Laboratory, the new wave of designer baubles is the latest manifestation of mass affluence and the insatiable demand for luxury. "We've reached the point where a £1,000 handbag is now fairly commonplace. The big global brands are looking for new avenues to explore and new products with which to engage the customer and appeal to those with a high sense of discernment," he says.

To spend a four-digit sum on a handbag could almost be justified on the basis that it is a functional item and one that you can use every day. To blow £4,000 on a fashion necklace, on the other hand, seems fabulously reckless. As Sanderson says, "You've got to be seriously wealthy or seriously love it. But branded costume jewellery is also part of a growing affinity for modern collectables." In other words, some of the most distinctive designs are likely to be the Christie's auction pieces of the future.

Of course, there are many desirable designs costing hundreds rather than thousands of

pounds. As for the most totemic pieces of the summer, it is impossible to say which accessories will attain that enviable "must-have" status. It could be the Hermès violet crocodile cuff (from £290), Miu Miu's spider, dragonfly and ladybird brooches (from £105) or Dior's dangly art deco earrings (from £250) – or any of the pieces outlined above. No one really knows what gives an accessory that elusive "It" factor, but one thing is certain: costume jewellery has become the latest, very visible form of fashion tribalism. ♦

COSTUME DRAMA

Atelier Swarovski, see Selfridges, Liberty and Harvey Nichols. Browns, 23-27 South Molton St, London W1 (020-7491 7833). **Chanel**, 26 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 5040) and branch/stockist. **Christian Dior**, 31 Sloane St, London SW1 (020-7172 0172) and stockists. **Dover Street Market**, 17-18 Dover St, London W1 (020-7518 0680). **Dries Van Noten**, see Browns and Harvey Nichols. **Harvey Nichols**, 109-125 Knightsbridge, London SW1 (020-7235 5000) and branches. **Hermès**, 155 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7499 8856) and branches/stockists. **Lanvin**, see Browns, Dover Street Market and Harvey Nichols. **Louis Vuitton**, 17-18 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7399 1690) and branch/stockist. **Marni**, 26 Sloane St, London SW1 (020-7245 9520) and see Selfridges. **Matches**, 60-64 Ledbury Rd, London W11 (020-7221 0255; www.matchesfashion.com) and branches. **Miu Miu**, 123 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7409 0900) and see Selfridges. Selfridges, 400 Oxford St, London W1 (0870-8377 377). **Yves Saint Laurent**, 32-33 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 1800) and branch.