

Steampunk Future Past

BY KAREN CHRISTIANS

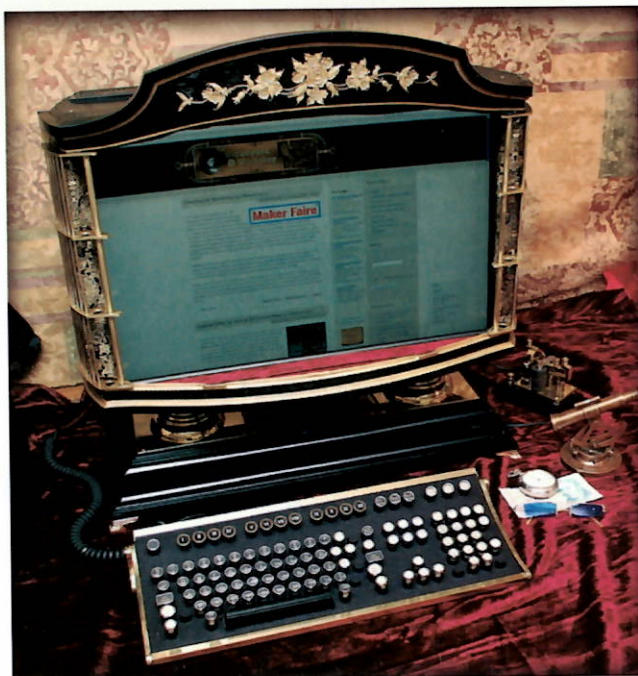
WHAT EXACTLY IS Steampunk? Shades of the movement have pervaded art, design, craft, and entertainment over recent years. One of the vital

voices of the genre, writer and historian G.D. Falksen, states, "In three short words, Steampunk is Victorian science fiction." During Queen Victoria's reign, the use of steam to drive mechanical objects in both England and the United States fueled many inventions and gave birth to the Industrial Revolution. Today, says Falksen, "Steampunk uses this existing technology and structure to imagine an even more advanced nineteenth century, often complete with Victorian-inspired wonders like steam-powered aircraft and mechanical computers."

In 1984, film director David Lynch brought Frank Herbert's science fiction epic *Dune* to the cinema, decades before computer graphics dominated the screen, using handmade models and much imagination. Although at the time it was not a critical or economic success, *Dune* featured enduring and striking visuals, a merger of Victorian ornament and technology, and offered both groundbreaking cinema and a foretaste of the Steampunk sensibility.

Steampunk is a fruitful hybrid of low and high tech. A perfect embodiment of this merger is found in the *Victorian All In One PC* by Jake Van Slatt, a Boston

JAKE VAN SLATT
Victorian All In One PC, 2008
modified personal computer



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information technology guru by day and uber Steampunk fabricator by night. In a 2007 *Wired* magazine article, Van Slatt stated, "The Victorian era was really the last era in which a high school graduate was given the complete set of scientific concepts to fully understand the technology of the age. Because of this, part of what I wanted to do was to co-opt the term 'steampunk' and imbue it with this DIY component."

In the visual arts, Steampunk expresses itself as a low-tech survivalist attitude aspiring to artistic grace. The concepts of time, motion, disassembly, and reassembly are recurring features in this work, often represented by pocket watches and gears. The Steampunk movement does not have a singular style; it is collaborative, imaginative, and participatory, with a spirit of rich allegory and metaphor.

The *Backpack Time Traveling Device* by Andrea Lynn consists of tubing, wiring, a keypad and live mice. Once the switch is flipped, electricity draws on the mice's life force to deliver the adventurer back in time. Two mice are needed per trip, and the backpack can only be used once (preferably to correct a unfortunate event). Lynn says, "I love that I can turn my body into a work of art. I feel like it is the only kind of art that I can share with people." She is further attracted to the use of historical objects because they are "beautiful, detailed, and connect to my post-World War I family roots." Says Lynn, "I have artifacts from my family that are graceful and precise." "I want my art to reflect this."

Since 2006, I have attended Burning Man, the annual non-commercial arts festival outside of Reno, Nevada, in the Black Rock Desert. This six-square-mile "happening" has become an exciting incubation studio for Steampunk production. Despite the 95-degree heat, dust storms, and challenging living conditions, the event attracts all kinds of wondrous contraptions, art cars, costumes, warriors, and people, many walking with piles of found objects, each with a purpose and story. To the festival for several years a

band of Berkeley-based artists, engineers, and craftsmen have contributed the “Neverwas Haul,” a self-propelled three-story Victorian house made from 75 percent recycled equipment and materials. Another captivating Jules Verne-inspired vehicle at the 2010 proceedings was *The Golden Mean* a giant iron snail built by California-based blacksmith Jon Sarriugarte with his wife Kyrsten Mate.

Until recently, much of Steampunk jewelry involved simple watch gears, hearts, lockets, and keys. But in the past few months, production jewelers like Erica Weiner and Mike Libby of Insect Lab are pushing the boundaries of metaphoric art. Their intricate attention to detail, thoughtfulness, and fabrication excellence combines with historical reference and metaphor. “The work of Insect Lab is like a good old fashioned radio show, one where the viewer can take cues from what is presented to them and actively engage in their imagination to bring the work to life,” says Libby. “It is as much about wonder, fantasy, and storytelling as it is about making spiffy and elegant-looking robotic bugs.”

A recent visit to a warehouse in Rhode Island filled with antique jewelry manufacturing tools brought home the attraction of Steampunk to me as an artist. It was wonderful and tragic to see 9,000 square feet of neglected yet beautiful hand-cut dies, specialty lathes, and chain machines from the 1900s sitting idle, barely used. A scale, manufactured in Europe in the 1920s, had for its indication of measurement two delicately carved crane heads, whose opposing beaks when aligned are in perfect balance. This is the artistic essence of Steampunk: transforming what is now digital and minimal back into an ornamental functionalism.

Steampunk is the antithesis of our digital age. New generations of children who grew up with computers, which are as common to them as the telephones of my generation, are building and becoming fabricators. The Maker Faires in California and New York are filled with tens of thousands of young kids soldering, grabbing hobby kits to build basic blinking lights on a badge, and creating the hand-eye skill needed for fabricating art. *Popular Mechanics* gives way to *Make* magazine.



Respinning beauty into mundane or ubiquitous objects is proving to be both attractive and lucrative. The masses of thirty-somethings who use their iPhones, Kindles, and laptops are hungry for ornamentation. Their nostalgia is not for the 1950s; it's for the 1890s, with all the beauty of an imaginary industrial age translated into new products. Will the students of tomorrow practice cursive writing; will they even hold a pen in their hands? Steampunk is steaming along, bridging old and new, and the ways in which it is transforming art with its historical technology, quality fabrication, and attention to detail is progressing at lightning speed.

Today's metalsmiths need to learn how to use lathes and old world technology in order to create fresh and exciting work for a new generation. Steampunk demands thoughtfulness, excellence in execution, and a standard of beauty. The movement is also rooted in storytelling. We love to hold old, elegantly constructed jewelry in our hands, but we also marvel at kinetics. Steampunk offers this generation a path to merge our fascination with technology with the drive to make beautiful art. ♻️

Karen Christians is a jewelry tool designer, educator, author and founder of Cleverwerx.

JON SARRIUGARTE AND KYRSTEN MATE
The Golden Mean, 2008
altered 1966 VW Bug
PHOTO: KAREN CHRISTIANS



MIKE LIBBY/INSECT LAB
Buprestidae: Euchroma Gigantea, 2011
beetle, brass gears, spring width 4"

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