TORONTO STAR

Opinion | We live in a disposable society. Here's how the value of quality revealed itself in a little fake bling

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A dazzling collection of clip-on earrings teaches something about the value of quality.
(Photo Credit Daryl Jones)

Getting ready to go out for supper, I scan my emerald green plate of colourful earrings. The setting sun is streaming in the window, shining on the pretty enamelled Norwegian platter from the same vintage as my well-crafted clip-ons. The oldest sparkly pair were made in 1938 and are still sturdy in 2026. The whole breathtaking assortment is a dish of exotic eye-candy.

I choose three pairs; trying each to see which goes with my plain outfit. I have never been a "fashion plate," as my favourite Aunt Dorothy used to call a well-dressed woman, but with the right pick from my plentiful stash, I feel like one.

Old clip-on earrings are the new *blank*. When I asked a stylish friend to finish the sentence, she thought for a moment, laughed and said: "*Garbage*. Old clip-on earrings are the new GARBAGE."

My friend is not alone in her assessment — but clip-ons have become a generational selection. While they may strike many Boomers as a useless relic from the past, 21st century Millennials and GenZers are hunting and mining them in vintage shops.

Like them, and unlike many in my Boomer cohort, I see old clip-ons as ornate treasures created by forgotten artisans.

Having long ago opted for hole-free lobes — not a hill I want to die on, as I know I'm in the smallest minority, but the idea of poking holes in my head never appealed — friends and family members have frequently gifted me interesting clip-on earrings found in garage sales and thrift shops.

I have found a few caches myself in second-hand stores, usually piled in a lidless cardboard container at the back corner of a shelf with a handwritten sign: Clip-Ons $2.

I have acquired an inspiring collection.

Though some may see this costume jewelry as cheap and old, the pieces can be uncommonly well-made and highly-detailed despite being hewn from humble materials such as iridescent, brightly-coloured glass, glittering rhinestones, inexpensive base-metal, Lucite and Bakelite plastics.

Many clip-on earrings were made in an era when talented 20th Century designers and creators produced quality workmanship — even for low-cost jewelry. Most were vivid copies of good designs — a fashion statement for the cashless masses.

The average women who wore them were not delicate waifs. The well-remembered hardships and lessons of World War II and the Great Depression were not far behind the resourceful women of the era. They did not have washers and driers and other modern conveniences. They may have had economic pressures and adverse conditions, but they still enjoyed the fun feel of wearing a bit of glitter on occasion.

The mid 20th Century trend featured dramatic costume jewelry; ready to throw on for the rare night out to bingo or bowling or bopping. Television moms like Mrs. Leave-it-to-Beaver Cleaver, along with legions of North American moms and grade school teachers, wore matching necklace and clip-on earring sets. My mother always wore her pretty clip-ons to Sunday mass or out with "the girls" for O-K-O — a popular French Canadian board game played at each other's homes in the 1960s.

I am not sure how she afforded it, but when her six kids were in elementary grades, my stay-at-home mother of a working-class family in Verdun, a lower income suburb of Montreal, would on occasion give a teacher a small gift of appreciation at the end of the school year. It was usually a blue box, a little bigger than a slice of white bread, containing a matching set of clip-on earrings and a necklace, laid out on a thin swatch of pristine cotton batting.

When I think about the Cold War era workers who made solid little clip-ons, worn by armies of nameless women, I am reminded of the tiny spring-loaded clip, that applies pressure to hold the earring in place. It is often solid and reliable and indestructible, and still they fabricated what looked like fancy, rainbow fragments — and their hardwearing output is still in use.

Lesley Stahl, renowned journalist of "60 Minutes" fame, wears stunning clip-on earrings. She chooses quality costume jewelry even though she could well afford the real thing in icy big-name bling. In Marilyn Monroe's day, bold and sturdy clip-ons went with the red-red lipstick fashion of the era; she did not have pierced ears — the glamorous icon wore clip-ons.

Clip-on earrings may be an insignificant example in a world economy, but they may have something to teach us about our disposable mindset. Within weeks of purchase, the stem broke off one of my modern, whimsical, red and white

mushroom-shaped, clip-on earrings that cost me $36! Unlike my clip-ons, they are junk and are going to the landfill. We bemoan the poor quality of 21st Century fridges, dishwashers, printers, toasters, irons, computers. Perhaps we should be asking whether we can afford to continue sending the scraps of our new, low-quality products to landfill.

Old clip-on earrings, still found in the attic and in second-hand stores, are a good reminder of the value of quality.



The setting sun is streaming in the window, shining on the pretty enamelled Norwegian platter from the same vintage as my well-crafted clip-ons. (Photo Credit Daryl Jones)



A necklace from a matching clip-on earring set. (Photo Credit Daryl Jones)



Screw-style clip on earrings. (Photo Credit Daryl Jones)