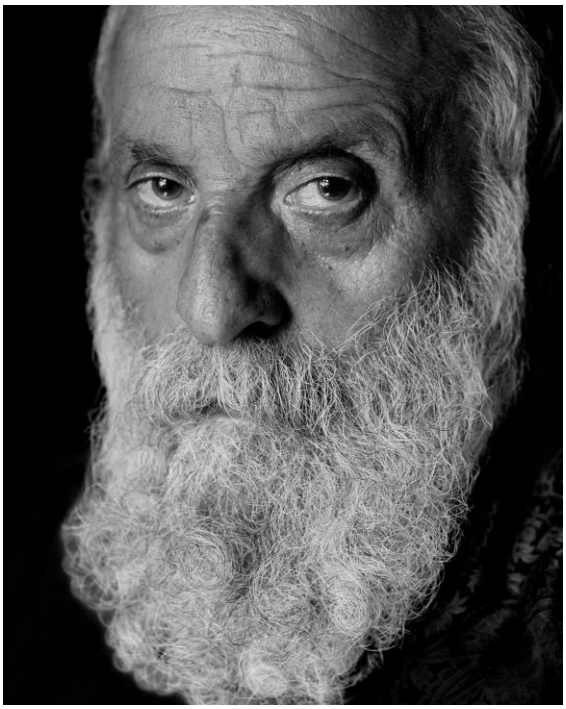
FROM CELINE, A PENDANT DESIGNED BY A SCULPTOR

The collaboration is a new piece of César's legacy, and of the larger history of artists making jewelry.

Celine collaborated with the estate of César to produce one of the artist's compression pendants in vermeil (shown here) and silver. Prices upon request, (212) 535-3707, celine.com.Credit...Florent Tanet

For someone whose monumental sculptures regularly required the use of a large-scale hydraulic press, the 20th-century French-born artist César Baldaccini — known during his lifetime simply as César — could seem breezy about materials and the toils of craftsmanship: "I take some matter, and I make something," he once told an interviewer. "I could be a baker, making bread." Clearly, what was paramount for him was the mere fact of creation. And although he's most famous for his use of crushed-up cars and other junkyard parts, scrap iron having proved affordable when he was starting out and had little money, he also worked with polyurethane and newspaper — and even made jewelry. This month, Celine is reviving that lesser-known element of his practice with the launch of a roughly two-and-a-half-inch-tall version of one of César's compression pendants: a rectangular column made up of small sheets and bands of metal that fold in and around each other in a gleaming maze.

César used a similar technique to create his jewelry as he did his metal sculptures, but with a deeply personal twist, reconfiguring and welding not industrial junk but a woman's own belongings. In 1971, he began asking women he knew to bring him their own trinkets to reshape, the result being something both old and new, at least for a time. "They're like memory sticks," Stéphanie Busuttil-Janssen, the president of Fondation César and César's partner from 1988 to his death in 1998, says of the artist's pendants.



César Baldaccini in 1993.Credit...Herb Ritts/Trunk Archive

"Compression de Bijoux" (circa 1971-72), another one of César's pendant designs.Credit...Courtesy of Sorry We're Closed Gallery/Brussels © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

With its sleek, androgynous look, the Celine pendant is also reminiscent of 1970s Left Bank glamour, and thus a natural complement to the rock 'n' roll silhouettes of the brand's fall 2020 collection — it appeared on the runway paired with straight-legged jeans and a jaunty fur coat. Working in close collaboration with the artist's foundation, the fashion house commissioned just 100 editions of the necklace in vermeil and another 100 in silver; it took its form from a 1972 original of Busuttil-Janssen's, made up in part of three small medallions and a curb chain, which artisans at a Parisian jewelry workshop cast in a wax mold. Each pendant can be removed from its chain or leather cord, both of which come included with the pendant in a simple pine box — a nod to César's fondness for humble materials. What's more, the hook used to hang the pendant on the chain or cord can be hidden, allowing the piece to stand on its own, or atop the box, as a piece of sculpture. "His intention was to transform all these little things into something very strong, very powerful, that you could play with," says Busuttil-Janssen, "and, at the same time, create a work of art."

César's foray into jewelry as art occurred just after and alongside analogous experiments by mid- to late-20th-century artists including Man Ray, Picasso, Dorothea Tanning, Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Niki de Saint Phalle and others. These efforts were influenced in part by earlier movements like the Bauhaus and de Stijl, which muddied the imposed boundary between fine art and design by avowing the value of an aesthetic approach to everyday objects. And yet jewelry is more ornamental than functional; it's perhaps unsurprising that these artists were attracted to the idea of an aesthetic object that would meld with a person's image. Certainly, as Louisa Guinness, the owner of London's Louisa Guinness Gallery and the author of "Art as Jewellery: From Calder to Kapoor" (2018), says, "It was something completely different and allowed them to work on a different scale." Ernst, who was known for placing his painted canvas over an uneven object, and then scraping the paint off the top, used jewelry to try out a new technique of labor-intensive repoussé hammering (an embossing technique), creating dramatic low-relief images of runes or faces on the surface of gold pendants. De Saint Phalle reimagined her large-scale feminist "Nana" sculptures as multicolored enamel pendants, in one case contrasting the bright colors and shapes of joyful female forms with a font of diamond tears, a pointed emotional detail not typically found in her larger pieces. For Louise Bourgeois, wearable miniatures may have actually precipitated full-scale pieces: Her iconic "Maman" (1999) spider was preceded by a six-piece run of a spider pin she made in collaboration with the Madrid jeweler Chus Burés in 1996.

Catherine Deneuve wearing Man Ray's Lampshade earrings, in 1968.Credit...Photo: Telimage, Paris © 2015 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y./ADAGP, Paris 2020

Anjelica Huston wearing Alexander Calder's Jealous Husband necklace (designed circa 1940), in 1976.Credit...Evelyn Hofer/Getty Images. Artwork © 2020 Calder Foundation, N.Y./Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

While these artists were hardly the first to make jewelry — the mammoth-tusk "Venus of Hohle Fels," the first known figurative artwork, which is thought to be between 40,000 and 35,000 years old, may have also been worn as a pendant — they did so with a real sense of daring, adopting a somewhat loose interpretation of wearability. Man Ray's 1960s-era Lampshade earrings (which Catherine Deneuve wore in an iconic 1968 photograph) consist of twisted sheets of silver based on a coiled shade design and hang down almost to the collarbone: The originals are so heavy that they have to be worn with a hook over the entire ear. Alexander Calder, meanwhile, made arboreal, torso-spanning necklaces out of copper, silver and gold that seem to command their wearers. He worked entirely by hand, often carrying bits of wire and pliers in his pockets, but many of his contemporaries sought out the master craftsmen François Hugo and Giancarlo Montebello, who, from respective workshops in Southern France and Milan, helped facilitate artists' devilishly complex designs — at least until an armed robbery in the late 1970s wiped out Montebello's entire 12-year collection, leading him to close up his original workshop.

In a way, however, the trend never died: The architect Frank Gehry, for instance, has collaborated on multiple pieces of architectural jewelry — the silver Torque bangle that looks like a series of leaning walls, the doorway-shaped Axis ring — with Tiffany & Co. And, in addition to collecting existing artist-designed jewelry, Guinness has become a kind of modern-day Montebello, facilitating dozens of projects since the early 2000s. Her present-day collaborators include Cornelia Parker, whose trophy necklaces are a conceptual extension of her crushed trophy sculptures of steamrollered commemorative silver, and Anish Kapoor, whose rings and cuff links, like his sculptures, are studies in the opposition between matter and void.

As with those pieces, as well as Man Ray's exuberant earrings or Dalí's jewel-encrusted melting clock brooches, César's compression necklaces are an expression of the artist's ideas — in this case, an interest in context, transformation and the potent link between an object and time. Celine's edition, then, comes to a wearer imbued with those ideas, and with César's scratchy signature. Though the piece is also a talisman for its wearer — one upon which new ideas, and new memories, can be imprinted.