

Confabulation as Artistic Method

Reactivating the Sentimental Jewellery of Louise-Marie d'Orléans

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In 1832, Louise-Marie d'Orléans was welcomed in Belgium. The twenty-year-old French princess, an outspoken and sharp-witted woman, was to unwillingly marry the first king of the Belgians – who was twice her age – and become queen herself. As a wedding present, she received his miniature portrait, surrounded by diamonds and incorporated into a bracelet. An honourable act of love? Or a somewhat awkward formality? Presumably the latter. Transitions such as the 19th-century royal wedding, which rarely involved love, were frightening. These fears were anticipated, for instance, with jewellery. The sumptuous rituals of the bridal attire served to distract the bride from her impending marriage duties and the departure from her familiar home.¹ This marriage was a turning point for Louise. The princess, who had been born into a large, warm nest and enjoyed herself with her brothers and sisters at the French court, could suddenly no longer be her witty self. Despair and melancholy steadily transformed the queen into a faint shadow of her former self. “When setting off for another place (...), hopes and imaginaries become reminiscences of lives lived before (...). When stuck in a place (...) we tend to dwell on memories of our former ways of life.”² For Louise, it became tempting to muse. To visit bygone places in her mind, places that colour the day. “Mnemonic practices help to make sense of our lives,”³ and Louise developed the urge to cherish memories of loved ones and meaningful moments, memories that gave Louise's life a new bloom. This she did by exchanging so-called sentimental jewellery pieces with the people she cared about. These small bodily treasures, which were very fashionable at the time, were known to encapsulate little mementos like miniature portraits, locks of human hair, engraved names, dates, messages, and so on. As small secular sanctuaries they gave a home to Louise's inner world of feelings. They helped her celebrate sentiments of love and friendship, but also mourn and commemorate her departed loved ones.

Memories reside in the material world around us. They are recalled in dialogues – dialogues between people, but also between people and objects. Objects themselves may have no memory, but they certainly can contain and (re)produce memories.⁴ Memories can be evoked via the sensory touch, sometimes unintentionally.⁵ Objects that almost seem to be in need of this touch are jewellery pieces, as they are designed to be close to the body.

¹ Marguerite Coppens, *Elke bruid is een prinses: het verhaal van de bruid in België van de 19^{de} tot de 21^{ste} eeuw* (Brussels: Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, 2001), 148.

² Monika Palmberger and Jelena Tošić, *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ László Munteán, Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, *Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11.

⁵ Remember the famous 'madeleine scene' in *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, where Marcel Proust's character, after tasting a madeleine dipped in blossom tea, is suddenly overwhelmed by childhood memories of the village of Combray and his great-aunt Léonie. *Ibid.*, 2.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that jewellery has been serving as a memory carrier for centuries. They proclaim not only status, splendour, but also, and sometimes above all, sentiment.

It's fascinating to see how people can cling to the latter. To that sentiment. Louise lived during the heyday of Romanticism, a movement of emotion and melancholy that emerged during the drastic political, social and economic transformations of the late 18th century and early 19th century.⁶ The industrial society slowly became a harsh reality, and romanticism sought to bring salvation by creating an illusory, ethereal hideaway. Romantic moods were to move the minds, so sentiment and delirium took over from reason and nostalgic escapism was intensely encouraged.⁷ These ideals had also taken root in the mind of Louise, who wasn't really interested in regal status displays and shimmering splendour. As a child of the sober French July monarchy, which did not want to indulge in decadent aristocratic behaviour out of fear of new rebellions, Louise valued simplicity and modesty and mostly cared about the matters of the heart. Her Estate Inventory, a document drawn up a year after her death in 1851, gives an insight into her belongings, including her jewellery. The voluminous book lists and values all movable property – from the simplest handkerchief to the finest court dress – that Louise owned at the time of her death.⁸ The chapter on jewellery describes no less than 293 pieces, of which more than a hundred are sentimental jewellery pieces. Throughout the descriptions, these pieces showcase a landscape of sentiments, and all together act as a miniature museum of Louise's emotional mind. Regretfully, almost all of Louise's jewellery got lost in the course of the inheritances.⁹

The loss of this heritage might displease the art historian. Nothing remains to be touched, there is nothing left but language. The artist, however, is intrigued. For the artist there is no need to accept that some information is lost forever. After all, the visual voids create space for imagination and 'retelling'. I thus want to discover and work with what these descriptions reveal, or rather, what these descriptions don't reveal. Intimate information such as Louise's love for Leopold, the happiness she felt at joyful celebrations, the grief she struggled with after her firstborn died, etc., was once made touchable and wearable for a reason in many jewellery pieces; fragments of Louise's sentimental mind were suddenly made tangible. What can this surviving information – with all its gaps – mean today, both from an art theoretical and artistic point of view?

This train of thought can be redirected to the question: how can the myth of Louise-Marie d'Orléans be retold through the sentimental jewellery pieces described in her Estate Inventory? Louise's identity as a queen is a consciously constructed identity. Mainly for political reasons, she was presented as a pious woman who devoted herself to her children, charity, religious activities, and who refrained from political comments. This idealized image, as Regina Schulte pointed out, emerged in times in which the middle-class prevailed and new family values allowed for reimagining queenships. In an attempt to distance themselves from the late 18th-century European courts, which were characterised by the abuse of power, decadence and intrigue, the 19th-century royal houses designated

⁶ Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 77.

⁷ Dominique Marechal and Francisca Vandepitte, *De romantiek in België: tussen werkelijkheid, herinnering en verlangen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2005), 76.

⁸ *Estate Inventory of the movable property belonging to Louise-Marie d'Orléans, first queen of the Belgians, 1851*, Conway Archive, folder 114, Brussels: State Archives of Belgium.

⁹ Griet Byl and Christophe Vachaudéz, *Koninklijke juwelen van de koninginnen en prinsessen van België* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2004), 11.

themselves as middle-class, where "marriage and family were among the cornerstones of [the] conception of society, or more precisely were [the] natural preconditions."¹⁰ The motherly ideal of the queen was already carried out by Louise's mother, Queen Marie-Amélie, whose husband Louis-Philippe, duc d'Orléans, rose to the French throne following the July Revolution. Louis-Philippe was known as the 'Bourgeois King', or the 'Citizen King', and Marie-Amélie assumed the role of 'an ideal Bourgeois Queen'. In fact "her apolitical public image was a conscious construction, designed to emphasise that the role of a queen was simply to be the king's spouse."¹¹ Eventually, it would also be the reign of the English queen Victoria "that cemented an image of the monarchy as a fully politically domesticated institution".¹² Louise, being very close to her mother Marie-Amélie, and being a good friend of Victoria, almost had no other choice but to fit the narrative from the moment she became queen, and to become a national myth as well. My way of deconstructing the representation of Louise-Marie d'Orléans aims at presenting a new narrative of this first queen of the Belgians. Via (lost) objects of memory I'll add a new layer of reality to the story. Of course, I will never pretend to uncover the absolute truth. However, both as an art historian as a maker, I will add a yet unseen perspective onto this fixed, artificial reality, which I call the Myth of Louise-Marie d'Orléans.

To create this new layer of reality, I allow myself to be intrigued by these aforementioned voids in the descriptions written down in Louise's Estate Inventory. The gaps that emerge amidst the language are doors to a new reality, one that can be constructed in the here and now. Therefore, based on the descriptions, I'm reactivating the sentimental jewellery of Louise-Marie d'Orléans from a contemporary point of view. By appealing to the imagination, by "aiming at the imaginary", I hope to go "beyond what one can cognitively know".¹³ As such, I use experimental artistic methods that revise seemingly fixed truths through alternative narratives. In recent years, methods such as fictioning and speculative thinking have gained prominence and have been presented and employed as both academically and artistically valid work strategies.

At first sight, fiction as method may seem rather unscientific. Yet, in essence, it does not differ much from what the historian does.¹⁴ In the 1980s, Hayden White pointed out how historians can never represent historical reality in a neutral way, since their writing is inescapably influenced by the narrative conventions of their time. This is a turning point in history and in literary studies which White called the 'Narrative Turn'.¹⁵ The historian is in fact also a writer of fiction: "Written history is (...) also 'an act of the imagination', filtered and tinted by the values, interests and assumptions of the historian. However, as readers and viewers we tend to be less aware of this."¹⁶ In the arts, fiction and reality can be deliberately confronted, making the audience suddenly realise how relative each perspective on reality is.¹⁷ This was emphasised by Jon Shaw and Theo Reeves-Everson, who

¹⁰ Regina Schulte, "The Queen – A Middle-Class Tragedy: The Writing of History and the Creation of Myths in Nineteenth-Century France and Germany," in *Gender & History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 269.

¹¹ Heta Aali, *French Royal Women during the Restoration and July Monarchy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 9.

¹² Virginia McKendry, "Taming the Sovereign. Princess Charlotte of Wales and the Rhetoric of Gender," in *Strategic Imaginations. Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture*, ed. Anke Gilleir and Aude Defurne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 256-290, here 278.

¹³ Pascal Gielen and Nele Wynants, "De queeste van de menswetenschappen," in *Forum+* 25, no. 1 (2018): 6.

¹⁴ Gielen, "De queeste van de menswetenschappen," 12.

¹⁵ White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1984): 1-33.

¹⁶ Gielen, "De queeste van de menswetenschappen," 12.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

advocated the importance of fiction.¹⁸ Equally, David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan explored fictioning techniques of numerous contemporary artists and philosophers and mapped out the three so-called ‘Myth-Functions’. The first function, ‘Mythopoesis’, is proposed as productive of worlds, people and communities to come, often drawing upon residual and emergent cultures. ‘Myth science’ functions by producing alternate perspectives and models, revealing habits of thought concerning physical, historical and social realities as yet more myth. Finally, ‘mythotechnesis’ concerns the ways in which technology enters into discourse and life, through projections of the existing and future influence of machines. Fictioning is seen as a ‘mode of operation’ and these myth-functions fiction reality in different ways.¹⁹ In the world of fashion (history) – which includes the world of jewellery –, Caroline Evans and Alessandra Vaccari expressed the need to examine the timelines of fashion: the ‘industrial’ time, the ‘antilinear time’ and the ‘uchronic time’. Interesting is the latter, the ‘uchronic time’, since ‘uchronia’ means an impossible or fictional timeline. It allows the invention of possible futures, and the rewriting of the past. This means that uchronic time has the capacity to provide alternative histories of fashion: one can create utopian heritages, trend-forecasting predictions, forward-looking fantasies set in an imagined future, and activism motivated by a real sense of urgency and political engagement.²⁰ Narratives like these eventually encourage innovative, experimental and even revolutionary thinking.

In the same way, I am adding a new layer of reality to Louise's story. I am regenerating the sentimental jewellery described in Louise's Estate Inventory by using the so-called confabulation method. This method starts from tangible, historical information, which is inevitably incomplete. Precisely these voids constitute the space in which I move, the space to which I ultimately give a personal interpretation. The confabulation of Louise's sentimental jewellery is a process that unfolds in two phases, namely the linguistic confabulation and the material confabulation. The first makes me explore the tangible, historical information, which is, in this case, the Estate Inventory. I scrutinise the descriptions in this document in depth until certain words, phrases and sentence combinations generate associative streams of thought. These musings mingle with other known information about the described piece or about its context, and trigger first, fragmented ideas. The second phase – the material confabulation – is initiated as soon as the thinking takes on visual proportions and starts bringing forth specific material and technical solutions. From then on, I can move on to the making process and regenerate a new jewellery piece of Louise-Marie d’Orléans.

As an illustration, I’ll demonstrate a brief outline of my creation process of jewellery piece N° 16, the sixteenth piece described in the Estate Inventory.

Original description:

« N° 16: (S. A. R. La princesse Charlotte) Une broche en or, forme de nœud, ayant pour pendant un cœur en or, enrichi de pierres précieuses; ce cœur qui s’ouvre contient l’œil du Roi peint en miniature, prisée deux cents francs. »

¹⁸ Jon Shaw and Theo Reeves-Evison, *Fiction as Method* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

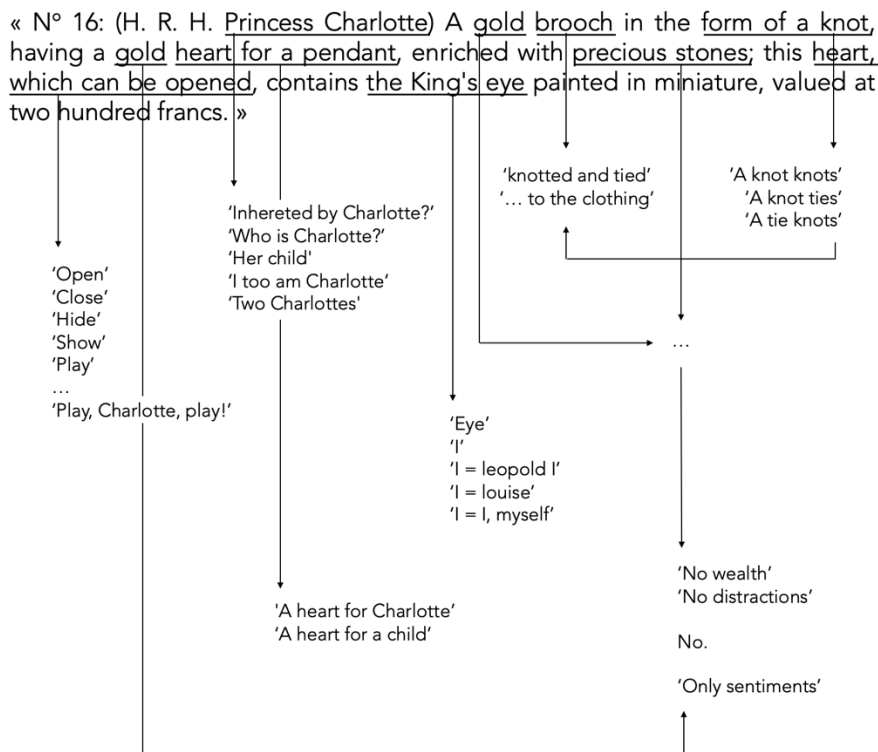
¹⁹ David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan, *Fictioning: The Myth-functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 1-2.

²⁰ Caroline Evans and Alessandra Vaccari, *Time in Fashion: Industrial, Antilinear and Uchronic Temporalities* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 29-30.

English translation:

« N° 16: (H. R. H. Princess Charlotte) A gold brooch in the form of a knot, having a gold heart for a pendant, enriched with precious stones; this heart, which can be opened, contains the King's eye painted in miniature, valued at two hundred francs. »

N° 16 concerns a piece of jewellery that Charlotte, Louise's daughter, is said to have inherited. At the time of her mother's death, Charlotte was ten years old and was given this gold brooch in the form of a heart-shaped medallion enclosing an eye miniature of king Leopold, hanging from a bow. Each fragment of this description makes me ponder. The linguistic information provokes words, sentences and questions; even wordplays or puns come to mind. All kinds of associations arise while reading and rereading this description, associations that continue to transform into new thoughts and ideas and eventually lead to visual thinking.



The associations that emerge from these streams of thought eventually substantiate into visual images, images that stimulate the maker to collect materials and sort out technical details. This is where the material confabulation comes in. Reflection and creation go hand in hand; both can only take place in constant interaction with each other. The mind moves the hands – and vice versa – until I obtain a new N° 16. This new piece has been stripped of its wealth and can no longer show off royal status. The shimmering of the gold and precious stones just blind the eye too much. The childlike heart invites to play. It gives the young Princess Charlotte comfort, distracts her from her grief. Inside the heart, the invitation 'Place I Here' reveals itself. An 'I', like in 'Eye', referring to the eye miniature? Or to leopold I? To louise maybe? Or to I, myself, the maker, who might also want to play

along? Once closed, the heart is eventually 'tied' to the clothing. An abstracted bow-'tie' presents itself as both a decorative element and a functional brooch mechanism.

Jewellery piece N° 16 was once a lover's gem given by Leopold to Louise. Princess Charlotte cherished the piece after Louise's death, until it finally disappeared. While confabulating, a fragment of Louise's love for both Leopold and Charlotte is reactivated. A new jewellery piece emerged that renews a past reality. A reality that tells of Louise-Marie d'Orléans, first queen of the Belgians.

