What is Steampunk?

At its core, Steampunk is a reimagining and reinvention of the past through the creation of new objects. Resting at an intersection of science fiction, fantasy, and history, Steampunk imagines how technology could have evolved without the benefit of electricity or computers.

About the Steampunk Brockton Exhibition
“By looking at an object and trying to figure out a new use for it, a new purpose—that’s an incredible metaphor for our lives, because a lot of us feel obsolete. We feel like we’ve lost connections or meaning. How can we improve our own lives? What I’m trying to share is an incredible means of self-improvement in terms of being able to adapt and change. But for me, Steampunk is about creative problem solving. It’s about collaborating and building resilience. Steampunk allows us to go back in history and celebrate the best that was. At the same time, Steampunk allows us to imagine a better path for a more resilient future.”
—Bruce Rosenbaum, Guest Curator New Sole of the Old Machine—Steampunk Brockton, Reimagining the City of Shoes

History
The Victorian era of British history was the period of Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837 to 1901. It was a long period of peace, prosperity, refined sensibilities, and national self-confidence for Britain.

The Industrial Revolution was the transition to new manufacturing processes in the period from about 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. It began in Great Britain, and most of the important technological innovations were British. This transition included going from hand production methods to machines, the increasing use of steam power, the development of machine tools, and the rise of the factory system.

The Second Industrial Revolution continued into the 20th century (with early factory electrification and the production line) and ended at the start of the First World War.

American Victorianism was an offshoot of this period and lifestyle that occurred in the United States, chiefly in heavily populated regions such as New England and the Deep South. The name was derived from the reign of Queen Victoria, which reflected the heavy British cultural influence on the nation during that time. As American business people of the Second Industrial Revolution created sprawling industrial towns and cities
in the Northeast, the growing upper class of the Gilded Age mimicked the high society of their former mother country in dress, morality, and mannerisms.

**Literature**
While the exact origins of the genre is unknown, the works of authors Jules Verne and H.G. Wells were incredibly influential in the creation and style of the Steampunk movement. The fictional machines and vehicles found in works such as 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea and The Time Machine paved the way for contemporary authors and artists such as Philip Pullman, Scott Westerfield, and China Miéville.

**Aesthetics**
The elements of this genre are inspired by steam-powered machines, clockwork inventions, tentacled monsters, fob watches, and top hats borrowed from England’s Victorian Era, the American “Wild West,” or even a post-apocalyptic future. The aesthetic is a kind of speculative fiction, a fusion of modern sensibility and industrial antique that blurs the lines between past, present, and future. The Steampunk movement and its art seek to create an alternate history by imagining what the past could have looked like if the future had happened sooner.

**Steampunk Philosophy**
The Steampunk philosophy offers a way to solve design problems by pushing us to think less in terms of either/or and more in terms of pluralities. Steampunk is a means of reinvention, creative problem solving, and becoming more resilient, developing the power to adapt and affect change in meaningful ways.

**Steampunk Fashion**
Steampunk fashion has evolved into an culture of imaginative dressing, inspired by the fashions of the Victorian period and melded with trends from different historical periods. Often the fashion channels a character from the 19th century (explorers, soldiers, lords, countesses, and harlots) and crosses with punk, contemporary street fashion, burlesque, goth, and post apocalyptic styles. Brass goggles, flight helmets, corsets, and bowler hats are just a few elements of the Steampunk fashion plate.

**Craft + Design**
The Steampunk movement encourages a do-it-yourself attitude and the creation of beautiful and functional objects and designs that combine art, fashion, architecture, and mechanics.