

The History of Jewelry-making: Throughout the Timeline

The art of jewelry making dates back to ancient man. Many techniques and materials such as shells, wood, soft stone, precious metals and gemstones that were used then are still used today. Jewelry was worn to make an expression about culture, race, wealth, religion and social status. Some religions used jewelry to ward off evil spirits. People who had great wealth used jewelry as form of currency to secure their wealth. Jewelry was also worn as a symbol of social status meant to communicate something about themselves.

Egyptian jewelry making started in prehistoric times, the earliest known record concerning the making of jewelry is found in Egypt. Egyptian belief stipulated that gemstones carried certain mystical powers. Egyptians used materials such as bones, shells, animal horns and feathers to make body ornaments. Egyptians wore jewelry to express their wealth and to communicate with others. The jewelry also let others know if he or she was married or single and what religion they followed. Gold was used primarily and it was available and easy to work with; diamonds did not exhibit the color or symbolism of other gemstones so they were not used as frequently. Egyptian men and women wore jewelry but, mostly women wore pairs of matching bracelets around their upper arm and ankles.

Egyptians wore collars that were made up of shells, beads, flowers and precious stones set into gold that could be worn as a necklace or attached to a neckline made of leather or cloth. Between 1991-1786 BC Egyptian jewelry had reached its peak, they started using less valuable stones, metals and glass, but this resulted in jewelry that was more colorful. Egyptians believed that jewelry was important part of life and death. When Egyptians were buried they believed if they had collected as much jewelry as they could it would help them on their journey to their afterlife.

Early Greek and Roman jewelry was somewhat conservative; they did not believe that gems had mythical power. Although, they did not attach religious meaning, as far back as 6000 BC jewelry was an important personal adornment to the peoples of the area. Metal adornment in that period was very rare but stones, shells, clay and bone were used. After the collapse of the Mycenaean world which was the precursor to Greek prehistory, gold and silversmithing did not have the creativity of the earlier centuries. Traditions did carry on, mingling with influences from northern areas, mostly with bronze and iron jewelry. Jewelry-making became more important again shortly after 800 BC, as a result of contacts with the more advanced civilizations of the East and Egypt. Funerary decorations and body adornments such as earrings, necklaces, plaques with metal filigree, and inlaid glass or amber were popular.

During the Middle Ages many people adopted the Christian faith. Jewelry was used as symbolizing their faith. Europeans of the Middle Ages rarely wore earrings and bracelets; instead they wore necklaces and brooches. Christian Monasteries produced most of the world's jewelry during this period. Monks were required to learn the system of trade using their jewelry to support their religious efforts and the Papal State. Jewelry was considered currency and was used to pay off debts. Upper and Lower classes wore precious stones and metals.

Jewelry worn during the Renaissance period was a symbol of wealth, religion and cultural beliefs. Jewelry that was worn during this time period had high levels of craftsmanship. It was important for men and women to wear matching jewelry pieces; however men had limited choice of jewelry. the concept of "Crown jewels" distinct from personal jewelry of royal family was born during Renaissance period. These jewels were considered a possession of the "state" and passed to succeeding Kings and Queens through the ages. Pearls, emeralds and rubies were highly prized during the Renaissance, particularly from Burma. The production of imitation gems and pearls began with increased sophistication. The increase of fake gemstones was such a threat to the reputation of many jewelry centers that making them was punishable by loss of the right hand and ten years exile.

Women wore long chains of gold attached to a bodice. Another big fashion were heavily decorated rings that had cameos, gemstones, and compasses or sundials in the bezel of the ring. Some rings had hidden compartments that may have contained a relic, perfume or even poison Jewelry was easy to sell and valuable so it was seen as a currency. The Renaissance period saw a big come back of bracelets and earrings. They featured various styles including simple drops and quite complex designs.

The art of gem faceting in the 16th century was very unsophisticated. Most gems were cabochon cut, with a smooth, rounded top, or table-cut (a cabochon with the top cut off, creating a flat surface.) They were oval or square in shape. For very hard stones, like diamonds, a pyramid-cut was used. Later in the century the classic "emerald" cut was invented by beveling the edges of the table cut stone. Around 1600 the rose-cut, which made gems glitter and sparkle more, was developed. In the early 1500s stones were set with plain gold wrapped around the bottom of the gem, but after 1540 they began to become more and more elaborate, often imitating petals. Gold chains and strings of pearls of varying lengths and sizes were the most common type of jewelry worn by both the richer merchant classes as well as the nobility. The middle classes wore more modest necklaces, often enameled similar to the delicate necklaces which are currently popular with teenagers.

The 17th century jewelry usually only worn by the rich became something that middle-class people could now start wearing. Diamonds were still popular and jewelry continued to change to new shapes and techniques such as flowers, bows and animal shapes with bright colors. Some of the first known pieces of mourning jewelry were found in the 16th and 17th century where they served as a reminder of the precious nature of life. Later on during the 17th and 18th century mourning rings were given to the families of the deceased as a sign of social status. This was a common practice among the wealthy class.

By the 19th century, techniques for creating jewelry pieces were refined to produce exquisite pieces by artisans. Jewelry was still produced a piece at a time but many people were able to find something

affordable to enhance their personal expression of fashion or sentiment. In America jewelry creation grew from small workshops to large factories, leaving the hand craftsman for mass production. By the mid-nineteenth century, American jewelers were able to provide gold and silver jewelry and medals; hair jewelry to memorialize or honor a loved one; and brooch-and-earring sets inspired by European styles. Cameos were especially prized, whether carved in America or abroad.

By the end of the 20th century jewelry ranges from pieces of great value made from precious stones and metals such as titanium, to affordable items that most everyone can afford. Trends and styles continue to change but interests in ancient jewelry designs are still popular. Jewelry artisans still continue to create individually inspired pieces and have many followers. Jewelry that used to be for gods, royalty and the wealthy are now available to all. Although styles change what has not changed is men and women's desire to wear jewelry and love the beauty it holds.

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