

Arts And Antiques

Collecting Victorian Jewellery

By Abby Cronin

For thousands of years jewellers have crafted gemstones and natural materials to create remarkably decorative and symbolic forms of adornment. And throughout the ages women and men have worn jewellery to display status, fashion, celebrate events, express mourning or even to convey intimate messages. Victorian jewellery exhibits all of these meanings in an exceptionally wide array of materials and designs. So – if you love jewellery and find you are unable to resist the collecting habit, your appetite is bound to be stimulated by learning about where to find good quality pieces in London's antique arcades and shops. Let's take a quick tour and look at a few examples of Victorian jewellery. We begin with the ever-popular jet.

Jet was one of the most plentiful and

decorative materials used by Victorian jewellers. The most important source of Victorian jet was from Whitby on the coast of North Yorkshire. Made from fossilised wood formed under intense heat and pressure, it is surprisingly light in weight. Whitby jet can be highly polished and carved into numerous ornaments and objects of jewellery. After the death of Queen Victoria's husband Albert in 1861, jet was closely associated with mourning and black was the most popular colour in jewellery for some forty years. There was a flourishing market for jet jewellery throughout these years and you can find a vast array of designs in today's antiques markets. They range from modest affordable bar pins (see one here) to oval lockets, earrings, elaborate bracelets and spectacular sets. An exceptionally beautiful set seen here is the 'French' jet parure*, circa 1870, in its original display case. It belongs to the British Museum and is pictured in the



British Museum's comprehensive publication, *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria: A Mirror to the World*, by Charlotte Gere and Judy Rudoe, 2010 (p.123).

Jet was also made from other materials such as bog-oak – a dark brown, dull wood from Irish peat bogs. Popular in the 1850s, bog-oak jewellery was cut into numerous forms: flowers, brooches often carved with the deceased's name, and unpolished jet whose 'dead' black tone represented the depth of mourning. There was, however, a distinct crossover between mourning and fashion jewellery. Fine jet ornaments also include long strings of beads in a variety of designs, combs and costume jewellery often made of French jet. French jet or black glass is heavier, cold to the touch and easily distinguished from other forms of jet. Other materials used include black onyx and black enamel. After the death of Victoria (1901), taste changed rapidly and the passion for mourning jewellery evaporated and was replaced with fashionable and frivolous ornaments reflecting changes in lifestyle.

Victorians also loved cameos. "Cameos occupied a special place in Victorian culture, crossing the boundaries of art and personal ornament," according to Gere (p467). Sometimes referred to as portable sculptures, cameos are defined as "a carving in which the design stands out in relief from its background". Dating cameos can prove tricky but they are usually identified by their settings



and subject matter. Technically, cameos are made from shell, hardstones, precious and semi-precious gems or even other organic materials such as coral, ivory and jet. Today you will find some made in plastic or composition materials but these are mainly cheap copies. Cameo jewellery was abundant in the Victorian era and most of the medium-priced pieces in antique markets are largely from the 19th century. Highly collectable antiquarian cameos from Roman and Renaissance times rarely appear because they



are hard to find but do turn up in specialist auctions.

Themes in early Victorian cameos are largely based on Greek mythology and neo-classical subject matter. They depict powerful figures such as Greek and Roman deities, nobles, statesmen, church figures and philosophers. Some early 19th century cameos were made in sets of complete groups of mythological figures, animals and cherubs. Mid-century cameos were often framed in gold filigree surrounds. But at the beginning of the Victorian era classicism gave way to romanticism. Cameo designs became softer and the subjects carved into brooches feature naturalistic scenes, ladies in Tudor costumes



and figures standing in rustic landscapes. By the 1860s to the 1880s, however, subject matter was once again strongly classical. Seen here are a few examples which illustrate these themes. The classical cameo brooch displays a Roman soldier in full regalia holding a spear. Mounted in a stunning gold frame circa 1880s, he has a striking heroic presence.

By contrast, toward the end of the Victorian era, feminine subjects became more fashionable. The image here shows two cameos of female heads. This jewellery was sought after by an increasingly affluent middle class of consumers for whom cameos had become an essential item of female adornment. It was not unusual for a Victorian woman of means to commission a cameo in her likeness – a form of portrait. Images of an idealized woman with a fashionable hairstyle and Romanesque features were also typical. The vogue for cameos reflected changing fashions in clothing and jewellery and toward the end of the Victorian era a woman often wore a cameo on the neck of her blouse or hung one from a velvet ribbon. Two cameos seen here are typical of this late period.

Victorians also enjoyed an abundance of decorative silver jewellery by the middle of the 19th century. There was a rich source of inexpensive silver after the discovery in 1860 of the Comstock Lode in Nevada, USA. Once



silver was readily available, jewellers designed a diversity of brooches which went into mass-production by the 1880s. Some had figurative engraving or took the form of an outstretched hand. Surfaces were overlaid with coloured floral motifs, woodland images and many other styles. Lockets were especially popular and worn on linked chains or necklaces. Pictured here are four lockets. Each one hangs from a different chain. Chains were made of articulated mesh or a series of uniform linked panels.

When American Commodore Perry negotiated a trade agreement with the Japanese in 1854, enthusiasm for Oriental goods emerged in Europe and America. A flood of Japanese art objects were imported. Japonesque or Japonaiserie style, a core theme in the Aesthetic Movement (1869-1900), quickly



became an important influence in jewellery designs both in America (notably Tiffany & Co) and Britain. An example of one of the most attractive forms of silver jewellery produced in the Japonesque mode was the silver bangle. A variety of bangles are pictured here. Easy to wear and affordable, their polished surfaces were engraved with

landscapes, delicate flowers, waterlilies, bamboo, and birds in flight. Bangles were often overlaid with gold strips and coloured highlights; some were designed to look like belts. They caught on quickly and are as wearable today as they were 150 years ago. Other themes in Victorian silver jewellery highlighted special events and sporting designs such as golf clubs, cricket bats, boxing gloves and sentimental 'sweetheart' brooches.

The enduring beauty and diversity of Victorian jewellery continues to attract collectors today. You can learn a great deal about this period by taking yourself to the permanent exhibitions in the Victoria and Albert's Bollinger Jewellery Gallery and the British Museum. Both museums display a remarkable collection of Victorian jewellery. Next stop might be some of London's antique arcades, specialist dealers' shops and markets. Make a date to visit Alfie's Antique Market on Church Street where Naneen Brooks specialises in Georgian, Victorian and collectable jewellery. Linda Gumb sets out her wares every Saturday in The Red Teapot on Portobello Road. She has a superb collection of Victorian bangles among her eclectic mix of decorative antiques. Whether you are just browsing, wanting to add to or even start a collection, there is a wealth of original jet, cameos, and silver Victorian jewellery at every price level. Best bet: buy from a reputable dealer! Collectors of Victorian jewellery do so knowing that they are not just shopping for a special 'look'. Collecting is far more significant than merely acquiring tasteful accessories.

**Parure: a matching set of jewellery that includes earrings, a brooch, ring, necklace, and bracelet, and sometimes other items such as buckles*

Contact: Abby Cronin
artsjournalist@abbycronin.co.uk
Website: www.abbycronin.co.uk
Photos by Abby Cronin (except the jet parure – courtesy of the British Museum)