



All that Glitters

A CENTURY OF RAZZLE-DAZZLE

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Fun Facts

Semi-precious stones were used during the Victorian era to keep jewelry affordable. The most popular stones were garnet, amethyst, coral, turquoise, seen pearls, and opals.

Large diamond deposits were discovered in 1867, but diamonds did not become popular for jewelry until after the introduction of electric lighting in the 1880s. Electric light allowed the diamonds to sparkle.

A karat describes the amount of pure gold in an alloy. Pure gold is 24 karats (24K), 18 karat (18K) gold is 18 parts gold and 6 parts other metal. After 1854, jewelry could be made in 9, 12, and 15 K, rather than just 18K.

Queen Victoria established strict rules of etiquette for wearing jewelry. Diamonds could only be worn with evening wear, and only by married women, since diamonds were customarily gifts to a wife from a husband. A single woman wearing diamonds was considered to be flaunting inherited wealth, which was considered vulgar, or wearing a gift from a lover, which was considered immoral.

Early Victorians wore jewelry with hidden meanings, including “acrostic bracelets” where the first letter of each gemstone spelled a word. A bracelet set with lapis, opal, vermeil, and emerald spelled “love,” and a brooch with a ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby and diamond spelled “regard.”

The opening of trade relations with Japan in 1853 inundated the west with examples of Japanese craftsmanship and “Japonaise” style. Japanese motifs continued into the early 20th century with jewelry, fans, clothing, furniture, and even architecture.

The invention of spring-driven clocks in the 16th century made the portable pocket watch possible.

The watch stem for setting time and winding pocket watches was invented in 1838.

The first wrist watch was made in 1868. These “wristlets” were made for women and were considered a passing fad.

Soldiers began to use pocket watches fitted into cupped leather wrist straps to free up their hands during battle as early as the 1880s. As tactical precision became increasingly important, makeshift wristwatches were used to coordinate and synchronize troop movements during the Anglo–Boer War between 1899 and 1902.

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Expandable, flexible wristwatch bracelets were invented in 1906. Pocket watches began to be made with open faces and lugs on the side so they could be attached to leather wrist straps.

Wristwatches were a wartime necessity by World War I. The Rolex Watch Company was founded in 1915.

The first wrist watch with a perpetual calendar was invented in 1925; the first water-resistant watch in 1927; and the first watch for children—Mickey Mouse, of course—in 1933. The battery-powered watch was first produced in 1953.

Couturier Coco Chanel introduced the term “junk jewelry” in the 1920s.

Costume jewelry in the 1920s included clips and “liberty pins” to hold up corsetless lingerie.

Bakelite (an early plastic) was used for the imitation of a number of different substances. From the 1920s on, it could be produced in a variety of colors.

Hatpins were used from the 1850s to the 1930s to secure hats to women’s heads. They were also seen as “lethal weapons” and symbols of equality for women.

When the balance of trade between Britain and France was endangered by the importation of hat pins at the start of World War I, the British Parliament passed an act that restricted the sale of hat pins to two days a year, at the beginning of January.

Victorian mourning jewelry was made of jet (lignite coal), gutta percha (tree resin from the Isonandra Gutta tree—gutta percha was also used to insulate electrical cables), vulcanite (an early rubber produced by adding sulfur to vulcanized rubber), French jet (black glass), horn, bog oak (fossil peat), and bois durci (a mixture of hardwood sawdust and blood).

Aluminum was a fashionable jewelry metal between 1855 (when it was introduced at the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris) until 1886 (when new methods of mass producing aluminum were invented and the price fell dramatically).

Jewelry and keepsakes made of human hair were popular during the Victorian era. Some were mourning pieces or “memento mori;” others were made as love tokens from sweethearts, family members, and cherished friends. Many pieces of jewelry had hidden compartments to hold human hair.

A pen knife, originally intended for making and sharpening quill pens, is small and thin and will not interfere with the appearance of dress clothes when carried in a pocket.

Earrings could have screw backs after 1900 and clip backs after 1930, but up until 1930 most women had pierced ears for studs or ear drops.

Electroplating, invented a process that coated base metal with silver or gold, was invented in the 1860s. This method of manufacturing less expensive jewelry replaced an earlier, secret process for making imitation gold called “pinchbeck” or “pom pom.” Pinchbeck was a combination of zinc and brass.

Most early Victorian jewelry was imported into the United States. Tiffany’s was founded by 1849 and by 1896, there were 1,800 trade-marks of American jewelry manufacturers.

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The invention of the sewing machine allowed both home sewers and factory workers to easily create a wider variety of costumes in the 1860s. This variety called for more and varied accessories: clasps, brooches, beaded purses, fans, and combs.

Matched sets of jewelry called *parures*—necklaces, brooches, breast pines, earrings, lockets, bracelets, and rings—were first available in the 1860s.

Accessories for young children that were miniature versions of adult wear were introduced in the late 1870s because of the influence of Kate Greenaway.

Oscar Wilde introduced vibrant colors into clothing in 1870. This daring vogue also influenced the design of jewelry and accessories.

Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, Americans of the late nineteenth century began to demand luxury items featured in publications, including the new mail order catalogs.

Mass-produced jewelry between 1880 and 1920 had unique “finishing touches” applied by jewelers.

The hatpin achieved its greatest popularity, its longest length, and its most fantastic design between 1900 and 1913.

The development of the parcel post system in 1913 made shopping by catalog fast and efficient.

Gold was taken out of circulation in the United States in 1933, and much less became available for jewelry. Plastics and lesser metals filled this gap.

Powdering one’s nose using a “vanity box,” today called a compact, became stylish during World War I.

