

Egyptian Art

By Fayez Barakay

At some point before the dawn of recorded history, man learned to shape beads from the wonders of the natural world. Beads were carved in a variety of colors from the fiery orange of carnelian and the midnight blue of lapis shot through with golden stars to the soothing twilight purple of amethyst. They were crafted from ivory, shell, and bone, blown from glass and rolled from clay. The wealthy and the poor alike wore strands of beads in life, and frequently these were buried with their owners as favorite treasures for the journey through eternity.

The Barakat Collection embraces piles of Egyptian Faience beads that were painstakingly culled, one by one, from the sands of an ancient necropolis; amber that had passed down the northern trading routes to the markets of Crete; vermilion coral from the Persian gulf and perfect beads of Phoenician glass which time has painted with the iridescence of a peacock's tail. Each bead is equally fascinating, and each tells a story.

Necklaces and many other pieces appear in the Barakat Collection exactly as they were worn many centuries ago. The pieces blend carnelian from the age of Solomon with jasper from the time of Cleopatra. What is most special about these beads is that they link us directly with the lives of their ancient owners. They grace the neck of a modern beauty with the same radiant sparkle as when they adorned a Bythibian dancer in the age of Alexander the great. Pieces in the collection blend authentic echoes of the past with such as coins, seals and amulets with the finest available precious metals and gems. Jewelry has been fashioned that is at once classic in scope and contemporary in design. Every piece is as unique as the man or woman who wears it.

Jewelry is said to be one of life's luxuries, but it is virtually impossible to imagine the world without it. The adoration of ornament is as old as civilization itself. Once mankind obtained the basic necessities of life, he began to adorn himself with rare, unusual and beautiful objects. This delightful mode of self-expression has continued without interruption to the present day. Tastes have varied and styles have changed, but never in history has any civilization, great or small, gone unadorned.

Paintings and carved reliefs from Egypt and Persia portray kings, nobles and ordinary citizens alike wearing collars, bracelets and rings to set themselves apart from the crowd. The jewels of the boy Pharaoh Tutankhamen are legendary; as dazzling today as they were more than three millennia ago. Cleopatra (who is said to have preferred emeralds) sought to impress her lover, Marc Anthony, by dissolving a priceless pearl in wine. In the buried city of Pompeii, excavated ornaments of gold, silver, gems, and pearls attest to the classical world's fascination with precious jewelry. Sitters in the portraits of the Renaissance and Europe's golden age displayed their wealth and dignity with jewelry. The terracotta tomb figures from pre-Columbian America and ancient China likewise indicate the former eminence of the deceased.

Primitive man, perhaps to imitate the mating dance of nature, decorated himself with flowers, feathers and brightly colored stones. Hunters wore the teeth and claws of wild beasts, which they had conquered to display their bravery and establish status within the community. Eventually, as civilizations grew more settled and less nomadic, jewelers became prominent artisans of the towns and villages. People discovered very early that by adorning their necks, ears, and hands they could make themselves feel good by satisfying a deep human desire to distinguish oneself as an individual. By wearing jewelry, people feel somehow enriched, more self-confident and more attractive. These are internal emotions to be sure, qualities we must find within ourselves, but jewelry helps draw them out and bring them radiantly to the surface.

Jewelry has always represented wealth in its most condensed and visible form. The story, however apocryphal, that the Dutch originally acquired the island of Manhattan for a handful of beads is hardly surprising. Far greater empires have been won and lost for the sake of brilliant jewels. Jewelry is a portable means of proving wealth and power. One cannot wear an island to dazzle an audience.

Some jewelry from the ancient world survives intact, needing only a slight dusting off to make it as eye-catching as it was when worn centuries ago. The spiritual energy that radiates from such pieces can be quite awesome. People have become emotionally overwhelmed as they slipped on an ancient ring, sensing that they had worn it in a past life. Though such mysteries cannot be fully understood, the bond that exists between the spirit and objects of beauty cannot be denied.

Magical properties have long been ascribed to stones. Many ancient cultures revered jewelry for its talismanic power to ward off evil, bring good health, prosperity, and to insure success in battle. Some Barakat creations incorporate such amulets as Egyptian carvings believed to ward off scorpion bites, Mayan jade designed to appease the jaguar god, Cufic invocations from the Koran carved on ruby, and Assyrian hematite beads which were said to inspire courage. These pieces are offered without guarantee of their current usefulness or potency, but many that wear amuletic jewelry swear that the balance of their lives has been restored. If they believe so, then is it not true? For it is believed that such luck depends on the attitude of the wearer. There is a renewed interest today in the healing properties of stones and their effects on the human body and spirit. Extensive research has been undertaken into the origins and history of these ancient beliefs and some pieces in the collection have been designed with as much attention to their curative potential as to their visible beauty.

Engraved gems and seals from the Classical and Byzantine eras provide splendid centerpieces for contemporary jewelry. Many of the original metal settings have long since been melted down for some other purpose, however some seals in the collection remain in their original gold settings. New settings have been fashioned which evoke the classical style, but are meant for modern hands.

The gems display a great variety of characters and insignias. Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, appears fully armed on one red carnelian. A triumphant eagle is carved in white

over black on beaded sardonyx. An amethyst boasts the exquisite features of an empress. In the past, these pieces might have been insignia of office, marks of religious affiliation, protective talismans, or a token of love. Time has only enhanced their beauty. Their history is left to the imagination.

Egyptian scarabs were used for centuries as personal signatures and amulets of good fortune, and they continue to exert a powerful spell on modern tastes. Carved with the image of the scarab beetle on one side and a variety of hieroglyphic symbols on the other, these amulets, set in pendants, bracelets, and rings draw us into the realm of the ancient Egyptians. Scarabs were talismans of continuous rejuvenation, and according to Egyptian belief, the sun was pushed across the sky by the sacred beetle. More than any other object, these benevolent talismans epitomize the spirit of Egypt. When a body was mummified, a scarab replaced the heart in the belief that it would provide life in death.

Scarabs were carved in ancient Egypt for over three thousand years in every variety of stone and precious metal known to the ancients. The practice has been renewed today for the tourist market, however the magic seems to be missing. Those ancient pieces intended as jewelry tend to be life size replicas of the desert beetle and are found in gold, lapis, amethyst, glass, or clay, depending on the status and wealth of the original owners. The most common form of scarab was of white steatite sometimes glazed with faience. Modest, yet elegant in appearance, scarabs glow with the immediacy of past experience and an energy as timeless as the Egyptian landscape.

The practice of setting coins in jewelry was common in antiquity, and to wear a coin portrait of a reigning ruler was considered a sign of political allegiance. The barbarian tribesman who brought about the fall of the Roman Empire fashioned fantastic jewels from the coins of the vanished classical age. Each coin was hand struck, and no two are exactly alike. They have been patinated by time and have survived by accident or luck. These coins are the artifacts, which speak most eloquently of history on both a grand and intimate scale. Unlike many treasures from the distant past, coins can usually be dated to specific periods. We see reflected on their surfaces the optimism of young kings, the ambition of usurpers, the dreams of an empire and the never ending human wish to live free from all oppression.

Silver coins set in cufflinks may once have been the pay for an officer who fought beside Alexander the Great at the battle of Issus. The denarius found in Judea and engraved with the portrait of Tiberius might be the very coin which Jesus held in his hand when he proclaimed, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's." The bronze coin struck by Shimon Bar Kohba during his revolt against Rome still provokes emotion as an enduring testament to faith and the survival of the spirit. We know when we touch an ancient coin it has passed through long-vanished hands. It has been through the lives of people who laughed and sang, pondered, argued, and loved. Those who strived for necessities and luxuries just as people do today. These treasures link us to the unbroken chain of history and remind us that mankind has survived through the rise and fall of empires, the comings and goings of wise men, tyrants, great battles,

small triumphs, and the unstoppable passage of time. They excite us in a renewed hope for the future.

Of paramount importance from an archaeological perspective is that the integrity of the artifacts be preserved. All settings in the collection have been custom designed to prevent damage and alteration to the ancient pieces. Surrounded by a glittering frame of gold and rubies, an Athenian coin will be altered only by the hand of centuries past, but not the jeweler. The same materials which were favored in ancient times have been selected to enhance a particular artifact. For instance, a coin portraying the Emperor Hadrian may be set in gold and strung in a necklace with lapis lazuli beads. Though the lapis is recently carved, the style is identical to the work of a craftsman of the Imperial court at the height of Rome's grandeur.

To this end, the far corners of the world have been reached in search of exquisite gems and semiprecious stones. In many cases, pieces were obtained from the sources of the ancients. Gold has, since ancient times, been the standard of beauty. It compliments even the simplest artifacts, and alone or with other materials, 18-karat gold is included in most Barakat designs.

Diamonds are the exception to the rule of authenticity. It is only recently that man has learned the art and science of faceting to draw out the diamond's brilliant fire. Diamonds lend breathtaking radiance to jewelry and they are represented throughout the Barakat Collection, although in ancient times they were rarely used. If faceted diamonds had been known to Cleopatra, perhaps she would have used them, rather than emeralds or pearls to dazzle her lovers.

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