

The Evolving World of Jewelry

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Since man (and woman) first walked the Earth, humankind has been fascinated by the shiny gems, rocks, and precious metals that make up the jewelry we all know of today. In many ancient cultures, wearing jewelry largely correlated with religious and spiritual symbolism; whereas today jewelry wearing is more tied with self-expression, fashion, and self-decoration. However, the desire to adorn oneself and express status through jewelry is one trend that has continued throughout the ages, transcending both time and cultures.

Body adornment with jewelry dates back 100,000 years to the old Nassarius shells that were made into beads. These shells are thought to be the oldest known jewelry in existence. In addition to shells, the first pieces of jewelry were made from natural materials, such as bones, animal teeth, wood, and carved stone.

In addition to satisfying the human need for body ornamentation, throughout history jewelry has also been used for a variety of other reasons including currency, symbolism, protection, artistic displays, displays of romantic affection, and simple functional uses (think pins, clasps, buckles). Made out of nearly every material known on the planet, the varieties of jewelry around the world are virtually endless.

Early History of Jewelry

Over 40,000 years ago, the Cro-Magnons (ancestors of Homo sapiens) showed the first signs of jewelry with pieces such as crude necklaces and bracelets made of bone, teeth, and stone hung on pieces of string or bone. Jewelry from this time period was also found to have been crafted using shell or mother-of-pearl pieces.

In Southern Russia, bracelets that were carved using mammoth tusks have been found. Many pieces of ancient jewelry were commonly found as grave-goods, which are items that were buried or preserved along with the deceased, often serving as offerings to the gods.

Around 3,000 to 5,000 years ago, the first signs of jewelry making were prevalent in Ancient Egypt. The Egyptians most commonly worked with gold, for its luxury, rarity and workability. Wealthy Egyptians adorned gold jewelry in their life and death, as jewelry was often placed among grave goods.

In addition to gold and silver, and in place of precious gems, the Egyptians also used colored glass to design jewelry.

Jewelry making was also prevalent through Asia, starting in China over 5,000 years ago. Asian jewelry was decorative, religion-oriented, and used mainly in ceremonies. Also in Asia, India has the longest continuous heritage of jewelry making in the entire world.

In ancient Mesopotamia (approximately 4,000 years ago) jewelry making had taken over as a predominant role in the cities of Sumer and Akkad. The Royal Cemetery of Ur serves as the most significant archaeological evidence to date. Home to hundreds of burials dating 2900-2300 BC, the cemetery contained a massive amount of artifacts in gold, silver, and semi-precious stones.

Greek and Roman jewelry dates back to beads that were shaped into shells and animals. In later years, around 1400 BC, both civilizations started using gold and gems in their jewelry. The main purpose of jewelry to the Greeks and Romans was to ward off evil spirits and the “evil eye,” given by other people. While Greek men and women rarely wore jewelry (it was mostly worn for public appearances or on special occasions), Roman men and women dressed themselves in a considerable amount of jewelry. Both Roman men and women wore rings with a carved stone on it, used with wax to seal documents. This act would carry well into medieval times when kings and noblemen used the same technique.

The history of jewelry carries on throughout several civilizations post the fall of the Roman Empire. Unique jewelry designs and uses paved its way throughout the Middle Ages, and the eras of the Renaissance, Romanticism, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco. Jewelry also played a major role in American history, with the Native Americans, the Spanish discovery of gold, the modern jewelry movement, and more.

Jewelry Today

Within the past thirty years, Western civilization has experienced major technological advances and social changes. Jewelers of today have reflected these changes by using their originality and expertise within their designs for modern day wearers and collectors. Today’s jewelry designs embody both past and present cultures, with famous jewelers such as Cartier, Asprey, and Tiffany continuing to produce time-honored designs using precious metals and gemstones. In addition, new ideas and designs are surfacing among the less pronounced but equally talented artist-jewelers throughout the world.

While the jewelry of today serves mostly aesthetic purposes, it continues to serve other purposes as well. Like so many past cultures, jewelry is still representative of one’s social status or official ranking. It continues to serve as an emblem of religious, social, and political affiliation, as well as a symbol of love and commitment in several cultures.

The history of jewelry is quite extensive, with several different uses among an array of cultures. Jewelry has endured for thousands and thousands of years, providing unique insights into all sorts of cultures. It will continue to remain an important part of society and culture as the years go on.