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**Craft/Metalwork**

**Title:**

**Rings, Functional, Symbolic and Ornamental**

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## Introduction



There is probably no item that is so common to all cultures and ages, yet so frequently overlooked as rings. It is such a common object in our lives, yet not many people can tell you much about its origin and original uses. Wedding and engagement rings today are taken for granted but how did this custom begin.

The ring has been used for many different functions throughout their history the most obvious being as purely decorative. In nearly all cultures rings generate an atmosphere of mystery and magic. There are many tales about rings, rings that grant the bearer three wishes. Today friends of a newly engaged woman twirl her engagement ring around their own finger three times towards the heart and make a wish. For magic we also learn that an unbacked ring could allow a stone to warn the skin in the presence of poison. Rings were used as status symbols - as the ring is a perfect setting for displaying expensive gems, it was widely used to display a persons wealth. They were used as signs of mourning, for storing poison and "such rings simply afforded a ready supply of poison at need but another type constituted a death dealing weapon" (Kunz, 1973 p37). They were used as signs of love, engagements, marriages. They were employed a lot in religious use. The most important use of the ring and the oldest, after decorative, being that of a seal or a signet.

Of all various forms of jewellery, the ring became the most significant during the war years, often it was the only kind of private possession a soldier could have on him in battle or could leave as a token to his beloved. Only too often it was the identifying object found on a body. While at home, women frequently sacrificed their rings to answer appeals for funds to help the war effort "I gave my gold for iron" was one of the slogans.

Over the centuries we find that the fashion for wearing rings changed. Different fingers were more favourable at different times, the finger on which a ring was worn could also tell something about the person. In the second half of the nineteenth century Russian noblemen had their ring hoops so tapered that they could wear a whole group of six on one finger. Wendy Ramshaw a jewellery designer of this century designed a series of rings that are designed to be worn together on the one finger.

According to Cartlidge, contemporary rings are a surer guide to a wearers character and outlook on life than to his or her bank account or social





standing. The ring indicates the degree of taste and personal panache of its possessor rather than placing him or her in a clearly definable social group. (Cartlidge, 1981 p146)

How rings are worn today and why are purely of individual taste, unlike in history when sometimes laws were passed on the wearing of rings and other jewellery in general. The Romans were particularly fanatical about who could and couldn't wear rings, and about the materials they were made from.

The materials used in ring making has changed over the centuries, gold and silver are still used widely, but 'new' materials such as plastics and titanium are also used. "Rings define status in a more varied and subtle manner today: by shape and maker rather than by cost and intrinsic value". (Cartlidge, 1981 p146)

The techniques used for making rings are basically the same as they were thousands of years ago, although the steady advancements in technology have not only invented new techniques but in some cases improved the old ones.

A ring becomes special to a person for different reasons - individual reasons, the fact alone that one wears or makes a certain ring, means that it holds some form of sentimental or special quality that is different from other forms of jewellery. It is always in close contact with the body and can be seen at all times without the use of a mirror, this makes it all the more personal. Many people will say that they feel naked without their ring/rings on, this to me is very understandable. Because of a rings close contact with you, you see it with every move of your hand, therefore you form a bond with it.

This thesis is broken up into five chapters.

**Chapter One** details the origin of the ring, in particular the importance attached to signet and seal rings.

**Chapter Two:** explains the different techniques and materials used in ring making, with a particular look at gemstones and their use in rings.



**Chapter Three:** As there are many interesting and fascinating types of rings, it would be impossible to mention them all. Chapter three looks at some interesting types and their functions, some of the uses more believable than others!

**Chapter Four:** In this chapter I look at the different ways in which rings were worn, on what fingers, how the fashion changed throughout history. This chapter looks also at not only how they were worn but who could wear them.

**Chapter Five** deals with twentieth century rings. How they relate to rings of antiquity. The different influences that affect the design and making of rings today. It ends with the conclusion of a story that will go on forever.





# **Chapter One**

## **The origin of the ring**



**T**o find the origin of the ring we must go back to the beginnings of civilization. Rings of bone, wood, shell, stone and other ornamental materials must have been worn from time immemorial. Almost every culture has its tales of rings, rings that bring dominion over spirits or confer wealth, immortality or the fulfilment of three wishes.

In a world without mirrors great satisfaction must have been gained from jewellery that could be seen by the wearer himself and of these the ring is the most obvious choice - a reminder of personal status, beauty and distinction, to be savoured with every gesture of the hand.

It was not until the discovery of gold and the realization of its extraordinary physical properties that the history of rings like other jewellery begins. Although other materials must have been used, very few have survived the realms of time, like metals.

Where and when gold was first worked is open to question. Discoveries by archaeologists compel us continually to change our ideas about structure and development of the ancient world. What is certain is that gold was being worked with extraordinary skill around 3000 BC by various communities in the middle and near East. By about 2800 BC goldsmiths in Egypt and Western Asia had remarkably little left to learn and only very few processes were added to the development of this skill since ancient times.

The swift advance of metal techniques led to a rapid extension of trade contacts and movements, which in turn led to the evolution of the seal.

Man needed some form of security on behalf of the fragile and vulnerable goods which they dispatched into a dangerous and often hostile world. A seal might bear the owner's name or amuletic motif with which he was personally associated. The obvious form for a personal seal was a ring, since it could be worn at all times and conveniently used without being taken off.

From the end of the Old Kingdom, seals carved in stone were used as a method of identification, later the backs were carved as scarabs. These were drilled and worn on a cord round the neck, but in the middle kingdom it became fashionable to tie the scarab on one finger with a thread. The thread was replaced by gold wire, the wire by rod and thus the world's first





signet ring was made. By the age of the new kingdom shanks were being cast and the seal held in by a rivet, which allowed it to swivel and expose either the scarab or the signature. Later still, solid signet rings were produced from gold or carved stone. **Plate 1** shows three Egyptian finger rings which show the development of the Egyptian signet ring (fig a) is an engraved seal strung on a thin piece of gold wire. In (fig b) the wire has been replaced by a stouter rod. The bottom ring is cast as a single piece and becomes almost indistinguishable from a signet ring today.

In Egypt as early as the Twelfth Dynasty (1800 BC) the scarab had become the bezel of the finger ring. By mounting the scarab so that it could be swivelled round, the Egyptians made it ideally suited to the signet ring, for not only could it be worn as a potent amulet (the scarab was the symbol of the resurrection in the other world), but it could also be engraved on the flat underside and so serve as the signet of the owner whenever required. By engraving on the underside of the scarab a further advantage is gained, because the signet is worn against the skin, it is therefore protected from the risk of scratches and surface damage.

From Egypt the custom of wearing signet rings was transmitted to the Greek world and also to the Etruscans from whom the usage was derived by the Romans.

Our knowledge of a great Bronze Age civilisation in the Aegean is due to the discovery by Heinrich Schliemann of the city of Troy. Here among the incredible amount of treasures excavated 8,000 gold finger rings were found.

Another excavated site in Crete 'Minoan' is split into three periods - Early Minoan, Middle Minoan and late Minoan. We find that in the Early Minoan period (2500 and 2000) finger rings and earrings seem to be unknown as none have been recovered.

Fashion changed between jewellery discovered from the early Minoan period at Mochlos and that made after 1700 BC. Finger rings became popular at this time again. These were not unlike the Egyptian rings with the scarab making a brief appearance. Rings fulfilled the triple function of being decorative, talismanic and signatory. Some bezels were round, but for the most part they were oval, with designs chased from gold sheet or inlaid.





A



B



C



**Plate 1**

The development of the Egyptian seal ring.





E



D



C



B



A



Plate 2

Five engraved Greek seal rings





Seal-cutting had been a traditional Minoan craft and like the Egyptian style, these seals were generally worn around the neck during the early period but in the middle period they were incorporated into ring making. Initially soft materials such as steatite, which could be cut with a copper chisel were used for seals but during the Middle period Cretan craftsmen were cutting hard stones such as rock crystal, cornelian and agate with incredible skill depicting animals, magical symbols and hieroglyphics.

The art of seal cutting reached unprecedented heights, after the Mycenaeans conquered Knossos and assumed overall power of the Aegean Empire. Single figures were replaced with complex human scenes involving several figures, religious ceremonies, animals fighting or mating and Minoan bull baiting. (**Plate 2**) shows examples of five engraved gold seal rings. (Fig. A) "depicts a strange scene full of pervasive symbolic significance. An opulent female figure in Cretan court dress sits beneath a laden fruit tree holding a bunch of poppy heads in her hand. Two other women, apparently of less importance approach her with gifts of flowers and two more votaries, one tending the tree the others also offering flowers, are shown as small girls. The ring, which, in design, technique and motif owes more to Minoan Crete than to its Mycenaean provenance is a vivid reminder that very little in the absence of written explanations, is known about Cretan religion". (Ward 1981,p28) One unusual thing about many of the seal-rings produced at this time is the shanks were often so small that they could not possibly be worn even by a child. This would indicate that the practice of wearing them on a cord around the neck had come back into fashion.

At the beginning of the 7th century BC, a new nation of jewellers and goldsmiths emerged in Northern Italy. These were known as the Etruscans. Finger rings made their first appearance into Etruscan jewellery around the 5th and 6th centuries. Again these were of an early Greek design - gold shanks with an oval bezel engraved with figurative designs.

After several hundred years of near artistic stagnation, the Greeks once again emerged as masters of both the major and minor arts. There are many examples of sculpture and decorated pots, from the Archaic period (600-475 BC) but examples of jewellery are few. There is a very simple reason for this - lack of materials. Although there was virtually no access to supplies of gold the craftsmen designed new techniques and designs.





Problems like this have always occurred throughout the history of jewellery. In Egyptian times, the stones used for jewellery were readily available in the early days but volume of production, particularly in Egypt meant that demand started to exceed supply and the craftsmen were forced to seek substitutes to simulate their favourite gemstones. Finger rings changed very little however in appearance or function from the late Minoan/Mycenaean civilisation. Stone seals swivelled on rivets or were fixed on a cloisonné setting. Other rings found at this time were made of gold with designs cut both in intaglio and relief. **Plate 3** shows a superb example of a Greek ring from this time, depicting a chariot drawn by four horses.

Jewellery in the Hellenistic era was no longer the preserve of royalty and nobility. Signet rings continued to be made in both solid gold and gold and carved stone. Perhaps the dominant feature of Hellenistic work is its extraordinary variety. This effect was enhanced by the introduction of a considerable range of colourful gems and strongly contrasting forms and novel styles often occur. Many complex rings with stones would seem purely decorative.

According to Black, the most important item of jewellery to the Romans was the finger ring. Finger rings flourished during this time. Both men and women wore numerous rings at the same time (Black 1974 p80). Theirs was the first civilisation to use rings as a sign of betrothal but rings also fulfilled the functions of talismans and badges of office. For like the former civilisations the seals of signature still existed. The Egyptians had started this fashion two thousand years earlier. **Plate 4** shows a variety of Roman ring styles. All 2nd/3rd century A.D. (fig A) is a gold finger ring with an engraved seal, (fig B) is a finger band of Opus interrasile, a Roman technique of open work chiselled from sheet gold. (fig C) is a gold finger ring with coin head of Faustina, wife of Emperor Antonius Pius (fig. D) is a finger ring set all round with garnets and sapphires.

The coin theme was used a lot in the design of Roman finger rings; they were, judging by the enormous amount recovered, the most popular form of jewellery throughout the Imperial period. **Plate 4**, (fig.C). Roman rings also incorporated some of the most exciting carved gems and cameos ever produced,

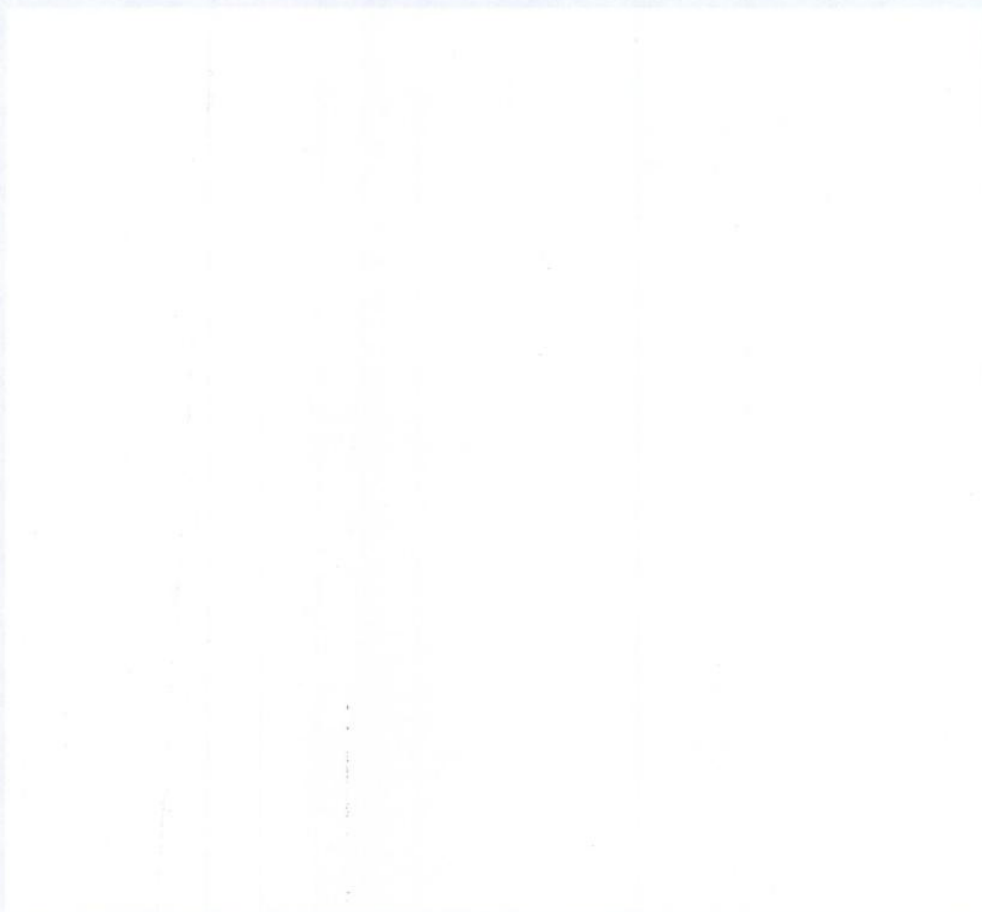




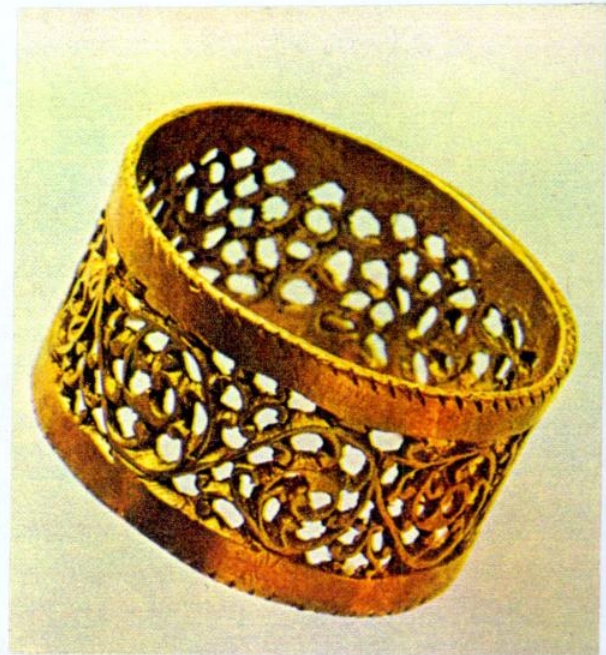


**Plate 3**

Greek Seal Ring







## Plate 4

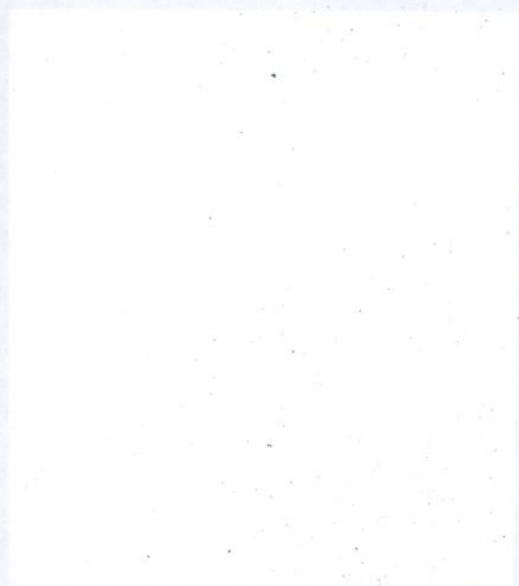
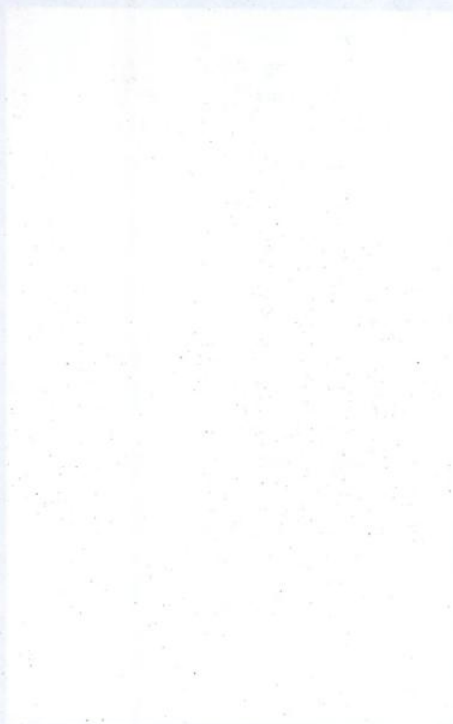
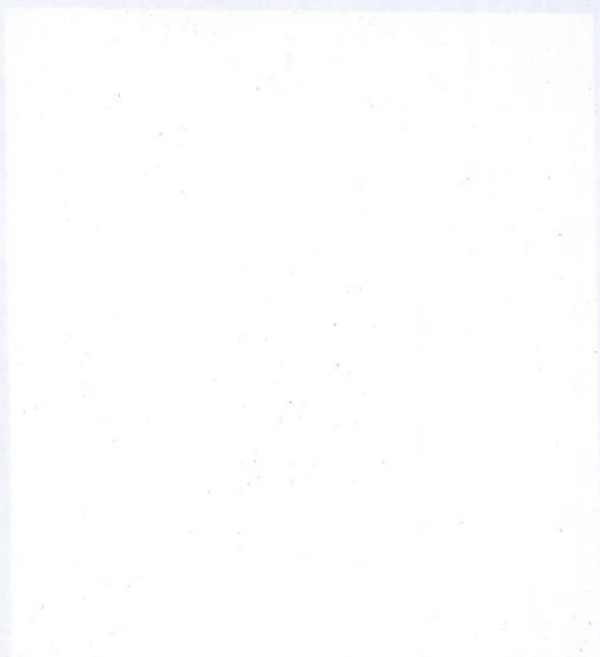
A variety of Roman finger rings

Fig a. Gold signet ring with engraved seal

Fig b. Finger band of opus interrasile

Fig c. Gold finger ring with coin head

Fig d. Finger ring set with garners and sapphires.

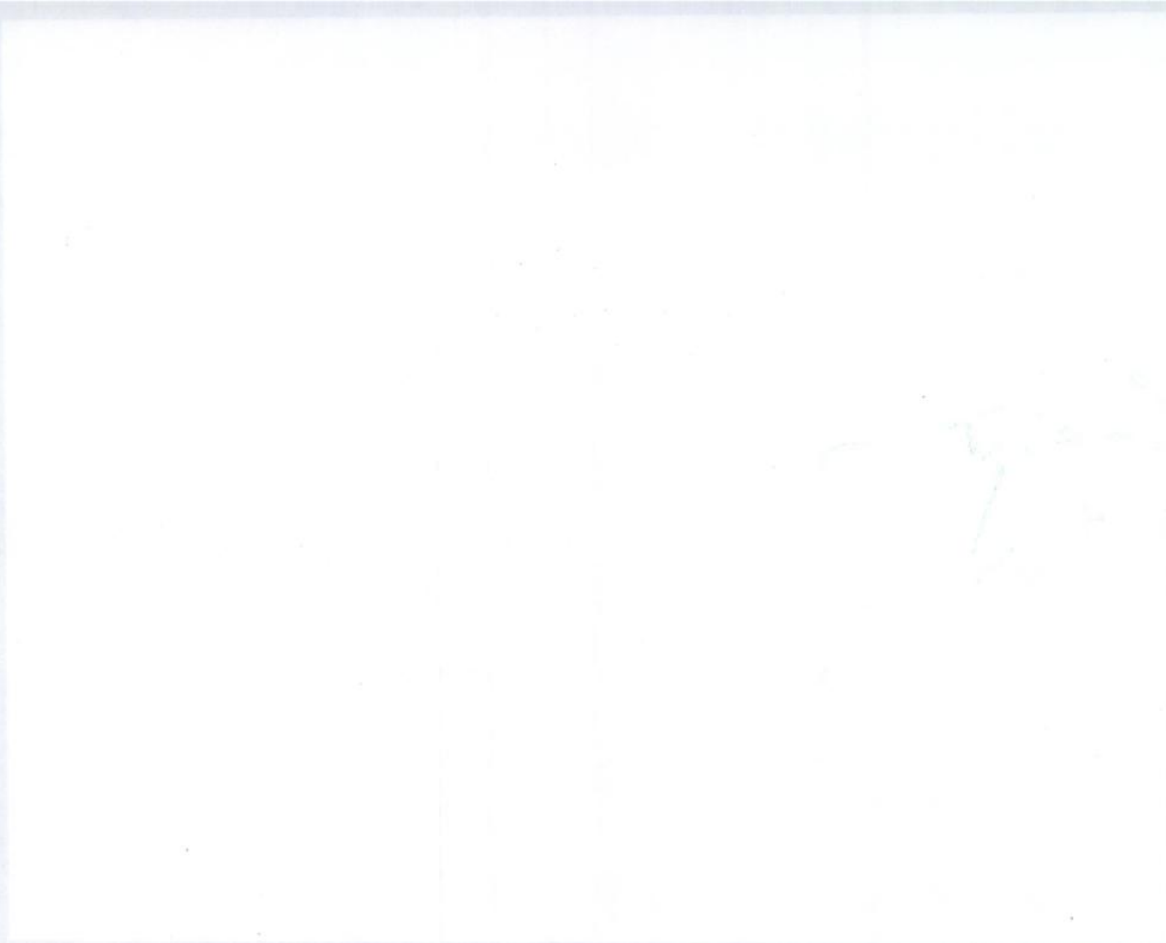






**Plate 5**

Two examples of carved Roman rings







**Plate 6**

Medieval Sherifs seal ring





**Plate 5** shows two examples of carved Roman rings one carved in relief, the other in intaglio.

"Ancient jewellers used almost as big a variety of stones as we do today. The Romans developed a taste for easily wearable rings robust and magnificent, evolved from the earlier Greek seal rings which were much more intricately engraved and of a shape more awkward to wear" (Hughes, 1972 p41)

Limitations in the supply of engraved gems meant that the signet rings of engraved metal were increasingly frequent in the late Middle Ages. This made it easier to employ a variety of devices that associated the impression with the owner of the ring - heraldic devices, Merchants' marks and initials.

Merchants' and craftsmen not entitled to bear arms often used merchants marks (a symbol composed of lines frequently based on the cross or the figure 4) on their rings, sometimes alone and sometimes set in a shield. Usually the merchants' mark was set in the bezel, sometimes with the name of the owner. Merchants' marks first appeared in the 14th century and occurred on the signet rings of almost every country. Occasionally the bezel of a signet ring shows a craftsman's tool such as a stonemason's hammer.

Signet rings sometimes had devices related to an official position such as the signet ring in **Plate 6**. This may have been used as a sheriff's ring. This ring combines the function of a signet ring with the decoration of a religious ring. On the shoulders St. Christopher and the virgin and child are engraved. The oval bezel is engraved with a castle gateway. This may have been a heraldic device but is more likely a symbol indicating that the ring belonged to a Sheriff, since the castle gateway appeared as many late Medieval Sheriff's seals.

In the post medieval period there begins to be a very complete record of the appearance of all kinds of jewellery, from which it is possible to construct a picture of how and why and to a certain extent by whom rings were worn. Rings had a number of functions, practical and otherwise, but the most important used for a ring was still as a signet.

The famous "fisherman's ring" of the pope was a signet used to seal papal documents, it was destroyed at each pope's death in a complicated ceremony designed to show that the authority vested in the late pope had





passed on to the conclave of cardinals. A new signet was made for the new Pope.

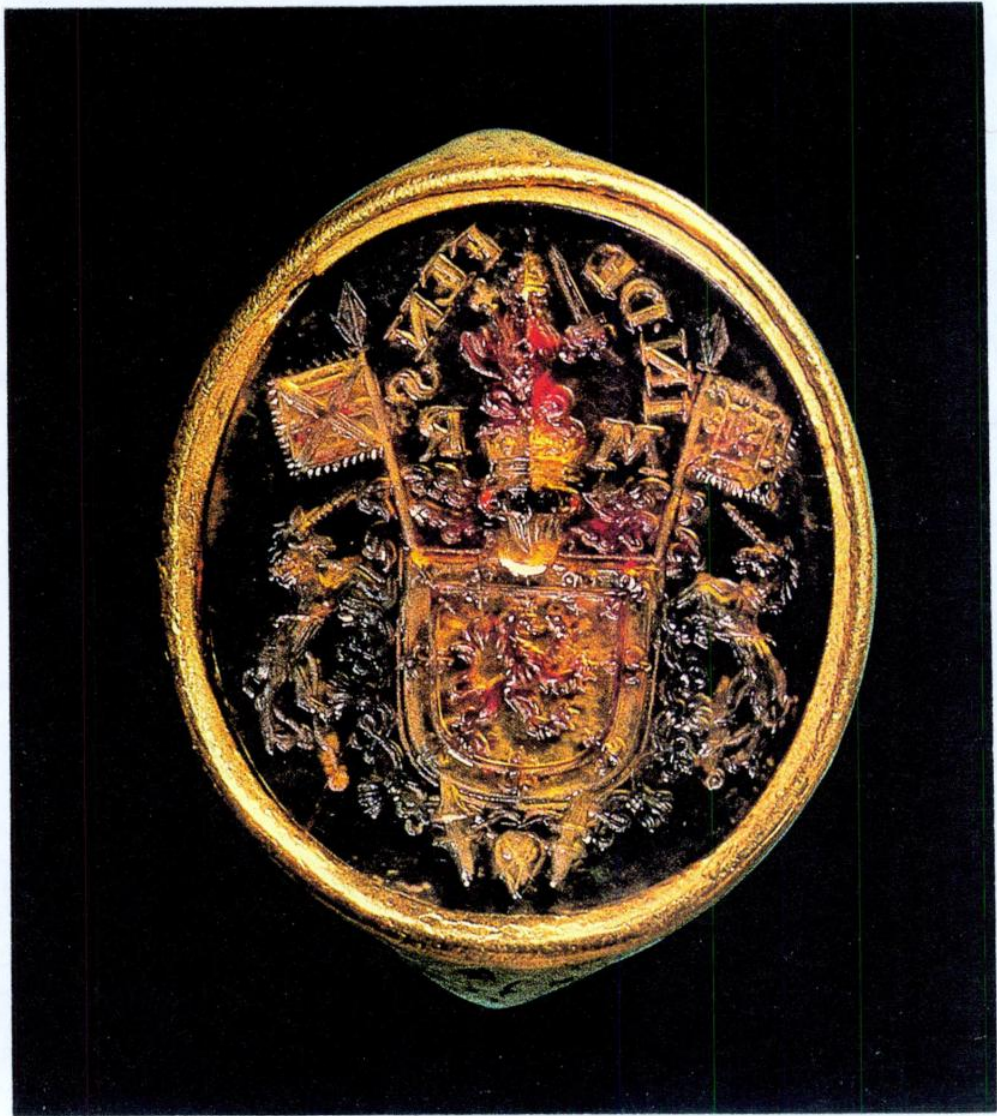
The custom of sealing documents with the impression from a personal signet, engraved with a device such as a coat of arms, identifying the owner, was a good precaution against the tampering with, or altering of the documents. The heraldic signet ring became fashionable in the 15th and 16th centuries. **Plate 7** is a good example of a heraldic signet ring, it belonged to Mary Queen of Scots and bears her coat of arms. This type of signet has remained the most common type of signet ring ever since. Signet rings are rarely used for their true purpose nowadays, they are usually worn only for decorative purposes.

The ring gained in popularity as manufacturers availed themselves of new technical processes. The signet ring has always been popular. In more modern times it has been adapted to another use as a college ring or as Americans might call it fraternity ring. It became a symbol of belonging to a group. In America the tradition of the college ring can be traced back to 1835 when the graduating class of cadets at West Point Military Academy decided to mark the event by having a ring specially designed and made for all graduates. During the first world war, Llyod G. Balfour started a jewellery business in Massachusetts. Soon he began to specialise in signet rings. This custom spread from colleges to high schools, sport clubs, fraternities of every kind and even business organisations. The L.G. Balfour Company is still in operation today which gives us an idea of how popular these rings still are **Plate 8** is a page from a catalogue of gold and platinum wedding rings and signet rings - published in England by W. Wilkinson Ltd. 1950. The signet rings were made by stamping out the overall shape and then hand finished with a file and an engraver to provide the individual decoration. The bezel was left practically bare for the initials, with perhaps just a tiny decorative border, while the sides and shank were given various contours. These designs are similar to designs in production today. (**Plate 9**, modern signet ring)

As can be seen from its continuous use throughout the history of the ring, the seal which started out as playing an important functional role in society and which has now become an almost purely decorative form, paved the way for hundreds of other types and forms of rings.







**Plate 7**

Heraldic signet ring of Mary Queen of Scots





# Wedding and Signet Rings



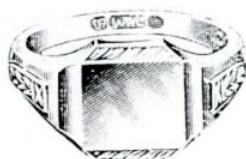
1653  
Heart



1654  
Clifton



1655  
Wide Heart



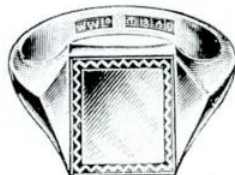
1656



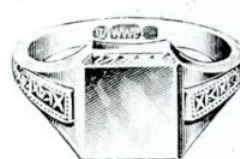
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1658



1659



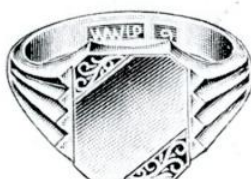
1660



1661



1662



1663



1664



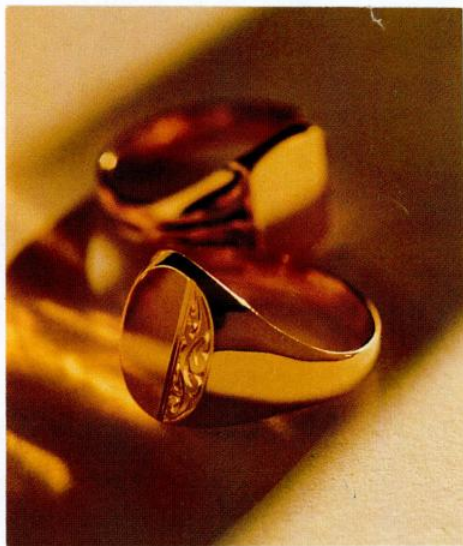
1665

*A style to fit every need*

## Plate 8

A page from a catalogue of gold and platinum wedding and signet rings by W. Wilkinson Ltd. 1950.





**Plate 9**

A typical modern signet ring - purely decorative





## **Chapter Two**

### **How Rings Were Made**



**I**n antiquity many rings were made of wire which was either produced by hammering thin strips of sheet metal and then rolling it between plates of stone or bronze, or by winding strips around a mandrel which was subsequently withdrawn, leaving a tube which might be reduced in diameter by tighter coiling, or by a process which was known as block twisting by which the strip of metal was twisted into a spiral and then smoothed by rolling.

As already mentioned in chapter one the first Egyptian scarab rings simply consisted of a scarab, one of the commonest amulets, pierced and tied to the finger by thread. Afterwards a thin gold wire replaced the thread and later thicker rods were used for the hoops. The scarabs were threaded independently on thin wire which was wound decoratively round the rods, here we see no need for soldering, but usually the simplest metal rings call for at least one join - with the exception of rings that have been cast in one solid piece, like a lot of seal rings. For the most part however, the hoop will consist of a strip of metal with the ends joined and a further joint will often be needed to attach the decorative bezel. The most basic joints were made by folding the two edges of the metal together tightly and subjecting them to great pressure, a process which was easy and needed no heat, but the results were often too insecure and inclined to be too bulky to be suitable for a ring. Alternatively, the two edges of the piece of metal might be sealed together. This process called for extraordinary accuracy of observation and promptness, if the join was underheated the rods would not stick, whereas overheating would melt the ring.

The most effective type of joint for such fine work as ring making is soldering. Soldering relies on the fact that an alloy of the metal used, silver or gold melts at a lower heat than the metal itself. For instance gold solder containing one seventh silver melts at  $970^{\circ}\text{C}$ , while the pure gold does not melt until at  $1063^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The surfaces to be joined are laid together and fluxed. Flux is used to prevent oxidation and facilitate the spread of the solder. Pieces of solder are placed along the join and the whole piece heated until the solder runs joining the two ends together. (Plate 10)

Once the basic ring was made there were many impressive techniques for decorating the surface of gold and metal in general. From the second millenium BC until the Industrial Revolution the techniques used by goldsmiths who also were jewellers were largely unchanged in essentials





allowing for improvements in tools and other workshop equipment. The early goldsmiths hammered ingots into sheet metal of suitable thickness for working. It is at this point that goldsmiths faced another serious problem. Initially, the metal would be soft and yield to the hammer but under continual hammering, it would become hard and brittle. To solve this problem the metal had to be heated periodically this became known as annealing and must surely have been the first major technical discovery made by the goldsmiths of the ancient world.

Most of the techniques used to decorate rings and metal in general are still in use today. One of the oldest of these is repoussé, a relief pattern raised on sheet metal worked with a hammer and punch from the back. Repoussé is a freehand process and each piece is therefore time-consuming and unique. **(Plate 11)**

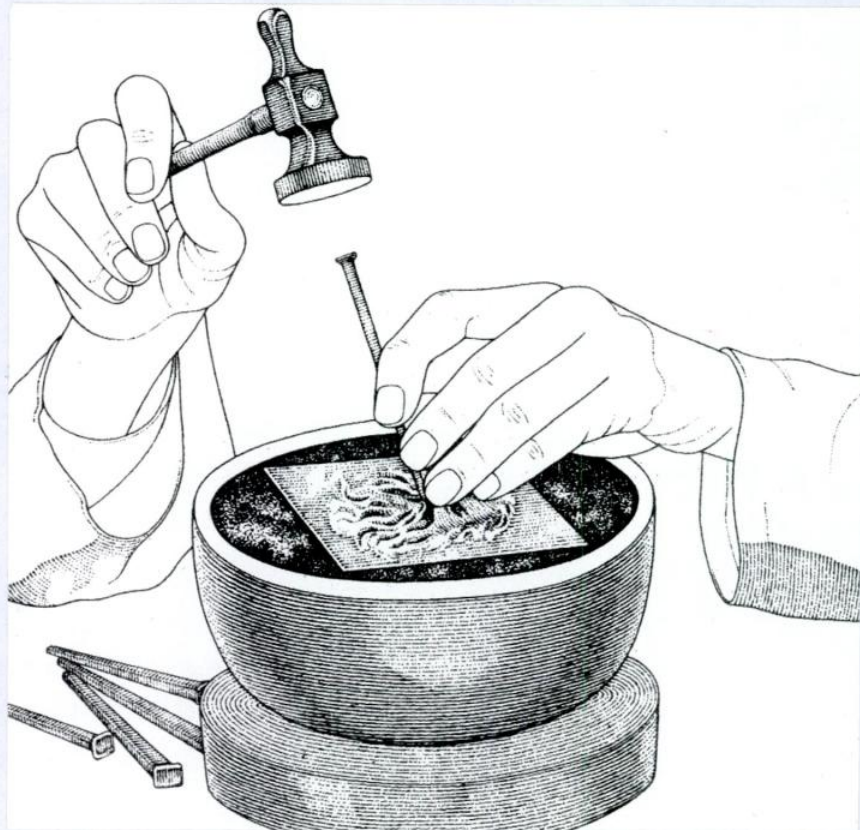
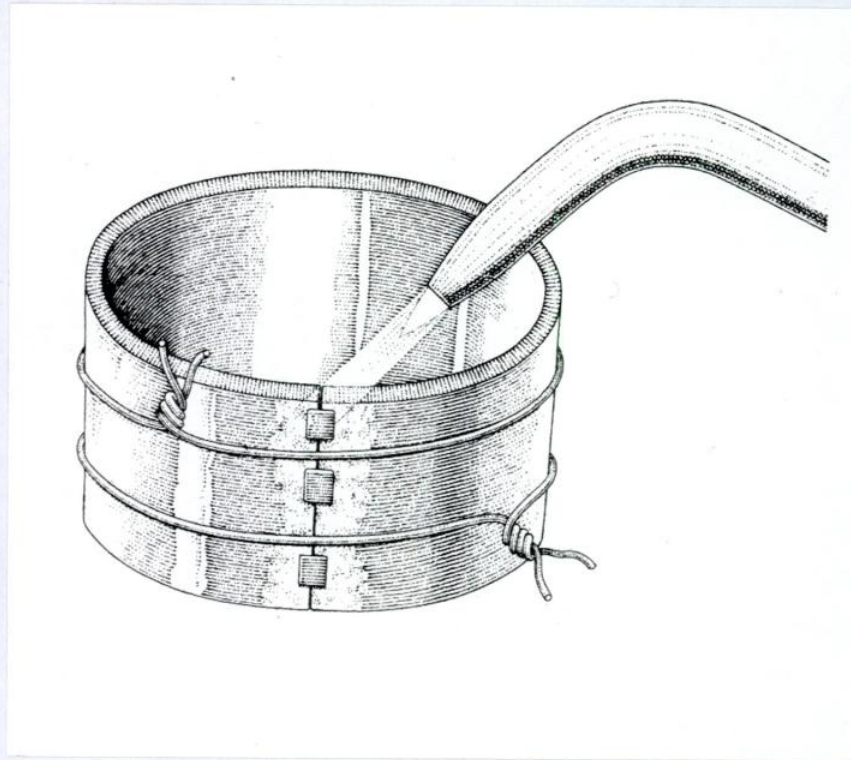
When a design was to be repeated exactly, a stamp or punch of hard metal was used. Two dies carry the motif (Plate 12), one in relief and the other in intaglio. A sheet of metal was laid between the two dies and a sharp tap applied to the upper one. Stamping marks the introduction of the concept of mass production to the world of jewellery. If the design was stamped in relief, it became known as cameo or if concave was known as intaglio. Both these terms are also employed to describe engraved gems which feature a lot in classical finger rings.

Surface decoration might include applied wire which is called filigree, **(Plate 13)**, piercing (opus interasile) a highly sophisticated technique in the hands of Roman and Byzantine jewellers as in **(Plate 4, fig B)**. Enamel chasing and engraving were also used frequently to decorate surfaces **(Plate 14 chasing, plate 15 engraving)**.

Filigree became a favourite form of decoration as soon as craftsmen discovered a method of producing wire. The date of the introduction of the drawplate, a strong metal plate pierced with holes of different sizes, is open to question, but it has been suggested that it was in use in Roman times. Wires of different gauges and decoration were made by pulling strips through the plates.







**Plate 10**

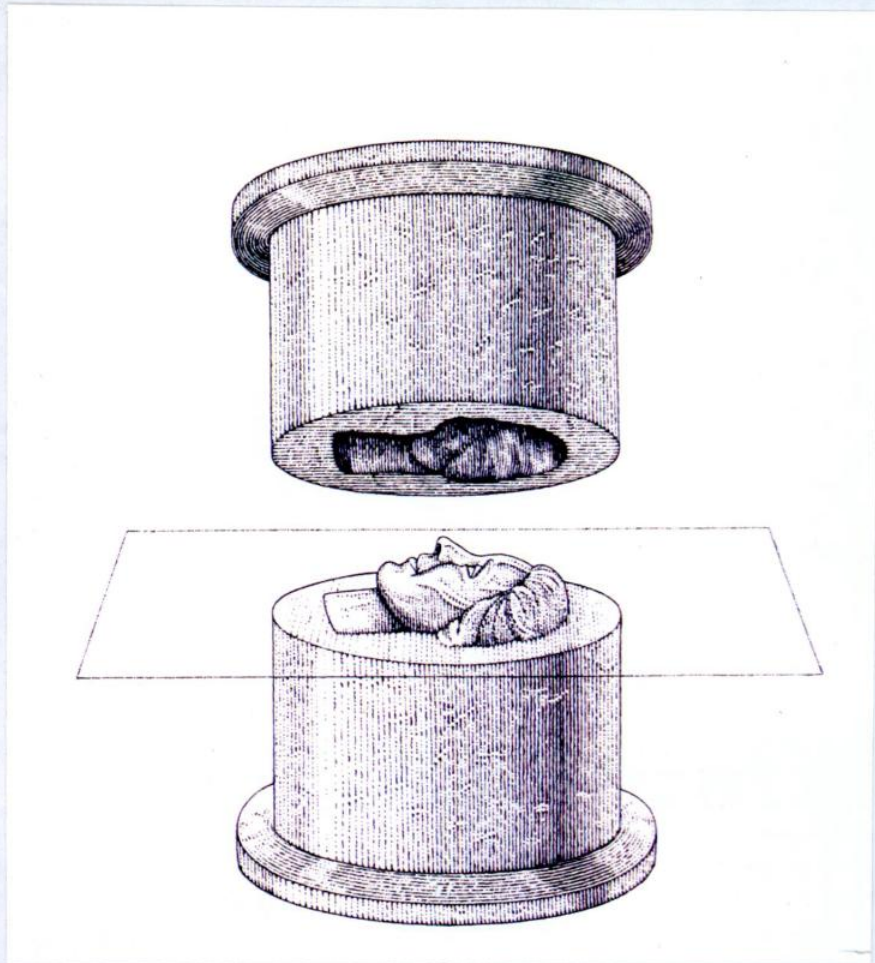
Soldering

**Plate 11**

Repoussé





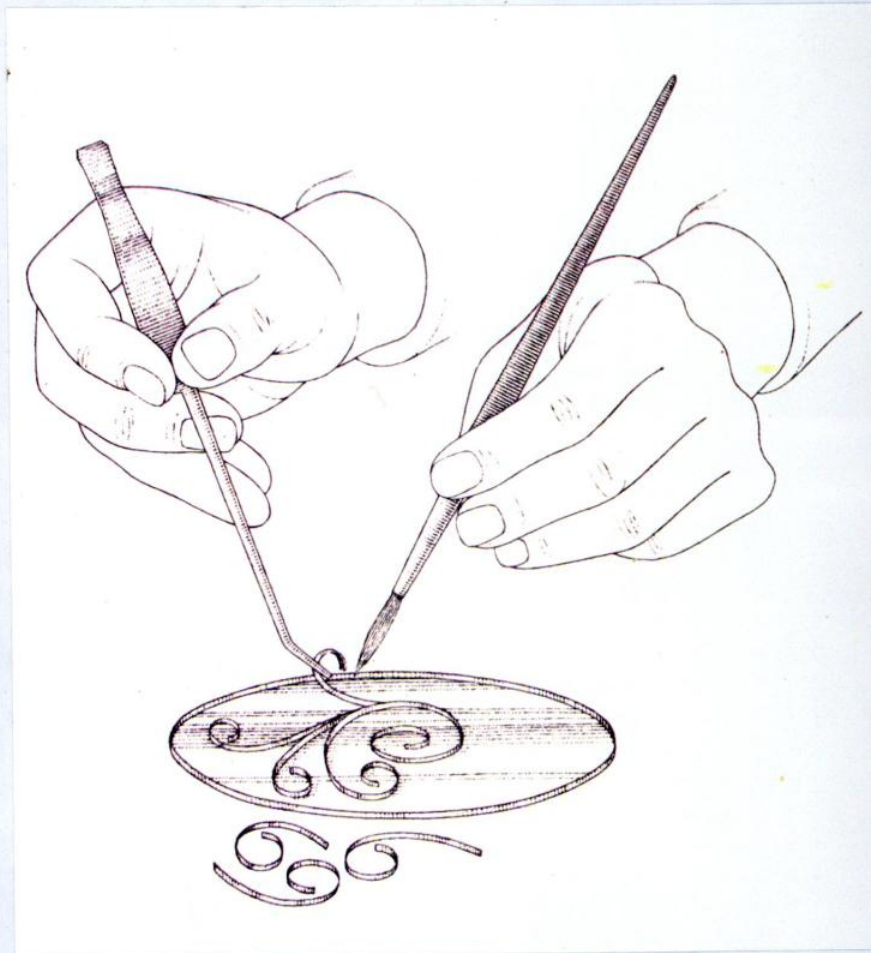


**Plate 12**

How stamping was achieved

**Plate 13**

Filigree







Engraving was executed on the front of the work with a fine tool which gauged out a thin sliver of metal. Granulation was one of the most remarkable achievements of the early Bronze Age goldsmiths. In this case the pattern of the design is composed of lines or masses of minute gold grains, separately made and soldered to the background. (Plate 16)

It is generally thought that the Egyptians of the New Kingdom (1559-1085 BC) rarely used enamel, even though at a glance most of their work would suggest enamel as in (Plate 17) but in fact this piece has been inlaid with stones cut to the shape of the cells, glass was also used. This is a remarkable piece of craftsmanship.

"Even the mighty pharaohs of the all-conquering Eighteenth Dynasty were, on occasion, ready to accept coloured glass instead of precious stones and since their wealth was virtually boundless, this points inevitably to the conclusion that the idea was of far more importance than the reality. Power was vested in the colour of the stone not in its price." (Ward, 1981 p15)

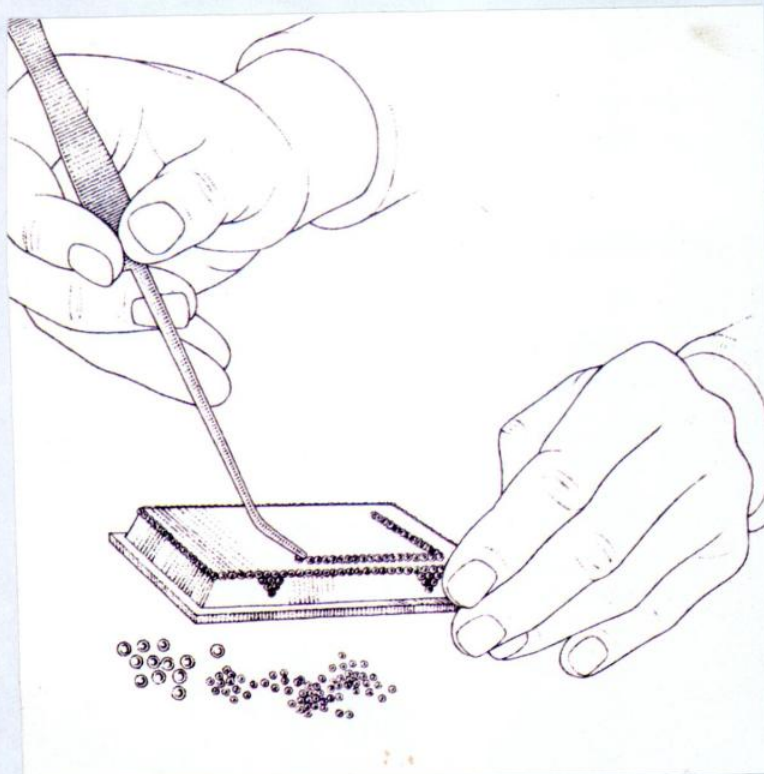
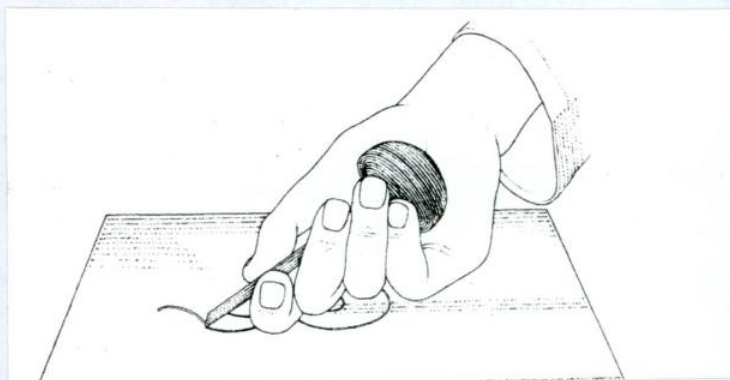
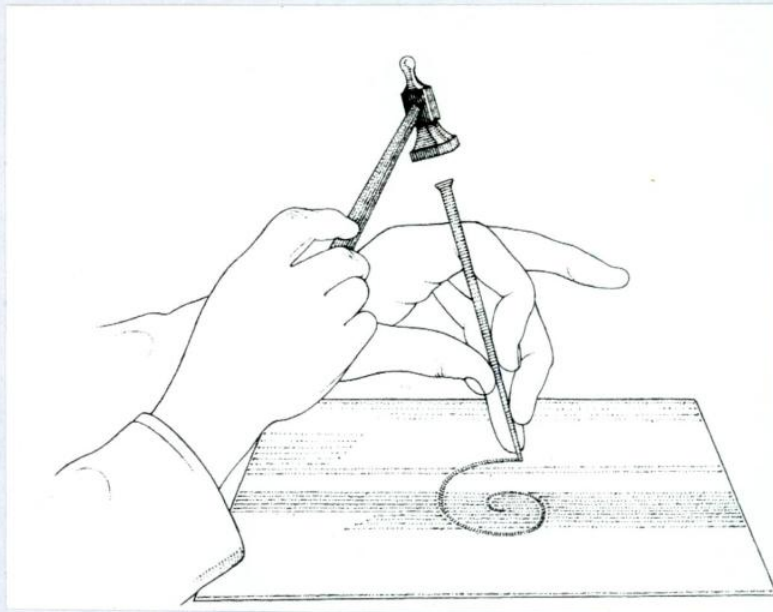
Niello a matt black sulphide was another material used for inlaying. It mainly consists of silver sulphide. It was known to the ancient world and remained popular with Byzantine, Anglo Saxon and Medieval jewellers. A lot of rings were inlaid in this way. Plate 18 shows examples of two rare finger rings from the early Middle Ages, in gold with niello inlay.

An interesting factor when considering the techniques and materials used in ring making and jewellery in general is, despite geographical and time differences, certain key motifs and styles recur time after time. Artists and craftsmen have produced original variations on the basic repertoire of articles. Often techniques and materials that were very popular within one society were never used in another. Techniques went out of fashion and were not reintroduced back into jewellery until thousands of years later. Niello for instance was widely used for the decoration of dagger blades and spearheads by the Mycenaeans, but it was not until the 3rd century AD that there is any evidence that the technique was used in jewellery.

"From time immemorial precious stones have been prized as tokens of love, as symbols of wealth and social status, or as objects endowed with magical or religious significance, finding a place in man's esteem thanks to their qualities of beauty and rarity" (Zucker 1984 p32).







# **Plate 14**

Chasing

# **Plate 15**

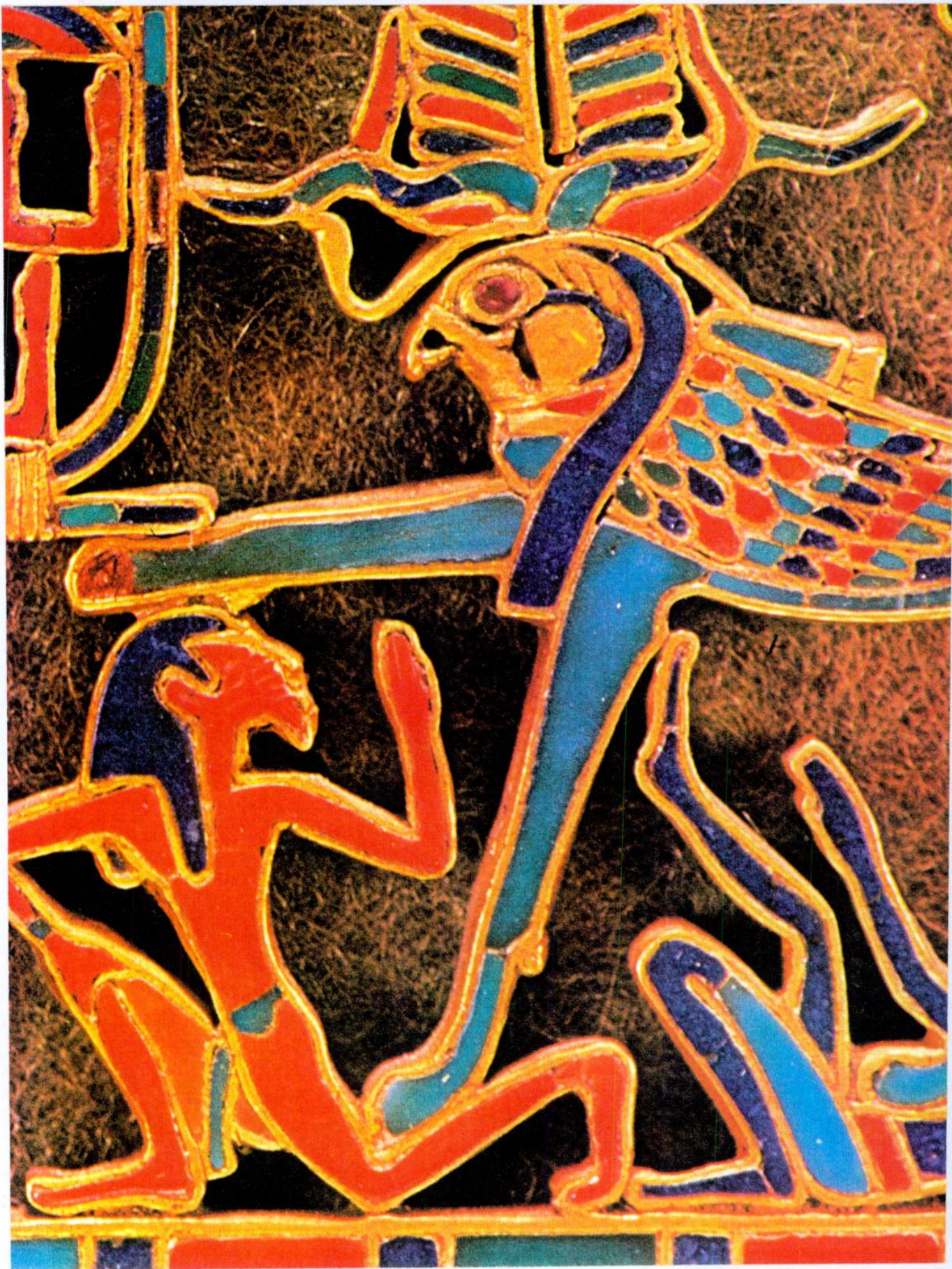
Example of Engraving

# **Plate 16**

Granulation







**Plate 17**

Egyptian inlay with stone







**Plate 18**

Two finger rings from the early Middle Ages, inlayed with niello





It is not surprising then to find that the use of precious and semi precious stones goes back a long way in the history of the ring.

Apart from the colour of the gems, which seems to have been a major consideration to the Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans attributed a variety of useful if occasionally unlikely powers to jewels. They believed that the correct choice of gem was believed to cure anything from toothache to impotence, and though increased availability is undoubtedly the chief reason for the extensive use of bejewelled rings, these talismanic functions certainly provided an extra stimulus. "Amethysts supposedly protected against drunkenness, sapphires against poison, emeralds against treachery and garnets against accidental injury. Amber was thought to have mysterious restorative powers for those suffering from headache or toothache, lapis lazuli could always be sure of a market for it was reputed to have prodigious effects on the owner's sexual prowess" (Ward 1981 p15)

The stones used for jewellery were readily available in the early days, but volume of production, particularly in Egypt, meant that demand started to exceed supply and the craftsmen were forced to seek substitutes to simulate their favourite gems.

The stones used for finger rings in the classical world were occasionally carved into a complete ring plate 19, a practice which was revived from time to time. More frequently they were set in bezels after being shaped and polished, and, in some instances engraved with the aid of a bow drill. **(Plate 20)**

Elaborate cuts were not feasible with the equipment that the goldsmiths had, and for this reason, stones of only moderate hardness were used. Harder stones such as sapphires, aquamarines and topaz were not introduced into jewellery until Roman times, when the hardest of all, the diamond began to be used.

Gold, silver and bronze were the principal materials used to make rings in the Middle Ages. The decorative effect of medieval rings was generally achieved through the use of stones and by varying the shape of both bezel and hoop. In the twelfth century the renewed fashion for rings set with gemstones may have been influenced by a revival of interest in classical Lapidaries, Stones at this period were usually polished: faceting was rare.





The principle stones used were ruby, sapphire, garnet, diamond rock crystal and amethyst. The shape of the stone often determined the shape of the bezel, as the ring in **(Plate 21)** would suggest.

In England in the 14th century, every bishop upon taking up office was presented with a sapphire ring. This ring with its stone of deep blue colour, symbolised the powers of heaven that were vested in the bishop - powers giving him both temporal and sacred rights to dispense blessings and judgements.

"On seeing the stirrup-shaped gem-set bishop's ring in the Victoria and Albert Museum, one is struck by the enormous effort that must have gone into its design and creation. The sapphire, a deep blue Ceylon stone, had to be brought all the way from the East, through India via the Middle East, across the sea and finally to England. At that time, Ceylon was the principal source of fine quality sapphires. (Zucker 1984 p8).

There is also the literary allusion in the biblical mention of sapphire as the 'Throne of God'. The sapphire ring was so important as an emblem of a medieval bishop's station in life that, after his death, his tomb would be surmounted by a life size portrait sculpture in which, clearly visible to all, would be included a representation in stone of the stirrup-shaped sapphire ring. **(Plate 22)**

In many societies gems are talismans of strength. To the migration hoards that swept across Europe after the fall of Rome, garnets symbolised blood and hence virility and life. These fiery red stones were worn in battle in rings, belt buckles, swords and brooches. The Lombards, the Avors, the Celts and Visigoths all believed that garnets would give them power even in the hereafter. **Plate 21** shows a Roman garnet ring in the shape of an eye; the eye was intended as a talisman to protect the wearer and was often incorporated into rings.

"The basic idea of a jewel is to enhance the innate properties and allure of a particular gem by providing an appropriate setting" (Zucker, 1984 p36).

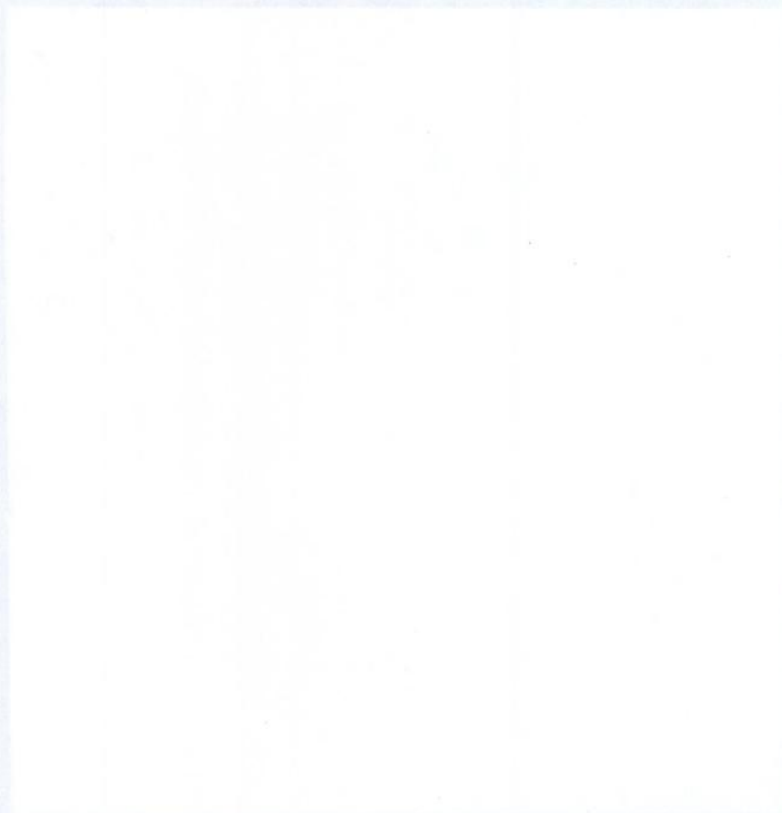






**Plate 19**

A Roman ring made entirely out of gem material (Amber)







**Plate 20**

Gold ring with engraved cornelian







**Plate 21**

Gold and Sapphire ring, the shape of the stone often determined the shape of the bezel.





In the Renaissance period, for example, Venetian jewellery designers were extraordinarily skilled in combining delicately coloured enamels with rubies, sapphires and emeralds. In the early 20th century the Art Nouveau jeweller René Lalique created a beautiful ring containing a deep-colour, rich Burma sapphire, in combination with a plique à jour enamel setting (Plate 23). "The quality of light passing through the sapphire contrasts markedly with the quality of light passing through the translucent enamelled setting." (Zucker 1984 p36). Enamel by its nature is fragile whereas sapphire is extremely strong and hard. This contradiction in aesthetics appealed to Lalique and to the French Art Nouveau philosophy of aesthetics. The combination of enamel and sapphire works well together in Lalique's ring but this is not always the case, as the ring depicted in Plate 24 might suggest. In my opinion the combination of enamel and onyx cameo does not work here. The enamel does not compliment the stone, which would probably have looked much better in a plain, gold setting.

Different societies and periods had their favourite materials. The three periods of fashion for amber being the Etruscan times, the late Roman era and the Victorian age. Today amber is returning to favour. The Etruscans' love of amber meant that they had to import Baltic Amber from over two hundred miles away. The Romans also had a great love of amber, often the whole ring was carved out of the gem material (Plate no.17). This was regarded in ancient Rome as an especially powerful amulet. Pieces of amber were often set in low-grade silver rings and worn as amulets, the amuletic powers of the stone being more important than it's setting. (Plate 25).

The combination of coloured stones with gold was popular in Egypt and Mesopotamia from an early age. Cornelian and Lapis Lazuli were the favourites, but green feldspar and other stones were also employed. In Europe the fashion seems to have been for gold alone and here coloured stones were seldom set in gold before the Roman period.

Extensive trade contacts meant that there was a general constancy in the techniques and materials used in jewellery making. In most parts of the old world, the designs are essentially abstract, geometric or organic in form. Spirals, circles, rosettes are timeless forms that can be paralleled in most parts of the world and in all periods. The only civilisation that stands out in contrast is Egypt. Strongly representational forms were very much a characteristic of Egyptian jewellery, which could quite literally spell out meanings in its designs.





A



B



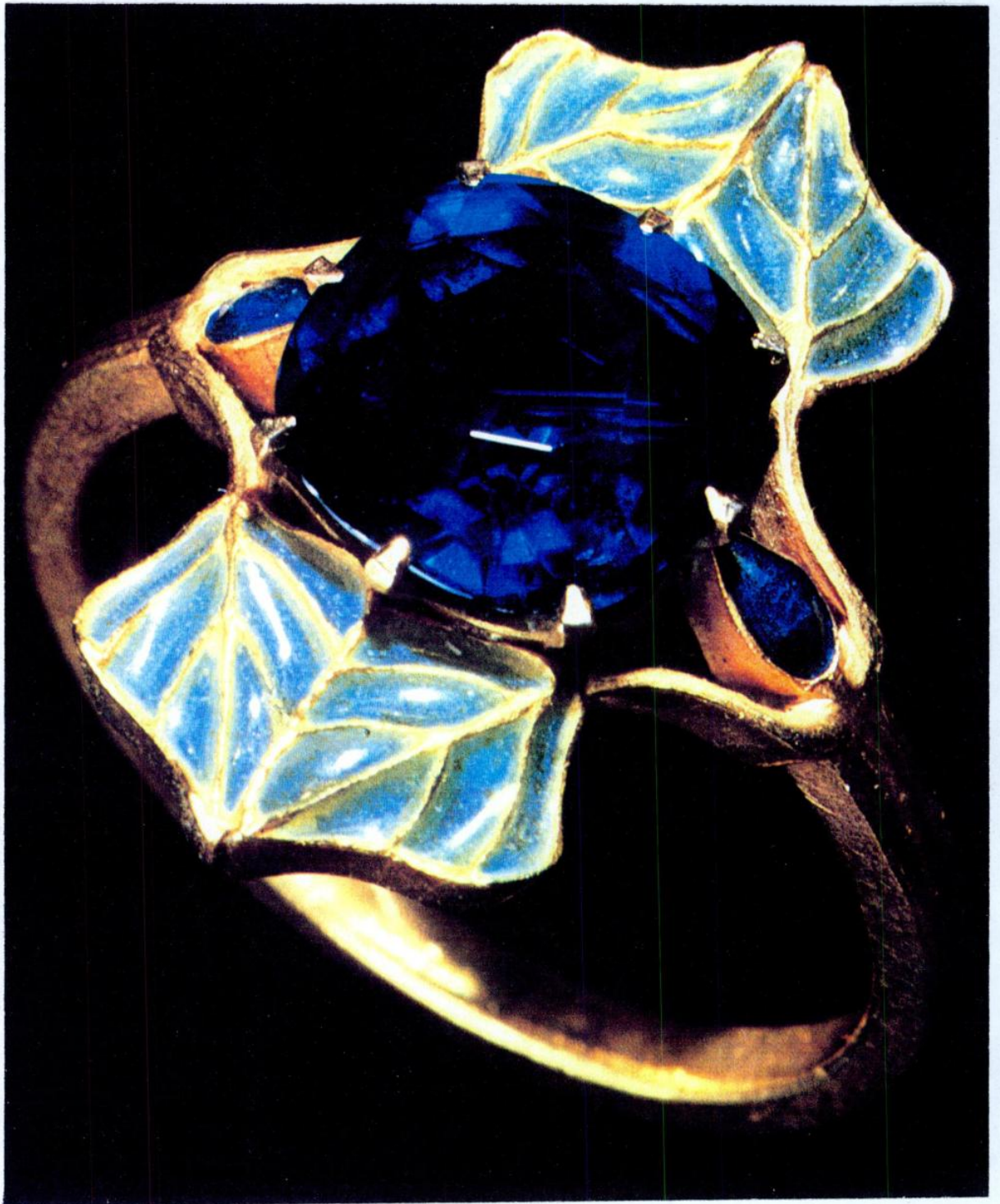
**Plate 22**

Fig A Stirrup shaped sapphire

Fig B A Roman garnet ring in the shape of an eye







**Plate 23**

An Art Nouveau by René Lalique, sapphire and enamel

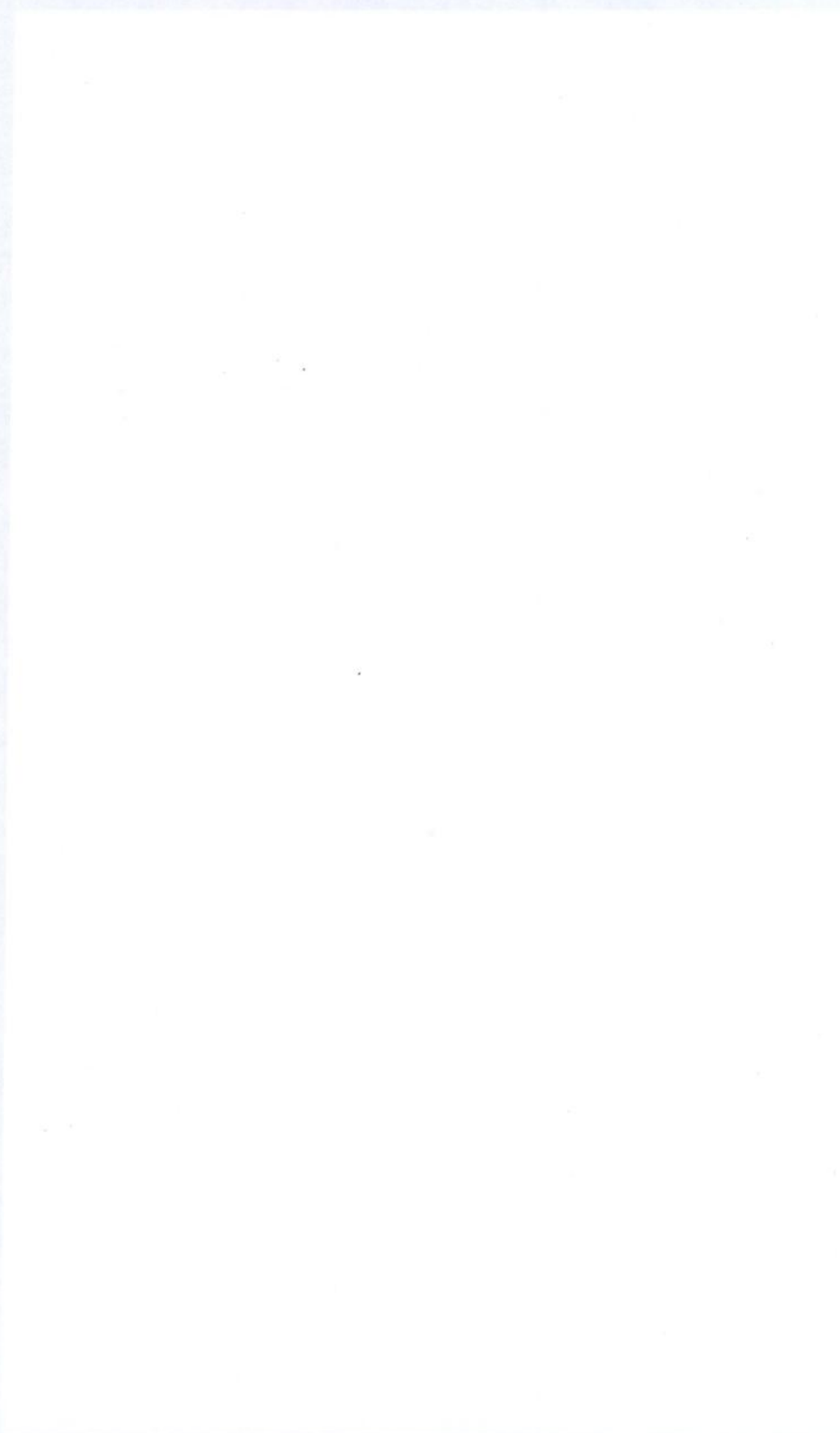






**Plate 24**

Gold, enamel and onyx cameo, English late 17th century







**Plate 25**

An amber ring mounted in low grade silver, probably worn as an amulet.





The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with a renewed interest in classical design and the revival of several historic styles which remained in force until the early years of the twentieth century.

"The designers, makers and patrons who together sustained the taste for historicism tended to range themselves with the antiquarians, who distrusted the mechanised methods of manufacture brought by the Industrial Revolution. They preferred whenever possible to match historical design with traditional craftsmanship" (Bury 1984, P7).

Many leading commercial jewellers while naturally employing some mechanical aid, still relied extensively on hand craftsmanship, though constantly refining their methods.

While the imaginative use of new types of equipment such as lathes has become the hallmark of the rings produced by Wendy Ramshaw and traditional techniques of texturing and colouring metals have been redeployed by others such as Gerda Floking, other modern craftsmen have exploited the potential of acrylics and of metals such as titanium.

Rings altered their appearance again in the 1970's with the advent of new technology in the jewellery industry and elsewhere. Emeralds are now grown in a matter of months in a laboratory. Cubic zirconia have replaced diamonds to the naked eye of anyone but the expert. Not only the design ideas but the actual materials used in space technology have been adapted to jewellery. Metals like titanium have come into use. Acrylics and plastics add colour as a replacement for stones, their shape is easier to control and the jewellers skill and techniques can turn them into something very special and unique, Acrylics and plastics are often combined with precious metals and have become a category of rings in their own right, (Plate 26). This ring by Claus Bury was one of the first to use acrylic in conjunction with precious metals and jewellers techniques.







**Plate 26**

White and yellow gold (18 caret) and acrylic by German Claus Burg  
1972





## **Chapter Three**

### **Different functions, Different styles**



"Rings were early deployed in the struggle of man with his environment - The mysterious and often hostile forces of nature, the angry gods, attacks by enemies and the onset of sickness, were among the hazards to be fended off, if possible, by charms" (Bury 1984 p.45).

There are many stories and legends which tell of magic and talismanic use of rings, even today people still wear rings that they believe possess some form of luck or magic.

### **Magic and Healing Rings**

According to Kunz, no ancient talisman enjoyed a greater repute in Medieval Legend than the ring of Solomon or Solomon's seal. Legend tells that by means of the power inherent in this ring, the Hebrew king was able to succeed in all his undertakings. Legend has it that this ring was set with a marvellous precious stone, perhaps a diamond, which served as a mirror wherein Solomon was able to see reflected the image of any distant place or of any persons in regard to whom he wished to be informed. (Kunz 1973 p.288).

The God Mercury was popularly regarded as a bestower of magic rings - to judge from the words Lucian, the greatest humorist of ancient times, puts into the mouth of one of his characters, Timolaus in "The ship"

"expresses the wish that Mercury would grant him a number of wonder-working rings: one of these should preserve his health, and protect him from wounds and other injuries; another should make him invisible; a third should give him the strength of ten thousand men; a fourth was to give him the power to fly and the fifth the power to sleep at will and the privilege of seeing all doors open before him. The crowning gift, however would be a ring possessing the virtue of attracting the love of all fair women and the affection and respect of his fellow men." (Kunz 1973 in passing)

"Of all means of self ornamentation devised by the human race, none seems to generate a more powerful atmosphere of mystery and magic than the ring." (Ward 1981, p.9)





Within many cultures the ring was used to ward off evil. The great fear of the evil eye was a great threat to many people. The Avars were a nomadic people who during the brief period of their supremacy controlled vast supplies of gold. Apparently rings were not given much thought, a strip of metal spiralled round the finger without joint or decoration was often deemed sufficient. Other rings with same basic shape indicated a talismanic function. In the ring in **Plate 27** the front strip widens into an eye shaped bezel worked with an outline of punched dots enclosing a pair of concentric circles that suggest another example of widespread fear of the evil eye and the consequent abundance of protective charms against it.

The Romans used amber in their rings to ward off the evil eye, **Plate 19** shows a ring made from a single piece of amber as so many rings were before the development of technology. The Egyptians used the Horus eye to ward off evil.

Closely allied with magic rings, so closely that it is often difficult to establish a satisfactory distinction between them, are the rings of healing, those to which were ascribed special and peculiar curative powers. In some instances this was due to a legend connected with a particular ring or with the prototype of a class of rings, at other times the therapeutic virtue was believed to result from the inscription of certain letters or words. In other cases, again, the belief arose from the form given to the ring.

A strange remedy for sneezing or hiccoughing recommended by Pliny was to transfer a ring from one of the fingers of the left hand to the middle finger of the right hand. Probably the explanation is to be found in the fact that rings were rarely worn by the Romans in the middle finger and hence the unusual sensation produced by placing the ring on this finger, served to check the nervous spasm causing the hiccough. It is well known that any nervous shock, sometimes even a slight one, is enough to stop such spasms.

Some cures are much more unbelievable. A 'pishogue' still believed in rural Ireland today claims that one can cure a sty in the eye by looking through a wedding ring. This was often found to be a psychosomatic cure.





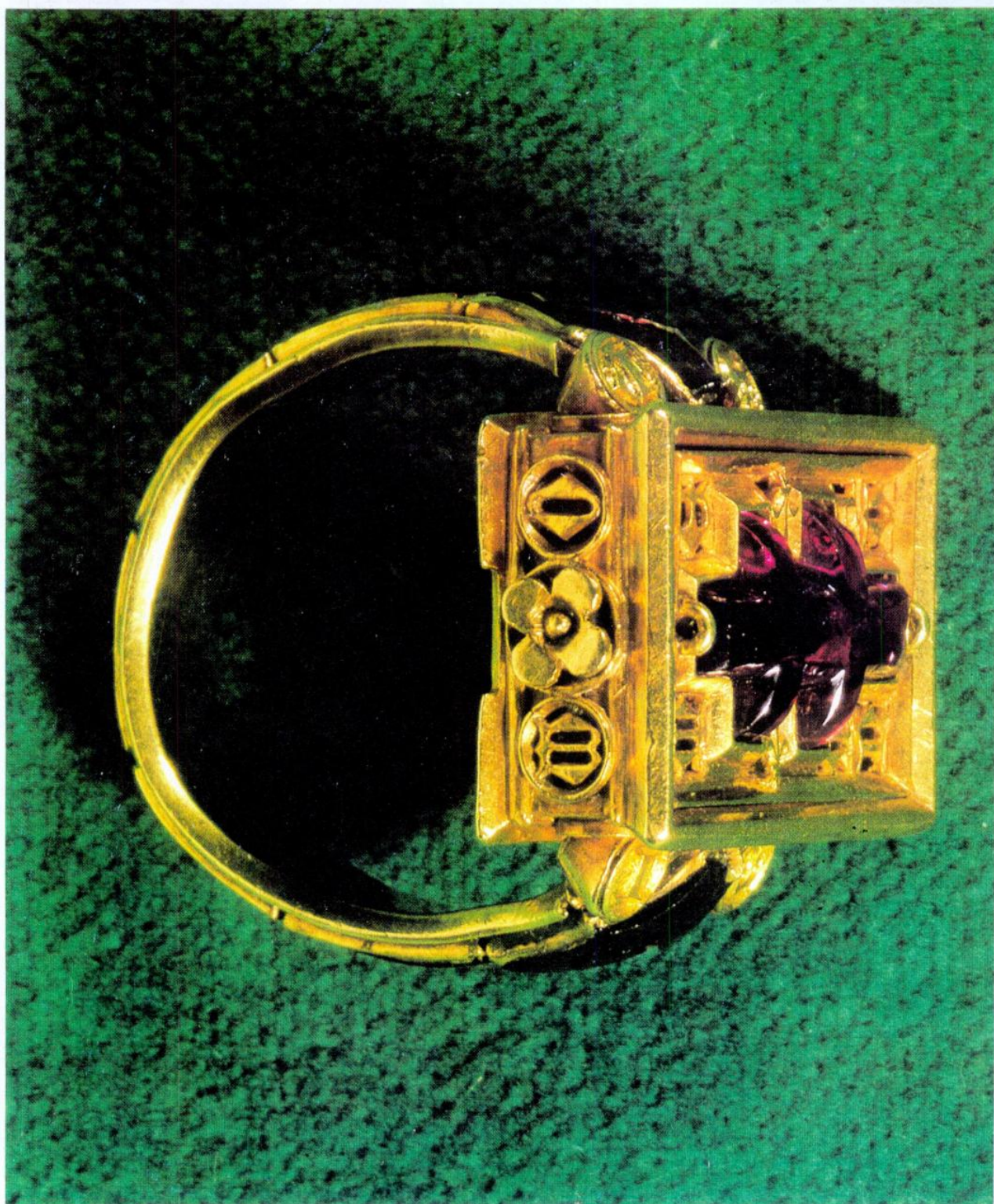


**Plate 27**

Silver Avar, seventh century eye shaped bezel worked with an outline of punched dots enclosing a pair of concentric circles.







**Plate 28**  
The Thame Ring





Since Lizards were believed to recover their sight by natural means after being blinded, this fancy led to the use of a strange method for procuring remedial rings.

"A blinded Lizard was put into a glass vessel in which iron rings and gold rings were put, when it became apparent that the creature had regained his sight, the rings were taken out and used for the cure of weak and weeping eyes. Something of the natural force that operated to restore the Lizards vision was supposed to communicate itself to the rings" (Kunz 1973, p.337).

Whatever good effects may have been observed as a result of the use of such rings, presumably few would be inclined to deny that one of the active agents in the cure was the faith of the wearer, where the mind was firmly impressed with the conviction that a curative power existed in the ring.

### **Religious Rings**

The combination of religion and superstition survived long into the Christian era. The religious subjects engraved on medieval English iconographical rings were talismans as well as advertisements of faith for piety and hope of salvation in the afterlife went hand in hand with an earnest desire to ward off earthly troubles. In the Medieval age the distinction between religion and superstition is not easily drawn, particularly in the case of rings that might be worn equally in the hope of safety in this world or salvation in the next.

Due to their devotion to saints and to religion, in the medieval time, there are a great number of kings which reflect religion. Occasionally rings were made to contain relics. The Thame ring (**Plate 28**) with its emphasis on the Crucifixion both in the enamelled plate at the back of the bezel and in the inscription: MEMANTO (sic) MEI DOMENE (remember me, Lord) around the box shaped bezel, that may have contained a relic of the true cross, provides a very fine and elaborate example of goldsmiths work.

"On this superb ring, the outside of the hoop is set with square cut amethysts. The box shaped bezel has a double armed cross of amethysts at the top. Under this is a plaque engraved with foliage, and the space between it and the plaque at the back, engraved and enamelled with the Crucifixion, probably contained a relic of the true





cross. "Its fine craftsmanship as well as the size suggest that it was probable worn as an official ring by a high ecclesiastic" (Cherry, 1981 p.72)

The late Medieval devotion to the images of saints was reflected in rings by the development of the iconographic ring, so called from the engraving of saints on the bezel. This is a particularly English type ring. The first appeared in the late fourteenth century and both gold and silver examples were common in the 15th century.

The employment of rings as religious symbols is often bound up with their use in some other way as is the case of many seal rings. However some are more exclusively religious in their character. The ecclesiastical rings, especially those worn by Roman Catholic popes, cardinals and bishops constitute a large part of these.

Episcopal rings, given at the consecration of bishops, have a long history in the Christian Church. In the seventeenth century they had to be made of pure gold and set only with unengraved stones. Bishops usually possessed several rings including a pontifical which was worn on the fourth finger when celebrating mass. A bishop was by tradition buried with a ring on his finger, but in England and also in France, episcopal rings were supposed to be handed over to the royal treasury after the bishops death. The great prelates of the Renaissance owned splendid rings, as the portrait by Raphael (1483-1520) of Giuliano della Rovere, Pope Julius II (1443-1513) clearly demonstrates. (Plate 29)

Decade rings were used by the pious as an alternative to rosaries. Their hoops are ribbed or knobbed, an Ave was said per knob and a paternoster for the bezel. Normally the rings have ten projections but seem to have more for other prayers. (Plate 30)

Until after the 11th century, all the Episcopal rings were used as signets. The ring was generally worn on the index finger of the right hand, the middle of the three fingers uplifted in conferring a blessing; but when celebrating Mass the bishops transferred it from the index finger to the annular. At the present day, it is always worn on this latter finger. The removal of the ring from the index is explained as being an act of humility, since the ring was regarded as a crown upon the index finger, "for sages say that the ring is the crown of the hand" and this crown should be removed in the presence of Christ. Today bishops wear only one ring.







**Plate 29**

Pope Jullius by Raphael, Italian, early 16th century









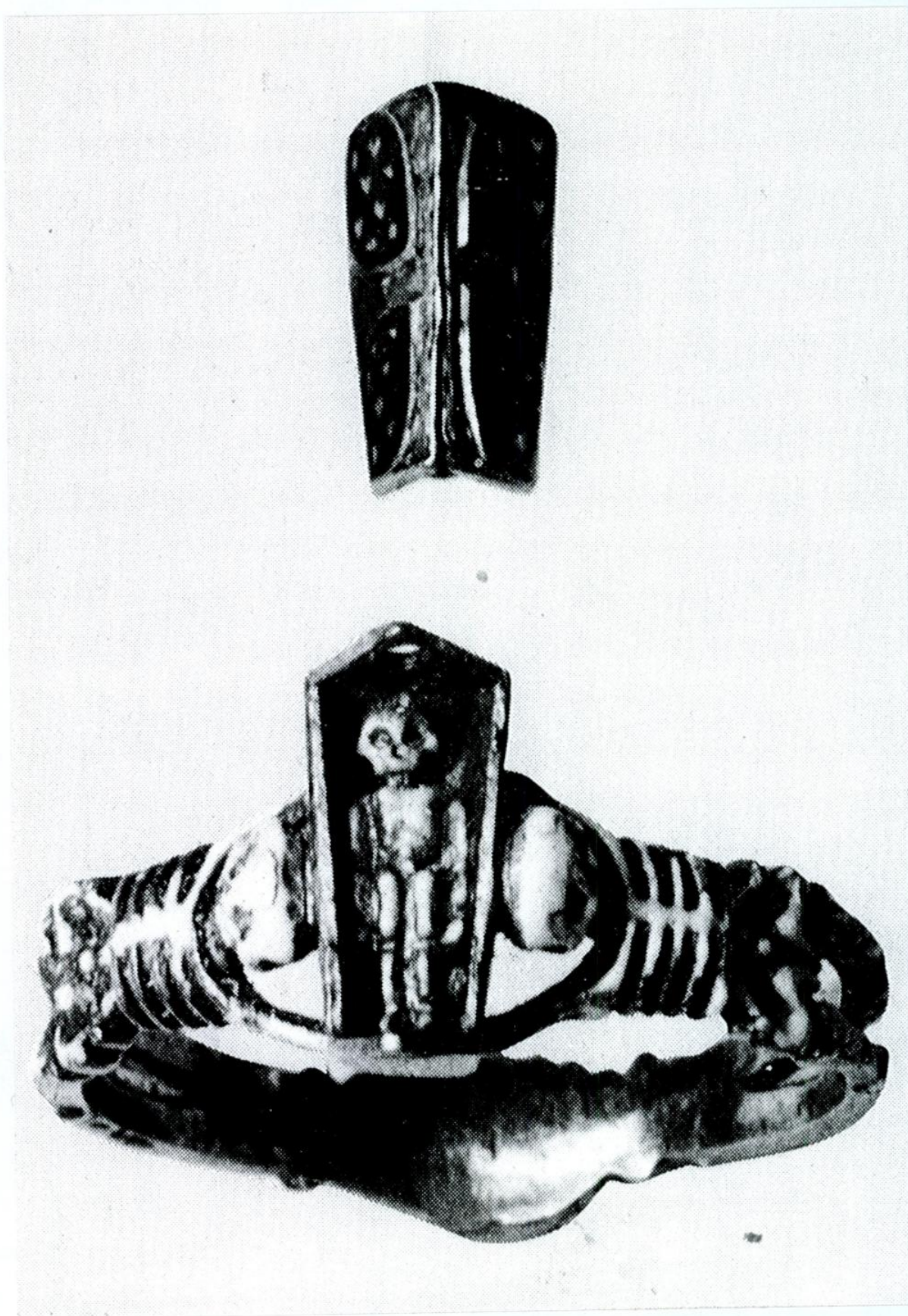
**Plate 30**

Three examples of Decade rings









**Plate 31**

Gold and Enamel century memento-mori ring







# Plate 32

## A Gimmel Ring

- Fig A when it's closed
- Fig B on the inside of the shank are two memento-mori figures reminding the wearer of the transience of life.





The custom of giving rings as souvenirs is an ancient one, but it took longer for special designs to appear. The earliest known English example of a mourning ring, dates back to the fifteenth century. Late medieval preoccupation with death in popular religious art was also demonstrated in rings, the bezel of a ring was often formed of a heart between two skulls. Rings were often distributed after a persons death in accordance with instructions left in the will. The death's head motif was much used in the seventeenth century. The inseting of the hoops of mourning, rings with the plaited hair of the deceased was a custom frequent in the early part of the nineteenth century. The hair rarely survives if the ring was worn.

**Plate 31** is an unusually specific memento-mori ring. The bezel is in the form of a coffin containing a skeleton, the shoulders are formed of skeletons and the back of the hoop of clasped hands. The ring belongs to the group of coffin jewels that contains minutely detailed skeletons and dates from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the Renaissance in particular, when the symbolic aspect of a ring was still of such great importance to the overall design, the combination of religious, scientific and memento-mori elements was not unusual. Similarly at that date, the themes of love and death were so closely identified and intermingled that it is often difficult to decide whether the primary function of a ring was as a memento-mori or a fede ring. German gimmel rings of the sixteenth century may open to reveal a compartment containing both an embryo and a skeleton, the hoop being inscribed with a motto implying the binding commitment of marriage, thus in one ring reminders of birth, mortality and the need for fidelity were combined.

There are many varying forms of wedding rings. Byzantine wedding rings were usually engraved with Christ joining the hands of husband and wife. The Roman fede and gimmel rings were revived in the Middle Ages. The fede device (hands clasped in faith) and gimmel (from latin gomellus, a twin) formed of two or more interlacing or pivoted hoops were often combined as gimmel, fede rings. In theory and sometimes in practice, the rings were divisible so that each lover might wear half until the hoops were reunited for the marriage ceremony. **Plate 32** shows a gimmel ring with a ruby and an emerald. In Renaissance times a ruby had the religious connotation of charity, with the emerald symbolising faith.

Figure 12 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.

Figure 13 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.

Figure 14 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.

Figure 15 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.

Figure 16 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.

Figure 17 illustrates the bride's head with the anklet of coupling on her neck. The anklet is a thin gold chain with a small bell. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck. The bride's head is shown in profile, facing right. The anklet is visible on her neck.





### Plate 33

A ring containing the symbolical features associated with both fede of betrothal rings and memento-mori, 16th century



# Fine Jewels and Betrothal Rings

### Advertisement for betrothal rings of today





The Claddagh is the Irish version of a love and friendship ring. It descended from the Roman fede rings. There are many stories about its origins. One story tells of a certain Richard Joyce who was swept to slavery from the little village of Cladagh, the intervening years were spent becoming masterly goldsmith. Upon returning to his beloved Claddagh he turned his fine skills to the creation of a jewel that would be renowned as an emblem of love and friendship: two hands cradling a crowned heart. **(Plate 35 Fig B).**

Posy rings were another form of love and friendship, usually engraved with words of love or flowers making them ideal for use as wedding rings **(Plate 36).** Wedding rings today are usually plain bands of gold.

Rings were often used as the very opposite to these love and friendship rings. The famous poison rings of the Bourgeois are not fabulous, according to Kunz, some of them still exist, one bearing the date 1503. Beneath the bezel of this ring there is a sliding panel and when this is displaced there appears a small space where the poison was kept. Such rings simply afforded a ready supply of poison at need, but another type constituted a death dealing weapon. In this later type, the bezel is wrought into the shape of a lion, and the hollow claws of the animal admit the passage of a subtle poison, concealed in a small reservoir in the back of the bezel. By a mechanical device, the poison was pressed out of the cavity, through the lions claws, the death wound would then have been inflicted by turning the head of the ring forward, so that a hearty grasp would produce a few slight punctures in the enemies hand. (Kunz 1945, p.37)

In more recent times and still about today, rings are used as signs of aggression. These rings became known as knuckle-dusters, they were not only used as signs of belonging to a certain gang but in many cases were used as weapons in gang fights.

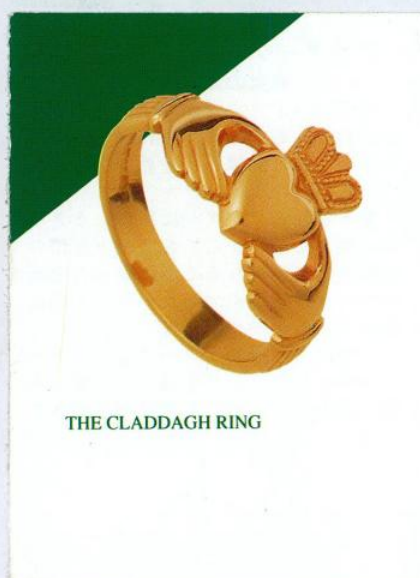




A



B



**Plate 35**

Fig A    Elaborate fede ring  
Fig B    The Claddagh Ring







**Plate 36**  
Posey Ring





## **Chapter Four**

**How rings were worn  
And who could wear them**





One of the most interesting aspects about rings in my opinion is how they were worn. How the fashion for wearing rings on different fingers varied from time to time, and also the fact that attempts have been made to control the wearing of rings made of precious metals and other materials under sumptuary laws. Evidence for the existence of rings may be drawn from documentary sources and evidence for the fashion in wearing rings may be deduced from paintings and portraits as well as from effigies on tombs, mummy cases and sculptures.

A painted image on an mummy case in the British museum gives us an idea of how some of the noblemen of ancient Egypt wore their rings. the left hand was given a decided preference in this respect over the right, there are nine rings on the left hand and three rings on the right. These left hand rings comprise of one thumb ring (the signet), three for the index, two on the middle finger, two for the 'ring finger' and one for the little finger. The thumb on the right hand bears a ring and two on the middle finger.

Another Egyptian mummy in the collection of the Metropolitan museum of Art in New York City offers an illustration of Egyptian ring wearing at the beginning of our era but only of the left hand as the right hand as been broken off. This is the mummy case of Artemidora daughter of Hapocradorus, who died at the age of twenty seven. The index, fourth and little finger of the left hand each bear a ring.

The opportunity to observe ancient rings in position on the original owners hand is very rare, but in the case of the boy king Tutankhamen the excavators had this experience. (Plate 37) The young kings fingers were covered in sheaths while on the top joints of his middle and third fingers were massive rings. The one on his middle finger is of heavy gold and bears a cartouche on which the figure of the king is engraved. The ring on the kings third finger is inlaid with dark blue glass in imitation of Lapis Lazuli.

In Greece in about 480BC to 400BC the wearing of rings on the fourth finger was attributed to the desire to guard the precious settings of the ring from injury. With the increase of wealth and luxury, precious stones were engraved and set in the metal ring and it became necessary to place such a ring on the best protected finger. The thumbs were most constantly used, the index finger was too exposed, the third finger was too long and the little finger too small while the right hand was much more frequently used than the left hand.







**Plate 37**

The mummified left hand of Tutankhamum, Egyptian Eighteenth  
Century Dynasty







**Plate 38**

A young man at prayer by Hans Fleming









**Plate 39**

The Aswelthorpe effigy





Hence the choice fell upon the fourth finger of the left hand as the best fitted to receive a precious ring. While at first in the Roman World the ring was worn on the fourth finger as is shown on several statues, it was later moved to the index and finally to the little finger.

While the Greeks and Romans did not usually wear rings on the middle finger the Gauls and Britons adorned it in this way. In the sixteenth century it was customary to assign rings as follows according to the quality of the wearer.

To the thumb for doctors

To the index finger for merchants

To the middle finger for fools

To the annular finger for students

To the auricular finger for lovers

In the Greco - Roman world there was a prejudice against wearing a ring on the middle finger. Hindus also are prejudiced against the wearing of a ring on the middle finger. They have a superstition that anyone who wears a ring on this finger will probably be attacked and bitten by a scorpion, although Hindus wear no ring on their middle fingers, the others are laden with them.

In the beginning of the first century BC it was rare for a Roman to wear more than one ring which would usually have been a signet ring, but those rich enough to participate in the collecting of engraved gems were soon tempted to have their acquisitions set in rings, as rings were ideal for displaying for these precious gems. Later in the century the limits of acceptability were excessive. The grand culmination came in the first century AD with a man who was said to wear six rings on every finger day and night.

Rings and jewellery of the Middle Ages were important indications of status and wealth and were worn for many reasons. The young man in the painting by Hans Memling (Plate 38) shows how rings might have been worn at that time for ornament or display and also as an aid to religious devotion. The painting shows a young nobleman, his hands raised in prayer





and on his right hand he wears a heavy decorative gold ring on his thumb and a smaller gold ring on the middle joint of his second finger. Each ring has a stone set on the hoop to the side of the bezel. In the fifteenth century, decorative rings were often worn on the thumb by both sexes. It is clear that at this time, and later on in history, it was often usual to wear a number of rings on both hands. The Ashwellthorpe effigy (**Plate 39**) illustrates this clearly.

"This monument commemorates Sir Edward de Thorpe and his wife. The rich dress ornaments of his wife, in particular her cloak-clasps in the form of birds, her elaborate hair net and her collar show that the many rings on her fingers were only part of the lavish display of jewellery. On her left hand she wears a large ring with a stone on her first finger, pairs of rings on the lower and upper joints of the third finger and a single ring and a pair of rings on the upper joint of the little finger. On her right hand she wears rings on her third and fourth fingers." (Cherry 1981, P73).

This effigy shows that rings were worn on both the upper and lower joints of fingers as well as been worn in pairs. It would also suggest that at this time the second finger considered by the Romans to be the least worthy continued to be unpopular in Medieval times.

In the post Medieval times there begins to be a very complete record of the appearance of all kinds of jewellery, from which it is possible to construct a picture of how and why and to a certain extent, by whom rings were worn. Renaissance portraits were very detailed and a great deal of information can be gathered about the jewellery of this time. It can be seen clearly from these portraits that rings of every kind were owned and worn, often many at a time by both men and women. It was not unusual to find eight or nine rings being worn at one time - on the upper joints of the fingers as well as on the lower ones and even on the thumbs, although it is likely that people wore more rings for portraits than they would wear everyday.

As can be seen from many sixteenth century portraits, when the fingers of the hand become too laden with rings, it was customary to sew more rings onto the sleeve, the hat or even the ruff, or to wear them suspended from a gold chain or on a silk cord around the neck, strung as necklaces (a sixteenth century practice revived in 1977 by Wendy Ramshaw). In the seventeenth century gentlemen often wore rings tied to their starched neckbands.





The boldest modern rings are impossible to wear under gloves thus posing a problem which has been faced in the past. The use of a high ornamental bezel on rings gave rise to a special fashion for wearing slashed gloves as is shown in (**Plate 40**). The slashed gloves accommodated the numerous rings. In addition, large rings were worn outside the gloves, a style that was to reappear with the large bezel rings of the late eighteenth century. In the fashion world, rings are still worn over gloves (**Plate 41**).

**Plate 42** : This painting shows the curious fashion for wearing a ring secured to the wrist by a black silk cord.

"It has been suggested that the more frequent use of precious stones in rings in the seventeenth century led to a greater concern for their safety.

During the eighteenth century rings were in great demand and were worn on every finger. The fourth finger of the left hand was used by men and women alike during the eighteenth century for decorative gem-set rings. The large bezels of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century were frequently set with a coloured stone in the centre, or a paste or translucent enamel plaque. Women wore a great number of rings on both hands at this time. A painting of Madame Senonnes in about 1814 adorned with three delicate rings apiece on the forefinger and third finger of both hands and a diamond ring on the middle finger of her right hand, making a total of thirteen rings in all. This shows the fashion for wearing numerous rings at once (**Plate 43**). This fashion abated somewhat in the late 1820's.

In 1827 a portrait of Lady Peel the wife of the future prime minister, Sir Robert Peel was painted. Lady Reed has on her left hand five rings, all crammed on to one finger. According to Bury, the rings comprise her wedding ring, three rings set with diamonds, pearls and rubies and another hoop. (Bury 1984, p.12)

In the middle of the century it became fashionable to reduce the number of rings even more. Madame Moitessier (**Plate 44**) whose portrait was completed by Ingres in 1856, wears only a wedding ring and a gem set ring on the third finger of her left hand, and none at all on her right.







**Plate 40**

Portrait of a Lady







**Plate 41**

In the fashion world today, rings are still worn over gloves

— a great  
back for one  
on an island  
party. Party,  
who came to  
office and  
dining room  
my money's  
line in the  
need to see  
a curious  
though I am a  
selection piece  
our room like

lovely (on a  
were kindly  
the price of a  
mural's sense  
chose on the  
dining about  
service, and  
evening food,  
and, and dis-  
breakfast  
with coffee  
that had  
in it and there  
on the table.  
guests are so  
used to be-  
ing with so  
£1.75 for a  
a bottle with  
drinks and  
and fresh  
dining food  
agreements in  
the  
that the food



of chicken and fish  
upon continuing to  
pleasantly and often  
Very good weather  
and comfortable room's  
purpose and then we  
to the end of the  
evening.

My main concern  
is a short story of  
admission story from  
a small of story of the  
scallop were common  
the best I have ever  
had not had the usual  
treatment but had been  
in butter which was  
golden, salty, creamy  
preserving their sweet  
tender texture. There  
a splendid light cream  
with just enough that  
richness that it had.  
Also there can be some  
toasty fish and duck  
poor bird available  
croquet. It had some  
fault. It was overcooked  
and kept all the time  
just a little more. There  
only remains to be  
beast is passed in a  
fashioned way. It was  
thick and had a  
dinner. I have seen  
duck in Chinese restaurants.  
Vegetables were good  
enough to be used  
precooked.

We were very dis-  
satisfied with the food.





**Plate 42**

The wearing of a ring secured to the wrist by a black silk cord.







**Plate 43**

Painting of Madame de Senonnes, 1814.









**Plate 44**

Madame Moitessier by Ingres 1856





In the second half of the nineteenth century, continental society men were still notable for the number and quality of their rings. Russian noblemen wore sets of rings with assorted stones, the hoops so tapered at the back that the whole group of six or so might be put on one finger. But the more puritanical Englishmen disdained such display, leaving it to their wives to wear matching rings which, however rarely amounted to more than two or three. Women remained less inhibited.

From the turn of the century until the outbreak of the first world war, people were still markedly under the influence of nineteenth century etiquette. Rings were worn according to the occasion and the social standing of the wearer. A young girl would only wear a modest ring probably with a floral design; a lady of the middle class would only own a dress ring or two for special occasions. Only the very wealthy, the aristocracy and royalty as well as people in the world of theatre were free to adorn their hands with some spectacular gem-encrusted rings.

With the outbreak of the first world war, the social order and etiquette were shaken into rather less formal attitudes. Inevitably the war brought radical changes that were clearly reflected in the design and wearing of rings. The social conscience that sprang up prevented the very rich from flaunting their wealth, therefore expensive gem set rings were not as popular as before. After the war, however, the widespread relief from war-time tension and austerity gave rise to a strong desire for frivolity and bolder, less expensive stones were used, and imitations became socially acceptable.

While older more bourgeois ladies still wore only wedding rings, during the twenties women freely indulged in outsize paste rings to match their rhinestone and diamante dresses for dancing the charleston.

After the second world war and by the beginning of the 1950's, widespread and significant change had occurred that affected the making and wearing of rings. The rules for wearing rings relaxed to suit the individual. One woman who expressed this most vividly was Dame Edith Sitwell "She was a lady of magnetic presence, a celebrated poet and writer, she was also famous for her passion for wearing large aquamarine and gold rings which emphasised her beautiful, slender hands. She always wore at least four of them, two on her ring finger of each hand." (Cartlidge, 1981 p. 162) (Plate 45).







**Plate 45**

Dame Edith Sitwell





It is not only interesting to note how rings were worn but also who could wear them. This may sound amusing to people today, but over the past, from time to time attempts have been made to control the wearing of jewellery, usually that made of precious materials.

The Romans had very strict laws about the wearing of rings. The iron rings of the Romans accounted for by the tale of the rock and the link ring of Prometheus were worn by certain ranks. The progressive change in Roman regulations and customs governing the wearing of rings and the material of which they should be made of, have been stated by M. Deloche and his conclusions are of considerable value, based as they are on a very careful study of classic sources.

According to Kunz, the iron ring was first regarded as a mark of individual honour, awarded by a sovereign or in his name. From the earliest times of the Roman republic, a senator sent on an embassy received a gold ring, all other senators being restricted to iron ones, soon however senators of noble birth and later all senators without distinction, enjoyed the right of wearing gold rings. In the third century BC this privilege was then extended to knights, and in the last years of the republic, as well as under the emperors, many other classes of citizens were made partakers of the privilege. Before long even some freedmen and of these certain people pursuing the least reputable vocations were permitted the enjoyment of a distinction once so jealously guarded.

Towards the latter part of the third century AD, all Roman soldiers could lawfully wear gold rings, although in the late Republican and earlier Imperial periods this right was accorded only to the military tribunes. Thus finally, all class distinctions in this respect were done away with. Every freeborn man could wear a gold ring, freed men with a few exceptions were confined to silver rings and the iron ring became the badge of slavery. (Kunz 1945 in passing)

On days of national mourning the gold rings were laid aside as a mark of sorrow and respect, and iron rings were substituted, which is similar to the removal of the ring from the index of the annular by a bishop when celebrating mass, as a sign of humility.





The wearing of a gold ring had such a high value in the eyes of the Romans that some freed men used to wear a gold ring with a dark coating so that it would appear to be of iron. Thus although they neither had the gratification nor incurred the perils of wearing a symbol confined to the freeborn, they had the ultimate personal satisfaction of knowing that it was really a gold ring that they were wearing.

In the middle ages the ring was never employed as in the Roman period to distinguish a class or society, nor was it recognised as a mark of military distinction. It was however worn by bishops and abbots and also abbesses to indicate their office. Rings were worn at all levels of society. It was only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that an attempt was made to restrict the wearing of gold rings through the sumptuary laws that regulated dress and jewellery.

As late as the eighteenth century Swiss women were subject to restrictions on what jewellery they might wear in the street and in church.

The production of rings at every level reached an all time high in the 1960's and 1970's. Fashionable women wore at least three or four at any given time, sometimes more (Plate 45). Rings of ethnic qualities were very much in fashion. Men began to consider it less effeminate to wear other rings in addition to wedding rings and signet rings.

Today there are no restrictions on the wearing of rings. People are free to wear as many or as few as they desire. They can be made of plastic or platinum the only restriction being what one can and can't afford.







**Plate 46**

Newspaper Colour Supplement





## **Chapter Five**

### **Twentieth Century Rings**





"During the 20th century there has been a fundamental change in attitude towards jewellery in terms both of its design and its function. Increasing importance has been attached to the aesthetic merits of form, colour and texture rather than to the obvious financial value of the materials used." (Scarisbrick, 1989 in passing)

Until the twentieth century mainly precious or semi precious materials were used in the jewellery trade. Jewellery was therefore really only for the rich. It was used to display the persons wealth and their position in society, even though today jewellery is seen as a status symbol or a secure form of investment. For this market, the well established jewellery houses such as Boucheron, Asprey, Cartier and Faberge continue to produce traditional jewellery forms. However, alongside them, there is now an increasing interest in the creative individuality of the artist/jeweller who creates for a much broader market.

"Industrialisation and new technologies which enable jewellery to be mass produced has brought about this revolution in jewellery design. While this has broadened the market to a less wealthy sector of society, it has also inevitably had enormous implications for design, some of which has been the cause for concern" (Pullee, 1991 p 28)

The era before the first world war was a period of enormous affluence for the very rich, who continued to indulge in all the outward manifestations of their standing, while the so called 'lower orders' still knew their place and observed the rules,

"no self respecting woman would display bejewelled hands not in keeping with her station, and if a girl were to be seen wearing such rings, she would be inviting suspicion as to her moral character, to say the least, if not actually criminal tendencies." (Cartlidge 1981 in passing).

At this time, it was also a period in which the first cracks in the social structure were making themselves felt. Artists of international standing were in the avant garde, expressing the need for change and the increasing demands of a broader section of society. The middle class, which benefitted from the industrial revolution, was growing and ready for the





new romantic designers that attempted to streamline the cluttered over ornamentation of the Victorian era. Art Nouveau was born as a result.

"In jewellery design, the Art Nouveau style led to a move away from precious stones and towards non-precious compositions particularly in bronze, glass, mother of pearl and ivory. In the decorative arts, signs of a new age were beginning to reveal themselves in techniques, materials, themes, influences and purposes. Jewellery was one of the most visible and exciting of the plastic arts to display these signs in Art Nouveau style. At first Art Nouveau was a discreet attempt to get away from industrial processes, to disregard all technical innovations and keep hand crafted artifacts alive." (Pullee 1991, p 52)

As time went on this proved impossible and the exponents of Art Nouveau began to make use of recent inventions and scientific discoveries to achieve new effects and also to produce the larger quantities needed to satisfy the growing consumer demand. By doing this they made art more available to the less affluent customers.

The years between the two world wars saw the enormous change that had taken place in peoples lives, women were enjoying a more liberated life style. The developments that took place in the fine arts and in architecture during these years were echoed in ring designs. Futurism, constructivism and the design concepts of the Bauhaus all left their mark on the shape of rings, as they did on other creative art forms.

"Art Deco was the name given to the very distinctive style of decorative arts in the 1920's and 1930's. Its originators were artists who deliberately sought to express their talent in areas of functional import also" (Black 1974 in passing).

The ring during this time gained in popularity as manufacturers availed themselves of new technical processes. With the help of advertising, manufacturers everywhere sought and found wider markets for their rings.

The economic crisis of the late 1920's and the sharpening of general political differences made themselves felt in the 1930's and the gulf between highly prized, gem set rings and mass produced costume jewellery widened significantly.





In some respects,

"interest in the shape and execution of rings receded at the upper end of the market in favour of intrinsic value: rings represented portable wealth, negotiable in any country. Large precious stones were brought and placed in heavy gold and platinum settings, intentionally often vulgar in form, in the hopes of deceiving the searching eyes of customs officers at the frontier, these rings were of significant value to help make a new start in life possible elsewhere" (Cartlidge 1981 p 139)

Although the majority of twentieth century rings manufactured still followed nineteenth century styles the quantity produced due to industrialisation was enormous and therefore most women could afford to own two or three dress rings, the value of which depended on their means.

The second world war brought most jewellery production to a standstill for the second time within the century. Gold became scarce and was rationed everywhere. Platinum was unobtainable. Silver enjoyed a greater respectability for rings than ever before. Once again repeating the same tendency as after the first world war, only perhaps in a more pronounced fashion, the urge to get away from austerity and uniformity was strengthened by the need to be different and individual.

"For the sake of the economy, a real need for personal individuality-particularly in the area of personal possessions, where the ring became possibly the most marked expression of this feeling" (Cartlidge 1981, p 140)

Between the two world wars, the arts and crafts movement had been active in a different manner than in its early days. The movement had become more acceptable and less controversial. It was in the field of education that the arts and crafts movement had its greatest impact. Courses in pre schools on handicrafts were introduced as part of teaching techniques. This idea eventually reached the higher levels of education and many art schools and colleges introduced courses in pottery, weaving, furniture and jewellery making for the first time.

Widespread cultural exchanges have had a great deal of influence on ring design and structure. The world crafts council among other organisations,





has held congresses all over the world, where artists can meet, work together and exhibit.

Two more very significant developments took place in the late 1950's, the advent of television and cheaper travel to far off destinations. Televisions brought the art and artifacts of other cultures - ancient and contemporary - to viewers all over the world. Millions of people had their first opportunity to see the treasures of the past, to learn something about the life of tribal Africa and other countries which would otherwise be beyond their reach.

Young people were stimulated by such knowledge. To demonstrate their revolt against mass production which had invaded every aspect of their lives, young people deliberately dressed in frayed jeans, ethnic costumes and ethnic jewellery. This included the custom of wearing rings, preferably several on each finger. (Ironically, in the tribal societies that those young people admired, jewellery was worn strictly to represent the wealth and status of the possessor.)

Since many of the countries that could now be easily visited, were underdeveloped in the industrial sense, but rich in manual skills and labour, a flood of hand crafted rings that were cheap and primitively made, reached western markets. Street sellers in ever major city and town in Europe and America were offering western 'Ethnic' rings made by anyone who wanted to cash in on the boom. This fashion is not over yet and many street traders in Ireland today sell these types of 'ethnic' rings.

According to Cartlidge, during this time the number of students in jewellery classes rose enormously everywhere and girls accounted for nearly 50% of the students, a new phenomenon in a profession that had been, with rare exceptions, a male occupation during all past centuries. (Cartlidge 1981 p 145)

(It is interesting to note that today out of eleven fourth year degree students in jewellery/metalwork in N.C.A.D., none are male.)

Students were drawn to making jewellery because it offered them more scope for creation and a closer contact with the public than other more traditional media. These artists recognised that the ultimate relationship between people and their jewellery gave artists access to a very personal environment, the way rings can influence the bearing and attitude of the wearer, conveying feelings of security and giving a sense of belonging or





a desire to shock. Reassurance, self confidence, humour and even the physical movement of hands and the body are generally affected by rings.

An article by jeweller/sculpture Daniel Jocz, clarifies this

"In jewellery and sculpture my subject matter is derived from within and I tend to swing between the cerebral and the intuitive when expressing myself artistically. For the last fifteen years my jewellery has been inspired by a love of construction techniques; reciprocally the small and intimate medium of jewellery has influenced the scale of my sculpture."

In 1988, I began making rings because of their potential for unified sculptural statements; this allows me to exercise both formality and freedom in my work. While the side view of a ring is the primary focus, the constraint of the finger hole is great to play with - sometimes adding a note of surprise. Gold and silver are favoured, while nickel, copper and other metals add to the range of the married metal pieces. Other materials are used when my interest is piqued or as aesthetic conception dictates." (**Plate 47**) (Jocz 1992 p20)

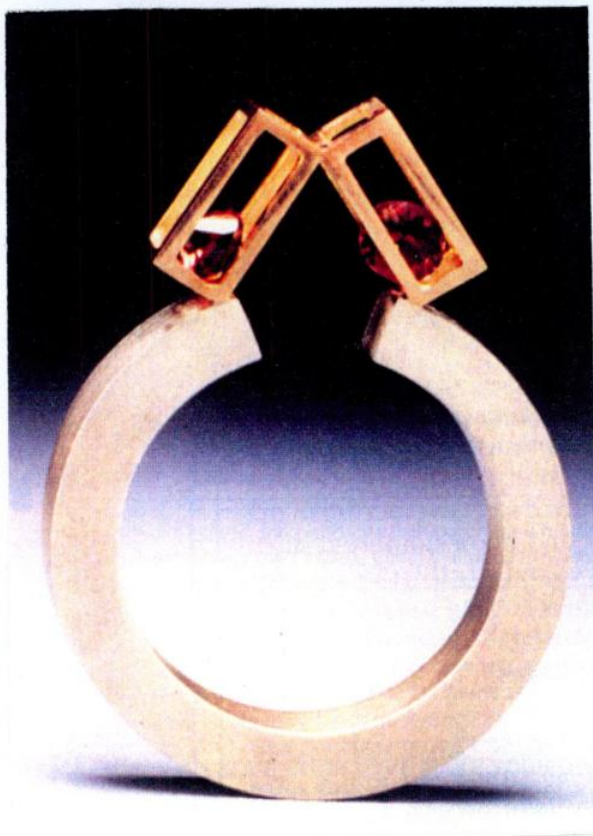
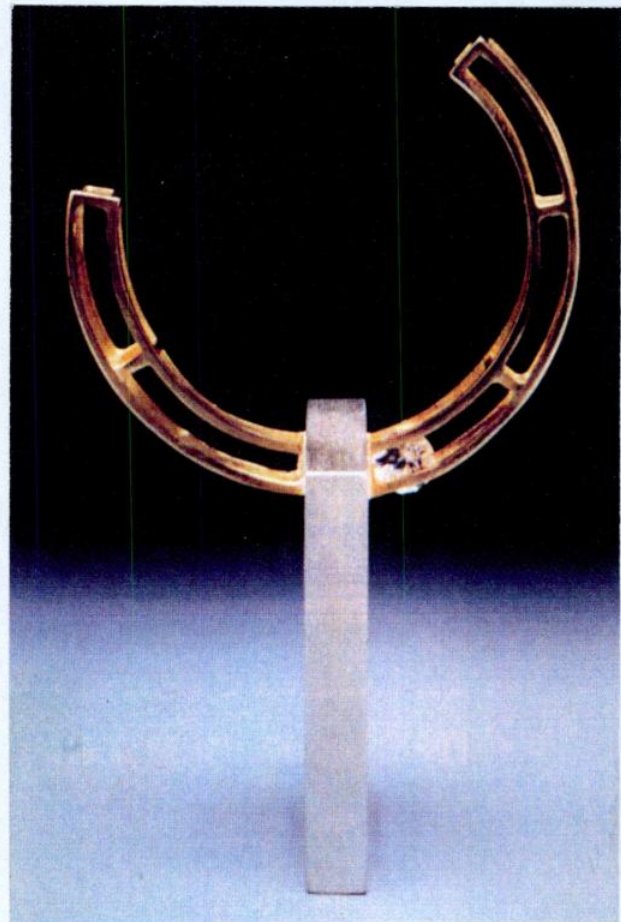
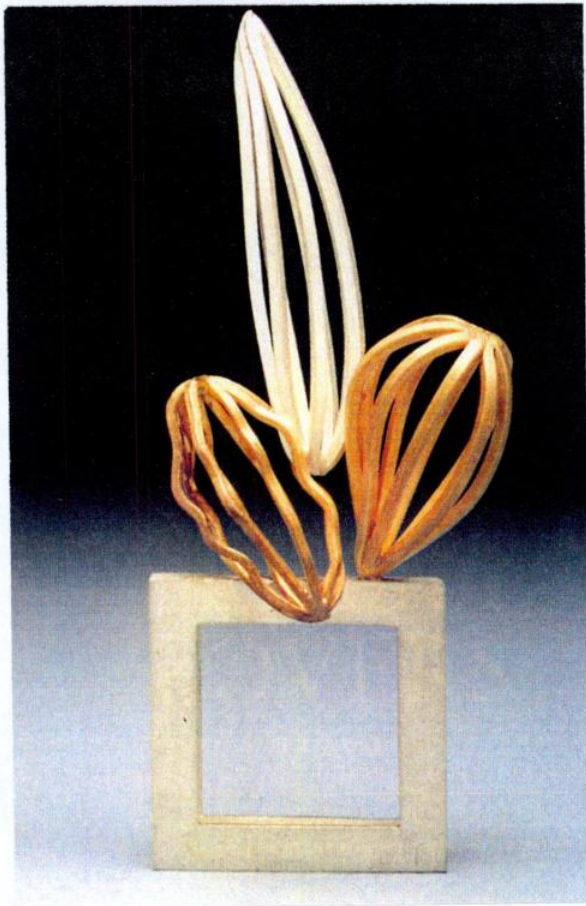
The production of rings at every level reached an all time high in the 1960's and 1970's. Ethnic rings were probably the most widely worn. They were usually made of silver and frequently set with brightly coloured stones such as turquoise, cornelian and coral. These rings were widely available and the prices were so low that people could afford several.

Artist jewellers everywhere started to make a name for themselves. They crafted rings that were not just functional ornaments for the hand but "objets d'art" in their own right, with all the elements of a work of art. To emphasise this, these rings were often presented as a part of a sculptural entity - either a stand on which the ring rested when not worn or a box containing the ring and of equal importance with it.

Wendy Ramshaw expresses the essence of contemporary jewellery concepts - the dual function of being wearable jewellery and small sculptural objects. Her work has the unmistakable flavour of the space age. Ramshaw's rings are striking and bold, often as many as twelve individual bands are grouped together and delicately blended for colour and shape covering the finger from its base to its first joint. The three sets of rings in **Plate 48**





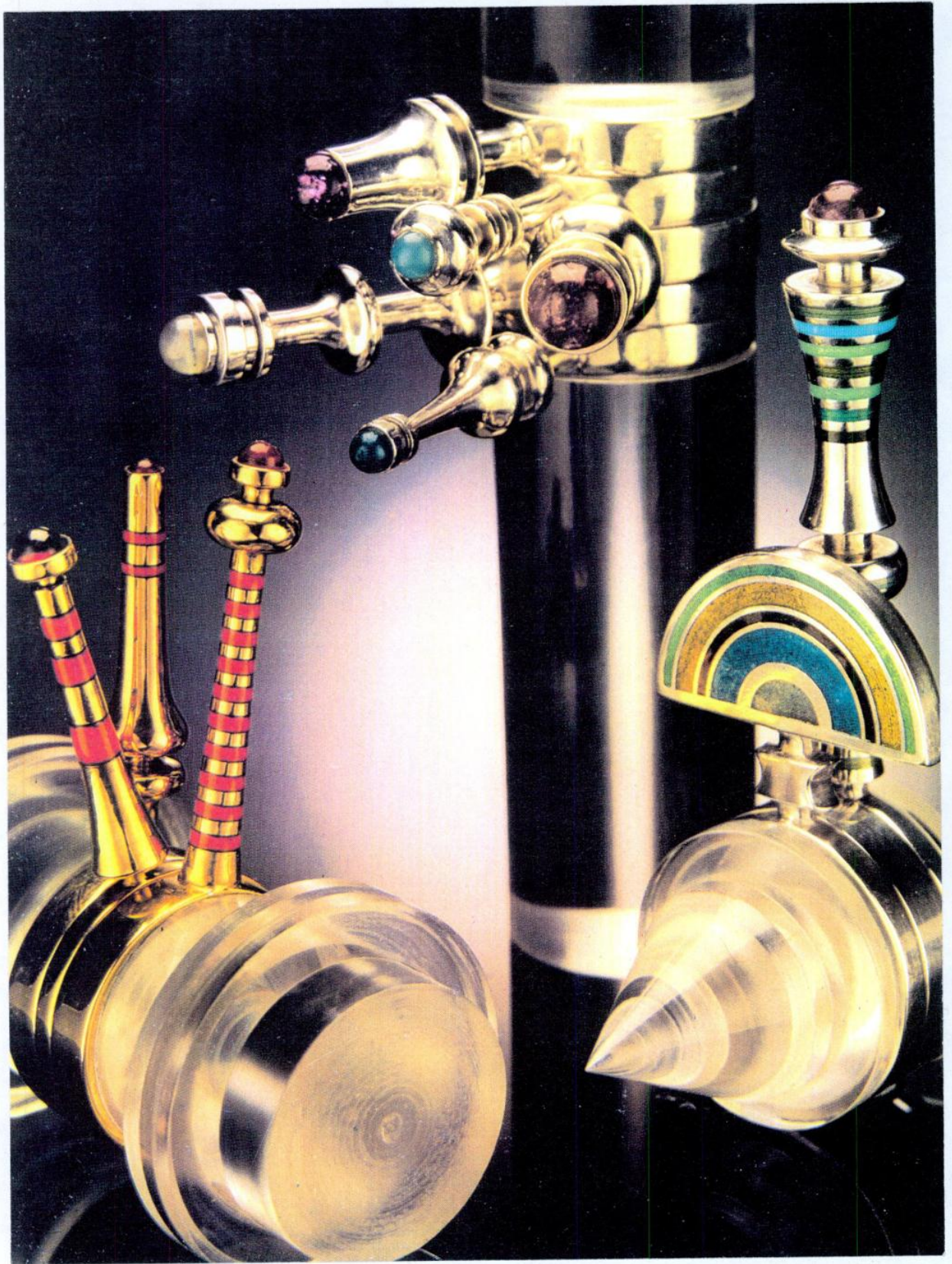


**Plate 47**

Rings by Daniel Jocz

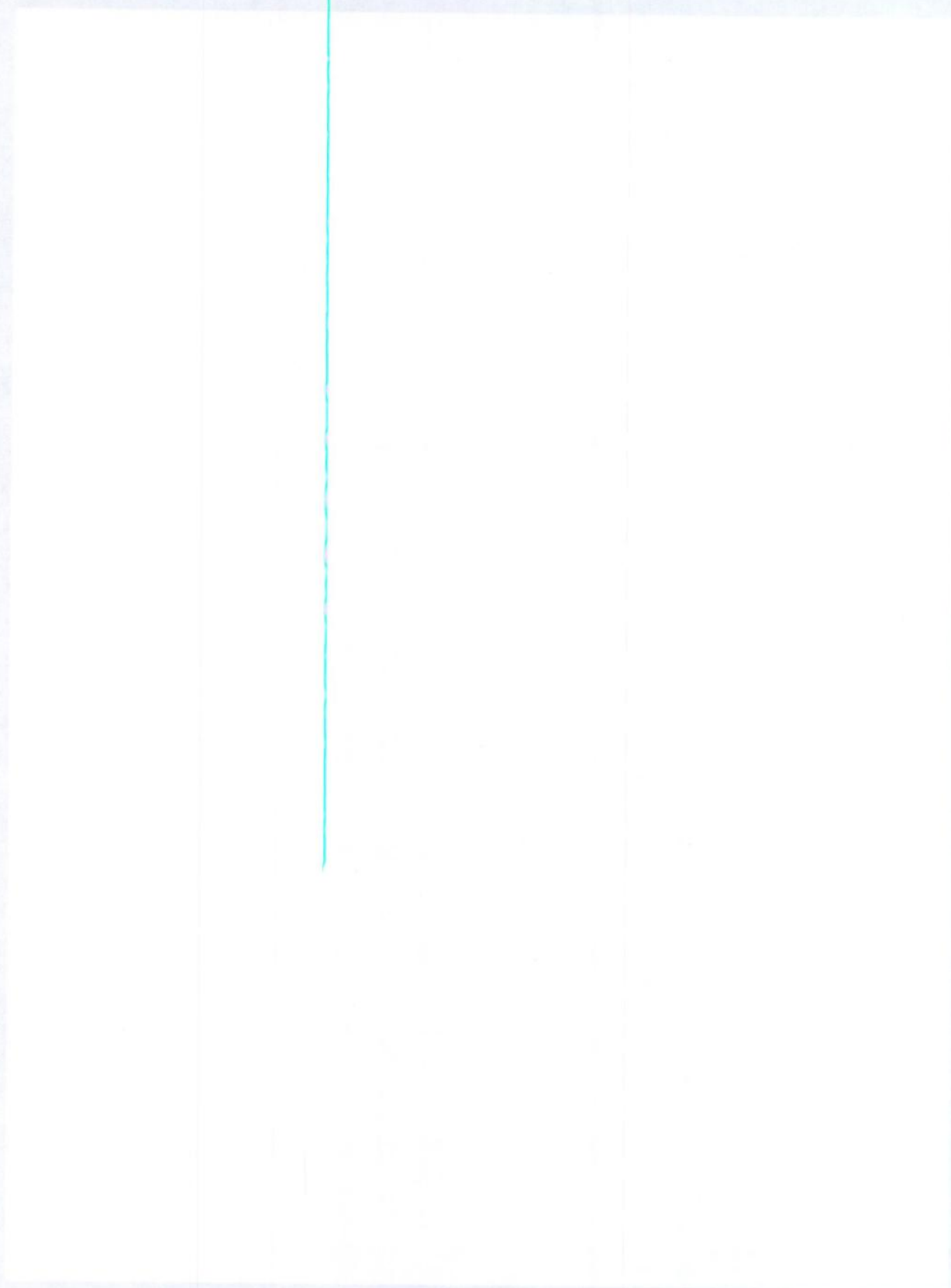






**Plate 48**

Rings by Wendy Ramshaw





"consist of rings in gold, each with a turnet - shaped elevation at the shank, each of these three sets of rings can be rearranged in variable combinations and each has its own special stand - perspex, nickel or brass on which it can be displayed when not worn" (Hughes 1972, p169)

One of the themes of youth culture of the early 1960's was the future seen as some kind of science fiction adventure. In Germany, aeronautical engineer, Friedrich Becker turned professional goldsmith in 1947 and brought with him an aesthetic built on machine engineering and aerospace technology. His pieces are composed of polished geometric forms, sometimes with many moving parts. Much of his work was devoted to rings and this ring, (Plate 49) is a classic example of Beckers expertise with kinetics. "Quite apart from the beautiful balance and clarity of this design, the constant movement never fails to arouse interest and fascinate the eye."(Cartlidge 1981 p171)

Rings altered their appearance again in the 1970's with the advent of new technology in the jewellery industry and else where, new materials and new influences. In the last 30 years, the Western world has experienced unprecedented technological advances with immense social changes following in their wake.

According to Cartlidge, the key-note to rings and their role in the twentieth century lies in their importance as personal statements from both artist and possessor. This applies particularly to unique and handmade rings in any price range, which nowadays have become the prerogative of the many rather than of the few as in the past. Rings define status in a more varied and subtle manner today, by the shape and maker rather than by cost and intrinsic value. Contemporary rings are a surer guide to the wearer's character and outlook on life than to his or her bank account or social standing. (Cartlidge 1981 p 146)





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**Plate 49**

Ring by Friedrich Becker



## **Conclusion**





**R**ings are generally constructed of a circular piece called a hoop through which to slip the finger and an enlarged upper part called a bezel on which the design is engraved. Within these simple limitations, however lies an incredible variety of ornamentation, fashioned from every conceivable material, designed for wear on each and every finger. As we have seen, throughout history, rings have been used for every purpose, from personal decorations to symbols of authority to murder weapons!.

Throughout history, rings have assumed distinctive characteristics which identify them with particular civilisations. For example, Egyptian rings had oblong bezels upon which the name and title of their owners were engraved in hieroglyphic characters. In the Mycenaean period, rings characteristically had broad, flat bezels superimposed upon the hoop. Designs were incised into the gold. Stones were rarely set into the rings until late in the Mycenaean period at Aegina and Enkomi, at that time paste decorations also appeared occasionally. The Greek rings had flattened bezels, with intaglio designs in the gold.

The Celts frequently wore gold rings, judging from the large number found in their tombs. These simple rings were usually penannular in shape, fashioned of gold wire twisted into a kind of rope or consisting of a simple gold bar, bent in an ornamental way.

In addition to its normal decorative appeal the ring had great importance in religious, legal, commercial and private matters throughout history. The giving of betrothal rings, an old Roman custom, evolved into an important part of the marriage ritual and the practice of exchanging marriage rings arose as well. Memorial rings were worn to commemorate a death. Cramp rings prevalent during the Middle Ages, were blessed by the King during a special service. They were supposed to ward off cramps.

Rings for purely decorative use were, of course prevalent throughout all these periods. Many ancient and medieval styles of rings are still worn today. These include betrothal and wedding rings, signet rings and of course gem studded or engraved decorative rings. Antique rings of all types are particularly valued by modern jewellery collectors.

Today's styles in jewellery include, many new, innovative forms such as enormous imitation stones made of paste and set into plain silver or gold





rings. Rings made by using lathes and materials that in the past were never employed in the making of rings, such as plastics and resins.

Not all has been changed, though the most famous names in the jewellery world - Cartier, Bulgari, Boucheron, Asprey and Tiffany have remained faithful to their exclusive and wealthy clientele and continue to produce jewellery in the traditional "grand manner". The established companies still devise sumptuous designs in precious metals and exquisite gem stones as status symbols, heirlooms and investments. In recent years, many consumers of this grand jewellery have been from the Middle East, where tradition still demands the formal display of wealth and rank.

Mans desire to embellish himself with precious or apparently precious articles shows no sign of waning, much less of dying; indeed on the contrary it would appear that just as it has accompanied man from his earliest being until today it will continue to be one of his greatest needs.

"Whatever their shape, material or function in the future, rings will always contain all the magic with which we ourselves endow them - Expressions of our needs, our artistic ability and our technical skills" (Cartlidge 1981 p146)



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