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Platinum

by Sally Thornton

This month I am going to talk about *Platinum* and reflect not only upon why this precious metal is considered so special but also this particular 'white' metal's meteoric rise to fame and fortune.

Platinum ranks amongst the rarest of precious metals being around 30 times rarer than gold and is among the least abundant of the earth's elements. It is to be found in very few places around the world with Colombia, Russia, Canada and South Africa being the main producers. To exasperate its rarity, *platinum* also plays an important role in other fields: it is used in industry in catalytic converters and in medicine, notably pacemakers, because of its conductivity and its compatibility with living tissue. As a jeweller, however, my main interest is when this exquisite metal has been fashioned into beautiful jewellery so it is this that I will focus on.

One could say that *platinum's* history spans from about two billion years ago when the earliest recorded meteorite containing *platinum* fell on the Earth. The early use of *platinum*, however, can be found much later at around 700 BC when Shepenupet, the daughter of the King of Thebes, was buried in a magnificent sarcophagus decorated with gold and *platinum* hieroglyphics.

The first documented discovery was by the Spanish conquistadors in the 1500's in the alluvial gold mines of the Rio Pinto, Colombia. The name *platinum* derives from these conquistadors who misunderstood the metal, calling it 'Platina' which means 'little silver' and dismissed it as an inferior. This 'little silver' was, however, used by the native Indians to make beads and, like the conquistadors, the Indians considered *platinum* to be a nuisance as they found it difficult to work because of its high melting point.

So, *platinum* was forgotten about until the 1700's when it came to the attention of scientists in Europe, who began to experiment with it. In 1751, a Swedish scientist called Sheffer succeeded in melting *platinum* with arsenic and, importantly, recognized it as a new element. The earliest significant uses of *platinum* came 30 years later when coffee pots and other vessels were made by the French court goldsmith Janety in 1780.

It was during the last quarter of the 19th century that a new jewellery style developed using *platinum*. The famous French jeweller, Louis Cartier, was the first person to successfully create intricate designs with this metal. His clientele included the royalty of Europe with Edward VII calling Cartier the "jeweller of kings" resulting in *platinum* becoming a major status symbol. However, it was the Art Deco movement of the 1920's that eventually woke the world up to the true beauty of this metal, and there are fine examples of this work available in the antique market.

You may recall in my earlier article that around this time *white gold* was developed as a cost effective alternative to the highly fashionable *platinum*. How the conquistadors must have turned in their graves to hear that gold was being used as a cheap copy for their inferior "platina"!



Platinum's popularity continued and, in 1936, when the Duke of Windsor married Wallis Simpson they exchanged *platinum* wedding rings but only a few years later, at the beginning of the second world war, platinum was declared a strategic metal and banned for any non military use deemed non essential to the war effort.

The recovery in popularity took a little time but the 1960's saw Elvis Presley marry Priscilla Anne Beaulieu who chose *platinum* wedding rings. It was not, however, until the 1990's that *platinum* finally re-emerged as the 'King of Metals' and since then the rise in demand for *platinum* has been nothing short of meteoric.

When I talk about precious metals it is difficult to leave out Hallmarking about which I have previously written. We tend to think about Hallmarks going back hundreds and hundreds of years, as indeed they do for *gold* and *silver*, but for *platinum* it was only compulsory from 1975. In the first year, there were 7,000 items hallmarked but 30 years later this had risen to 323,000!

What is so special about *platinum*? I have already mentioned that it has a high melting point making it hard to work with but it has many plus points. This naturally 'white' lustrous metal resists tarnishing and corrosion whilst its density and weight make it more durable than other jewellery metals.

Platinum does not wear away and holds precious stones firmly and securely making it an ideal host for diamonds. In addition to its strength and density, *platinum* has another remarkable quality – pliability. *Platinum* is so pliable, that just one gram of the metal can be drawn to produce a fine wire over one mile long.

Like all precious metals, *platinum* scratches. The scratch on a platinum piece, however, tends to be a displacement of the metal and little or none of its volume is lost. So, even though wearing it every day may leave an impression on the surface, it remains what it was – a symbol for all things eternal.

Over time, *platinum* develops a natural patina especially wedding rings that are often worn continuously and many people prefer this over the "just polished" look. If this is not for you and you would like to have your platinum jewellery cleaned it requires specialist skills to restore that special polished look. You are very welcome to bring your rings or other jewellery in to the shop in Kettering for Tony, our in-house goldsmith, to attend to.

I have a *platinum* and 18ct yellow gold wedding ring which survives the rigor of everyday wear and when Tony gives it a clean and polish it gleams just like it did on my wedding day!

