

Palladium - Athena's Secret

by Sally Thornton

Earlier this year I have written about various precious metals such as *Gold*, *Silver* and *Platinum* so now I thought I would tell you about a comparative newcomer to the jewellery world: *Palladium*.

As little as ten or fifteen years ago, *Palladium* was almost unheard of in jewellery circles, so what is *Palladium* and why is this newcomer rapidly becoming the metal of choice for some jewellery lovers?

Palladium was discovered or, perhaps more accurately, separated from its sister metal, *Platinum*, by William Wollaston in the early 19th century. He named it Pallas after the Greek God Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war.

Wollaston didn't announce his discovery as he apparently thought it would have commercial value, and didn't want to tell others how to make it. Although he was successful marketing *Platinum*, he had no buyers for his *Palladium* which was perhaps a metal that was available before technology found uses for it. Without a market his stocks of *Palladium* continued to grow and eventually he gave a considerable quantity to the Royal Society.

So, unfortunately for Wollaston, *Palladium* had to wait more than a hundred years to find a significant purpose in life when it began to be used in dentistry, where it is still applied today in the manufacture of crowns and bridges.

The value of *Palladium* was undoubtedly appreciated and, in 1967, the South Pacific island nation of Tonga issued some *Palladium* general circulation coins commemorating the coronation of King Taufa Ahau Tupou IV, perhaps the ever first issue using *Palladium*. In 1987, both Portugal and France issued *Palladium* proof coins and even the Isle of Man issued a commemorative *Palladium* coin for the bicentennial of the American Constitution.

Coming back to my main interest, *Palladium's* first use in jewellery came when *Platinum* was declared a strategic material during World War II and

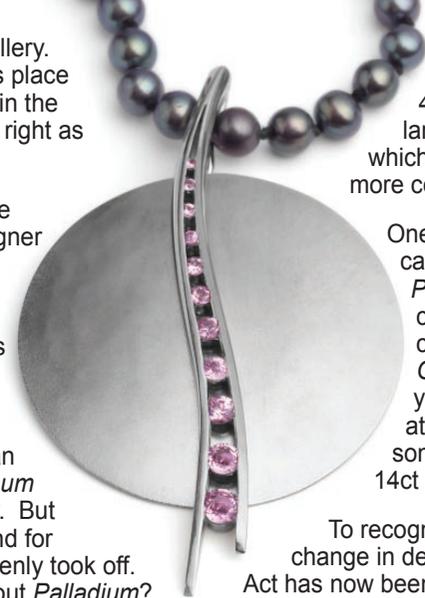
couldn't be used for jewellery. *Palladium* was used in its place to make *White Gold* and in the USA was used in its own right as substitute for *Platinum*.

In the 1990's, some of the more contemporary designer jewellers in Germany began to introduce collections in *Palladium*. This use in Germany was very small and up until 2003 demand was fairly constant with *Palladium* being used primarily as an alloying element in *Platinum* and *White Gold* jewellery. But five years ago the demand for *Palladium* jewellery suddenly took off. So what is so special about *Palladium*?

Importantly, *Palladium* is a precious metal unlike the other new white jewellery metals, such as *Tungsten*, *Titanium* and *Steel*. It is a Noble Metal, a member of the platinum family that shares many of their attributes.

As *Palladium* is a natural white colour, it is perfect for the current fashion trend in white metal jewellery. It makes an alternative to the currently highly fashionable *White Gold*, which often needs to be rhodium plated, or *Platinum*, which is perhaps the most expensive of all precious metals. Like *Platinum*, *Palladium* has a natural ability to resist tarnish so unlike *Silver* will not require regular cleaning.

Because it is so new to the jewellery trade the designers and craftsmen are still developing their techniques. Indeed, I was talking to a workshop only a few weeks ago when they were explaining that they have over the last 18 months made considerable advances in the way they are working *Palladium*. Being malleable and easily manipulated, it is particularly suited to the process of setting gemstones, machine forming and hand-making.



As *Palladium* is less dense, making it around 40% lighter than *Platinum*, larger more flamboyant pieces which are suited to the metal are more comfortable to wear.

One other attraction which can not be ignored is that *Palladium* is currently cheaper than its main competitors, *Platinum* and *Gold*, so for the time being you should be looking at prices that would fall somewhere in between 9 and 14ct Gold.

To recognise and adapt to the rapid change in demand, the UK Hallmarking Act has now been amended by Parliament to incorporate *Palladium* as a metal which requires hallmarking. Having finally received official recognition as a precious metal in its own right, compulsory hallmarking of *Palladium* will come into effect as of January 1, 2010, with the mark resembling the head of Pallas Athena in her helmet.

So what of the future for *Palladium*? Initially, when I first started to sell *Palladium* it was plain and textured gents jewellery and then wedding rings, but now I am finding that people are asking for *Palladium* engagement rings. Designers, I feel, are likely to experiment with bolder designs as customers become familiar with the metal and appreciate its lusturous appeal. So without doubt we are all going to see more and more *Palladium* jewellery.

On a closing note, *Palladium* is mined in only a few areas, mostly in South Africa and Russia. With the ever growing demand from the electrical and automotive industries as well as jewellery, there is a danger that an interruption in supply could send the price skyrocketing as it did in 2000-1. Whilst the price is currently somewhere between that of 9 and 14ct Gold it really is a very attractive option, so if you want to know more about jewellery crafted from this wonderful precious metal please don't hesitate to call in and talk to me or one of my colleagues.

