



## This month I have decided to write about the frequently misunderstood Marcasite Jewellery.

Confusingly Marcasite jewellery is not set with the stone Marcasite, but this term refers to silver jewellery inlaid with small stones of Pyrite. Genuine Marcasite, which has a whitish yellow colour, is far too brittle to be worked and used in jewellery, whilst Pyrite can be cut with facets revealing a beautiful shining metallic brass yellow lustre. This brass yellow in the past been mistaken for gold earning it the nickname of 'fool's gold' famous in many a gold rush.

The name 'pyrite' comes from the Greek word 'pyr' meaning fire on account of the sparks that are created when the rock is struck. The Arabic word for pyrite is 'markaschatsa', from which the name 'marcasite' was derived and adopted many centuries ago by jewellers and has remained the accepted jewellery term to this day.

Early traces of Marcasite jewellery have been found as far apart as ancient Greece and the burial grounds of the Inca people in Latin America. Indeed the stone can be found in high quantities throughout South America and has been called the stone of the Incas, who not only used it for jewellery but also for round plate-like objects that may have been mirrors to be used in

their sun-worship rituals or as a means of seeing into the future. Native Americans believed they could look into the very soul when peering into a polished piece of Pyrite. Their shamans used it as "a stone of power," and their medicine men used it in certain healing rituals earning it the name of the "Healer's Stone", whilst on the shores of the Mediterranean it was said that Cleopatra was reported to wear Marcasite jewellery in order to preserve her beauty.



In Europe it was not until the 18th century, when France was the centre of fashion and French Jewellers lead the field in design and craftsmanship, that Marcasite jewellery became very much in vogue.

In 1759 during the reign of Louis XV the French economy was in serious trouble. The finance minister, a Monsieur Silhouette, wished to fill the states coffers and at the same time find ways to curb the wildly extravagant and highly visible lifestyle of the aristocrats. He devised a plan to persuade the aristocrats to exchange their valuable and precious jewels for cheaper marcasite, which would then be openly worn as a badge of patriotism. How successful Monsieur Silhouette

was with this scheme is not known, but we must remember that for many years prior to this Sumptuary Laws had been introduced which forbade the use of diamonds by all but the most aristocratic. In fact Louis 14th decreed that no-one but he should wear diamonds and since marcasite is an excellent imitation these laws gave a boost to its use by jewellers.

When Napoleon eventually emerged as the Emperor, a wave of jewellery wearing flooded France, with even poorest women wearing some adornment, frequently in the form of Marcasite Jewellery. This popularity was not confined to France but spread throughout Europe and in Britain the fashion was undoubtedly influenced by Queen Victoria's endearment to Marcasite Jewellery.

Whilst Marcasite was probably at its most popular during the Victorian era, I feel that its greatest period was that of the 1920's and Art Deco. Up until this time Marcasite was used as a lower cost alternative to diamonds, but the Art Deco jewellers used the stone out of choice to produce the stylised and geometrical look they wanted. These pieces were usually of a high standard of craftsmanship, even though many were mass produced and usually set in Silver.

Marcasite stones are almost always fashioned in a flattened rose cut, being a flat base with six triangular facets rising to a peak. These stones are very small often no more than 1/12 inch in diameter and create a dark reflective effect, which in subdued or candlelight closely resembles the rose cut diamonds popular in the mid 18th century.

When set in silver they produce a very striking contrast between the two metallic grey shades, which gives a special vintage look to silver jewellery. In the past Jewellers have experimented by setting them into yellow gold, but the colours tend to clash and in general they simply did not look right.



As a little girl I used to visit my father and grandfather in the original shop in Market Street. I would often spend my time in the workshop and being curious would open up lots of small boxes containing different sizes of marcasite. With marcasite jewellery the stones are often glued into the setting and with wear some could become loose and be lost. These stones in the boxes were used to replace those lost by customers who brought their jewellery in for repair. There was also a box containing some Victorian and other old marcasite rings which I would eagerly try on, pushing the rings onto my fingers. Although the business moved a few paces down to its current location in the High Street, we still have a few of the rings.



Whilst Marcasite Jewellery declined in popularity due to its association with 1940's costume jewellery, it is now once again becoming more sought after. With the growing fashion in the retro art deco and Victorian look, many designers are incorporating the stone along with seed pearls, mother of pearl, amethyst, turquoise or enamel to create this look.

Just before Christmas one of our suppliers sent us some marcasite samples for us to view and to ask our opinion. The samples they sent were quite beautiful and interestingly there was not one negative comment, so I decided to take on some of this new collection. You are of course only too welcome to call in and see them for yourself.



**Sally Thornton, AA Thornton,  
1/7 High Street, Kettering  
Tel: 01536 513014  
www.aathorntonjeweller.com**