

# Finger Rings

I have, in previous editions of 4 Locals, written about the wedding ring and engagement ring but never about rings in general. So in this article I will reflect upon the finger ring from its humble beginnings to the present day.

The story of the finger ring is in a way like the ring itself, without beginning or end, and has been an object of ornament playing a vital role in our stories and rituals for thousands of years.

The simplest form of finger ring worn by our ancestors consisted of a band of metal

twisted round to embrace the finger and open at either end. Such plain open silver spiral rings were found alongside solid rings on the hand of an early Saxon in a burial site near Salisbury.

It is likely however that finger rings as we may understand them evolved from the signet rings worn by the ancient Egyptians. A seal or signet ring had the practical purpose of sealing letters and papers and as such was regarded as a sign of power and authority. A royal personage wishing to delegate his power to one of his officials would hand him his signet ring.

Perhaps also as a sign of wealth and power, the signet ring evolved into a favourite decoration amongst the wealthy Egyptian women, who sometimes wore two or three gold rings on the

same finger particularly on the thumb. Some such rings had a simple design, some set with stones or engraved with the name of the owner and using images of the knot, snake and cat. The finger ring tied a person down to his or her social class, with the poorer classes wearing rings of less costly materials such as silver, bronze, glass or pottery.

Surviving rings from republican and imperial Rome confirms that they too were enthusiastic ring wearers. These include two finger rings and small 'baby' rings, which were probably worn on the upper joints of adult fingers.

Rings were worn in great number for fashionable effect in the Middle Ages, where a portrait of Lady Joan Beaufort and her daughters all displaying a large number of rings on every finger and thumb and not forgetting additional

rings tied to the wrist and pinned on clothes and hats!

In an age where magic, science and religion were intertwined, a ring could be worn as a sign of faith, as an amulet or to cure illness. The V & A museum in London has a fine example (dated 1200-1300) of a gold

Second Hand 9ct Yellow Gold Signet Ring £125



18ct yellow gold diamond Bubble ring £1,735



Babette Wasserman Cocktail Ring £179



Shaped 9ct White Gold Diamond dress ring £400



9ct Marquise Ruby & Diamond dress ring £540



Silver Marcasite Ring £39

ring set with a wolf's tooth. The ring would have been used as a charm and carries an inscription against toothache to increase the prophylactic power of the wolf's tooth!

From the time of Edward the Confessor in the 11th Century up until the reign of Queen Mary in the 16th Century, English Kings and Queens on Good Friday blessed and distributed curative rings which were held to be a cure for epilepsy.

But rings were not only used to effect healing but also to carry poison! It is thought that this originated in the Far East and India and spread to other parts of Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean before reaching Western Europe in the Middle Ages.



9ct yellow Gold ruby & diamond dress ring £540

So rings were more than just decoration or a fashion accessory, they are worn as wedding rings and a sign of love as the Regard, Dearest or Mizpah rings. Posy rings, the name given to Tudor and Elizabethan gold bands, were inscribed with lines of "poesie" or poetry. We mark special occasions with graduation rings, birthstone and mourning rings. The list is endless – rather like the ring an unbroken circle, decorated or plain but they survive as the most unusual wearable form of art and offer a powerful link with our past.

Moving forward to the twentieth century this brought about unprecedented innovation and diversity in ring designs influenced by key artistic developments including the Art and Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau and Art Deco period. The darkening political and economics period of the 1930's and 1940's was reflected in the rings of that time with jewellers using large but less expensive gemstones such as rock crystal or quartz.

It was only in the 1950's and 1960's that the first jewellery courses were set up in art colleges and rings became sculptural objects or 'wearable' art. Artist jewellers now challenged conventions about the place of jewellery in society and created fantastic playful designs, constrained only by the imagination

of their makers and wearers. This explosion in design and inventiveness of rings available today brings delight to the younger members of our team, who when choosing them for the AA Thornton collections think these both fun and different. Look out for Babette Wassermann's glamorously large cocktail rings set with colourful stones and also the large amber rings each one unique so when they've gone – they've gone.



Unique Amber Ring £65

If creating your own look appeals then stacking rings may be for you. With the display right by our front counter, it is very accessible and leaves the customer to mix and match the rings for their desired look. With silver rings starting at £35 we find this aims to suit most budgets.

For those of you who are looking for something more vintage, do pop in and check out our second hand collection. This is constantly changing with more traditional styles such as the keeper rings, Russian three colour bands or small Victorian three stone rings all selling quickly.

We have helped customers to design their own rings too and re use the stones from worn out old items. We have for example turned a wedding ring into an occasion ring by setting stones into the plain band so using the ring in a different way but retaining the sentiment.

Rings continue to be a constant surprise and are collectable and great fun. The poet Edith Sitwell (1887- 1964) who was famous for her dramatic jewellery and sat for a portrait by Cecil Beaton wearing large rings said 'I feel undressed without my rings'. The sentiment says it all...



Stacking Rings from £35

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