

# Gems With a Past

Old is new again as antique jewelry enjoys a Renaissance of its own

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By SASHA WILKINS



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Woolley & Wallis, Les Enluminures, Berganza; Museum of London

**LOOKING DOWN** at my hand as I try on rings in Hatton Garden jewelry dealer Berganza, I take pleasure in knowing that the simple 18th-century gold band contains a secret known only to its wearer. Inside the ring, a hand-engraved inscription reads: "Be ever content." A pertinent *aide memoire* for this never-satisfied entrepreneur.

Named after the inscription (from the French *poésie*, or poetry), the posy ring is no longer a well-kept secret between lovers. And its renewed popularity is part of a growing understanding that antique jewelry isn't just intrinsically beautiful but comes with both investment value and a compelling emotional narrative.

### Gold Digging



View Graphics

Key moments in early jewelry history

"At a time of great homogeneity, antique jewelry does convey a real sense of the individual, which is why I like it so much," says the longtime "Antiques Roadshow" expert and jewelry historian John Benjamin.

One of the most ancient forms of decorative art, jewelry is how we show our personal taste, our status, our religious affiliations, our wealth and our affections—and have for millennia. With

antique pieces, old sentiments can take on fresh meaning.

"I love the thought that these rings have some history, and that others have loved them before," says Lucy Ashford, an account director at public relations firm TCS and the happy owner of an antique engagement ring from Berganza. "The proportions and workmanship are so elegant in these old pieces, and the designs are often unique—such an important point for me."



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A ring from Les Enluminures

Sandra Hindman, the founder of antique dealers Les Enluminures and professor emerita of art history at Northwestern University in Chicago, wears a 15th-century English iconographic ring every day. She says people often completely ignore it, believing "it's a trinket from a Cracker Jack box." "I think one wears *haute joaillerie* for show," she says, "but wears antique—and



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A Woolley & Wallis gold posy ring (£200-£300)

especially medieval—jewelry for oneself."

The other glorious discovery about buying antique jewelry is that while some pieces can command eye-watering prices, the entry point can be astonishingly low in comparison with modern costume jewelry.



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Les Enluminures Renaissance diamond ring

"It is odd that something 2,000 years old can be relatively inexpensive," Mr. Benjamin says, pointing out the paradox inherent in buying antique pieces. "Egyptian faience necklaces are incredibly common and you can buy them for a few hundred pounds."

Dr. Hindman, whose galleries specialize in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, agrees. "The buyer of any one of the colored diamonds (red, green, pink and blue), which have fetched staggering prices from \$2 [million]-\$10 million just in the past few years could, if he or she so wished, assemble an entire collection of equally rare rings of the Middle Ages in the low seven figures." Though few medieval rings ever go under the hammer, the record price at auction for one is £84,000, commanded at Christie's London in June 2006 by a pointed diamond loyalty ring said to have been a gift from Edward III.

So how does one start to buy antique jewelry? The best place to begin is with a little research: Take Mr. Benjamin's advice and head to the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jewellery Gallery to get a sense of how jewelry has evolved from ancient to modern times. He also recommends handling pieces as much as you can—auction houses are an excellent place to do this.

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**“** *The proportions and workmanship are so elegant in these old pieces, and the designs are often unique* **”**

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This is a very good time to invest: Experts say the upcoming Museum of London exhibition of the Cheapside Hoard (*from Oct. 11; [museumoflondon.org.uk](http://museumoflondon.org.uk)*) is going to activate an enormous interest in jewelry of the 17th century. "Although the Cheapside Hoard is spectacularly rare, I think that what it will do is make people reassess the appeal and value of jewelry of the past," says Mr. Benjamin.

Of course, the cost of a piece won't be your only concern when looking at antique jewelry: Provenance can be almost impossible to trace. Which is why it's important to buy only from an acknowledged retailer or the auction room network, which will give you the integrity of a firm backing your purchase.

Most important of all when buying antique jewelry: consider the value to yourself of wearing a piece with integrity and timelessness. As Dr. Hindman says, "There is something magical about wearing a ring that someone five to 10 centuries ago also wore."

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## THE GUIDE // Dealers and Auction Houses

### The Auction House

There are many auction houses that put up antique jewelry for sale but, as John Benjamin notes, "there are several excellent regional ones beyond Christie's, Phillips, Sotheby's and Bonhams. For example, **Woolley & Wallis** in Salisbury has really good jewelry sales, often selling privately consigned jewelry with a great pedigree."



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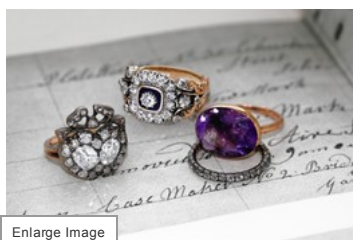
Woolley & Wallis natural pearl earrings, sold for £1.6 million.

Woolley & Wallis holds around 30 specialist sales a year, spread between nine departments. The house last year sold a pair of natural pearl earrings for £1.6 million, but they also have more affordable options. In their upcoming jewelry sale on Oct. 24, an 18th-century posy ring with the delightful inscription "Love and live happy" is estimated at £200-£300.

[woolleyandwallis.co.uk](http://woolleyandwallis.co.uk)

#### The London Dealer

If you wish to plight your troth with an antique engagement ring, then **Berganza** in London's Hatton Garden jewelry district is the perfect place to start.



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Berganza

Berganza rings

As well as precious objects such as Roman earrings and Georgian hair slides, Berganza prides itself on holding one of the largest collections of antique engagement rings in the world, including examples from the Roman, Byzantine and Georgian eras. Managing Director Paul Daughters estimates that they sell upward of 50 antique rings a week.

Last year, a circa-1770 amethyst memorial ring made for George Grenville (British prime minister, 1763-65), which Berganza put into the Lapada Antiques Fair, won the People's Vote for Object of the Year.

[berganza.com](http://berganza.com)

#### The Paris Dealers

Founded in Paris in 1991 by Sandra Hindman and with galleries in New York, Paris and Chicago, **Les Enluminures** specializes in manuscripts and miniatures from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and handles jewelry from the same periods.



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A ring from Les Enluminures

At Masterpiece London 2013, Les Enluminures rapidly sold out of a curated selection of gold posy rings and five important identity rings, including a medieval sheriff's signet ring. Its current stock includes a 9th-11th century gold braided Viking ring and a ravishing Renaissance gold and diamond ring.

Its [medieval-rings.com](http://medieval-rings.com) website explains in some detail the history behind antique rings and lists current pieces. Warning: It's addictive, and may prove harmful to your wallet.

[lesenluminures.com](http://lesenluminures.com)

At **Galerie J. Kugel**, fifth-generation dealers Nicolas and Alexis Kugel work more at the museum end of things— most famously facilitating the sale of an early 16th-century mother-of-pearl silver-gilt mounted casket, made by Francis I's goldsmith, to the Louvre in 2000 for an undisclosed sum.

Based in the 19th-century Hôtel Collot, the gallery houses an eclectic grouping of exquisite works of art, dating from the medieval and Renaissance eras up to the 1850s. They are currently hosting an online exhibition featuring Baroque pearls.

Not everything they sell is breathtaking in price as well as quality: Galerie J. Kugel's online "Cabinet de l'Amateur" showcases works, including jewelry, priced between

€1,000 and €30,000 to help art lovers establish and grow their collections.

[galeriekuigel.com](http://galeriekuigel.com)

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*What to Look for When Buying Antique Jewelry*

**John Benjamin, jewelry historian**

There is a lot of antique jewelry which isn't very well made, so the important thing is to try to buy the best quality and to recognize that it is possible that repairs and moderations may have been made, so you must always ask for a condition report.

Make sure that the piece is attractive. For example, when buying cameos—very undervalued right now—avoid shell ones with bearded male heads and look for a female head in profile, carved in hard stone in a gold frame.

**Paul Daughters, Breganza managing director**

You must go with your heart. If you like it, basically other people will, and that is what makes an investment.

**Sandra Hindman, Les Enluminures founder**

I always tell clients in any field that you should never buy art as an investment but because you get pleasure out of it.

**Sasha Wilkins**

Remember that with posy rings, the inscription usually perfectly fits the inside of the ring, so it is almost impossible to resize them. If you find a ring that fits, buy it!

—Sasha Wilkins is a fashion journalist and creator of the award-winning lifestyle blog [LibertyLondonGirl.com](http://LibertyLondonGirl.com)

