

Antique

JEWELLERY

Medieval rings and personal identity

Miniature works of art and laden with meaning, rings from the Middle Ages can resonate with contemporary jewellery wearers, as Dr Sandra Hindman explains.

Western audiences are familiar with jewellery being used as symbols of identity, be it a signet ring bearing a family crest or personalised wedding bands with sentimental inscriptions. The origins of these forms of identity date back beyond the medieval period, and they continue to be used to inspire jewellers today, who reinterpret their symbols in modern designs. What few people realise however, is that these ancient and medieval rings can still be worn today – their symbols and inscriptions appropriated to suit their new owners.

Of the many different types of rings that are markers of identity, the signet ring most

obviously lends itself to personalisation – signet deriving from old French and middle English *signum* or 'small seal'. The Bible is full of references to signet rings. The Pharaoh puts his own signet ring on Joseph's hand (*Genesis 41: 42*); the Lord declares that he makes Zerubbabel 'like a signet ring' (*Haggai 2: 23*); the son of Jehoiakim, King of Judah, wears the signet ring on his right hand (*Jeremiah 22: 24*); and King Xerxes presents Haman's signet ring to Mordecai (*Esther 8: 2*). In these biblical stories, the signet ring conveyed on its owner an official authority that went with his identity.

In the medieval era, signet rings came in many guises. The simplest type is the Merovingian signet of the 6th and 7th centuries mostly found in France. An excellent example (*below*) belonged to the Frankish Queen Aregunda (c. 500-561), who was the wife of King Clotaire I. A circular bezel bears an inscription with the engraved letters of her name arranged in a circle, *Arnegundis*, and the monogram in the centre *Regine*, or queen. Aregunda's ring was found in 1959 during the excavations of her tomb in the royal mausoleum of Saint. Denis, but it is characteristic of Merovingian signets worn by men and women alike in early medieval Gaul.

Emerging in the 12th century in the Middle Ages with the rise of feudal society, heraldry endorsed a system of personal identification of an individual or a family,



'Regine Arnegundis' (Queen Aregunda), gold, Merovingian Gaul, c. 570. Musée du Louvre

through emblems and devices, even colours, they could use on banners, garments and, of course, on rings. Heraldic rings thus replaced nominative rings. Those who were not entitled to bear arms, because they came from the non-noble families, such as merchants, created another type of signet ring as a marker of identity – the merchant's ring. Decorated with mysterious geometric symbols, each example is distinctive and unique, like those rings with actual heraldry. Renaissance paintings by Hans Holbein the Elder show these rings prominently displayed on the thumbs of powerful merchants of the Hanseatic League, who used them to sign documents which are often strewn on the tables before them. This particular merchant's ring (*left*) in a private collection is of special interest, because it suggests clearly that the symbols on these rings most likely originate with the marks medieval masons carved

Late medieval merchant's or stone mason's ring, Europe, probably England, c. 1450, gold. © Les Enluminures





Marriage ring, Byzantine, 6th-7th century, gold. © Les Enluminures

into the stone in Cathedrals and parish churches to 'sign' their work.

We have seen rings that identify a person by name, by lineage and by class. But there are also rings that identify persons by their civic status, such as betrothal or marriage rings. Today, the paired diamond bands worn on the left hand are tell-tale signs that

the colour of the gemstone was meaningful. Pious bishops' rings invariably are set with expensive sapphires, the blue of the sapphire recalling the Virgin Mary's blue mantle and the celestial blue of the heavens, and the value of the stone a reminder of the immense wealth of the church over which the bishop presided.

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a woman is married. In late Rome and Byzantium the marriage ring (*above*) had engraved portraits of the husband and wife on the bezel, accompanied by the engraved word *Omonia* for 'harmony' or *Vivatis* for 'long life'. If the couple was Christian, the figure of God the Father often appeared to bless them from above, or at the very least a cross was inscribed between their portrait images – signaling yet another marker of identity, that of their religious faith.

Sometimes medieval rings conveyed identity in even more symbolic ways. For example, bishops wore a type of ring we call the 'stirrup ring', a 19th-century misnomer based on the resemblance of the form to a horse's stirrup (*right*). The unusual form probably makes reference instead to the Gothic arch of Cathedrals, the very realm over which the bishop exercised his ecclesiastical authority. Just as the form is symbolic, so too



Medieval sapphire stirrup ring, Western Europe, 13th-14th century, gold with cabochon sapphire. © Les Enluminures

Hand in hand with identity and authority, the ring in antiquity and the Middle Ages was thought to possess power, even magic. In Plato's *Republic*, the ring of Gyges is a mythical magical artifact that grants the owner the power to become invisible at will. The shepherd, who discovers the golden ring worn by a corpse in a tomb, places it on his finger and, through his invisibility, is able to seduce the king's wife, murder the king with her help and take control of the kingdom. Plato uses the ring in the tale to analyse morality, asking whether man is moral purely out of necessity or by nature (somewhat pessimistically, necessity wins out for Plato), but the ring that embodies power is as old as King Solomon's magic ring and as recent as JR Tolkien's 'one ring'.

The idea of the power of the ring, coupled with personal identity, is inherent in another popular type of medieval ring, the iconographic ring, so-called because it bears engraved religious scenes of saints and their martyrdoms, stories of the New Testament such as the Nativity, and religious images, such as the Trinity. Iconographic rings (*overleaf*) were so common in 15th-century England we might consider them a sort of medieval 'bestseller' in the realm of jewellery just as the *Book of Hours* was the 'bestseller' among manuscripts. Literary accounts reveal that they were often given as gifts to protect wearers, and many such

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rings are inscribed *en bon an* (Happy New Year), a sure indication that they were exchanged as presents at *étrennes* or New Years. A frequent image on iconographic rings is that of Saint Christopher, the giant who crossed the river with the Christ Child on his shoulders, guaranteed to safeguard the owner on his own travels. If Catherine was your name saint, you might commission (or purchase ready-made) a ring showing Saint Catherine of Alexandria with her wheel, the symbol of her martyrdom. Gazing at the engraved image on your finger, like gazing at the image of the saint in a manuscript, reminded the viewer that Catherine was patron saint of female wisdom, virginity, spinners, librarians and so forth. Saint Margaret assured young brides protection in childbirth, a much more dangerous procedure then than now. Both men and women wore iconographic rings, which often referred to the identity of the wearer but at the same time were thought to have the power to protect.

Rings are so tied with personal identity in part because they are so intimate. A ring is one of the few pieces of jewellery that the wearer can admire without access to a mirror, whereas earrings, necklaces and

brooches are all worn to be admired by others or by oneself only if looking at one's reflection. Others (I belong to this camp) take pleasure in the idea that another person long ago treasured and wore the ring close to his or her body.

People wore rings from antiquity through the Renaissance and in all sorts of ways – pinned onto hats, dangling from chains, over their gloves, or peeking through specially designed gloves, etc. Bishops' rings and nominative rings come down to us from tombs, discovered still encircling the fingers of the corpse of the interred person, marking identity in death as in life. Iconographic rings must have been passed down from generation to generation much like the *Book of Hours* with which they are compared. Signet rings probably enjoyed the same fate. What about today? One thing is certain: made of heavy gold and often set with hard, indestructible gemstones, medieval rings are surprisingly durable, and they easily withstand daily wear. They survive as perhaps the only form of truly wearable medieval art. As such, they are purchased (and worn) today as engagement and wedding rings, for anniversaries with apt inscriptions (one ring inscribed on the outside 'I love you' and the inside 'And I will always love you' turned



Iconographic ring with two standing saints, England, 15th century, gold with engraved bezel. © Les Enluminures

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brooches are all worn to be admired by others or by oneself only if looking at one's reflection. Stressing the intimacy of the ring, the very terms defining its parts refer to the human body: the 'head' of the ring is the bezel, the 'shoulders' refer to the part of the ring between the hoop and the bezel and the 'foot' of the ring is the lower part of the hoop. It is this intimacy that makes the ring so enticing – or, alternatively, so foreboding. I have a client who, sensitive to the vibrations she receives from a ring, tries on every ring to see how it speaks to her of its previous 'life'. In some cultures it is superstitious to wear the ring of another person, because if something bad happened to the owner, it is believed that a similar misfortune could

be the perfect 25-year anniversary gift), for birthdays with the appropriate gemstone of the month, as special gifts and of course simply as beautifully crafted adornments.

I conclude with a personal story. I have worn the same 15th-century iconographic ring for nearly two decades (I even swim with it on). At the close of the very first TEFAF – the art, antique and design fair – at which I exhibited in Maastricht, as a special treat to myself, I rushed over to a

colleague's booth and bought a ring I had admired throughout the fair. It is engraved with the image of Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, teaching her daughter Mary to read. At the ridge of the double bezel, the two figures hold an open book, a manuscript. I have studied medieval manuscripts for many decades, first as a professor and scholar, and later as an art dealer, so for me the representation of a manuscript on a ring held by two women is incredibly personal. In the 15th century, the ring was also a very special gift – in my imagination to a young girl (maybe her name was Anne) perhaps from her mother – for the inner hoop is inscribed *nul si bien* or 'no one so good as you'. Like my ring, every ring has the potential to tell many stories, connecting people of the past with those in the present – and future.

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