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‘Meaningful Jewels,’ on Exhibition

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A memento mori skull from the “Meaningful Jewels” exhibition.

MAASTRICHT, the Netherlands — In theory, someone selects jewelry because it is personally expressive in some way. But with “Meaningful Jewels,” a collection of 46 antique European pieces exhibited for the first time at the European Fine Arts Fair earlier this month, Sandra Hindman aimed to highlight what she called a “more loaded” interpretation.

That is why Ms. Hindman, founder of the gallery *Les Enluminures* in Paris and Chicago, and her colleagues — Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, a jewelry historian, and Cynthia Hahn, a reliquary arts specialist, the authors of a book on the collection — decided to frame the exhibition with the quote: “The thing of mine I have loved the best.” The phrase came from the will of a medieval English duchess. And the “thing,” which Ms. Hindman, a medieval manuscript dealer, sold to a museum 25 years ago, was a two-inch-tall psalter with eight illuminated pages. She deduced that it was a talisman, something so precious that it was made to be handled and worn. Jewels, she realized, were just as moving.



The seventh-century Covehithe pendant, considered the finest piece of Anglo-Saxon reticulated glasswork ever found.

Compiled over 15 years, the “Meaningful” collection includes many crosses, representations of saints and scenes of the Annunciation and Crucifixion. But Ms. Hindman noted that, despite the devotional touch points, the pieces have almost nothing to do with traditional religion, nor are they fashion items, accessories or traditional art objects. “These are personal adornment with everyday power. They’re different, almost magical,” she said. “It’s less about a visual aesthetic than how they interacted with you as a person, on your body.”

The exhibition will also be shown at *Les Enluminures* in New York from April 5 to 20.

Ms. Hindman has worn many of the pieces, just to see if they are wearable: a finely engraved silver pomander in the form of a book, and a pair of 17th-century carved jet necklaces worn by a Spanish abbess (listed for sale at \$125,000). On Ms. Hindman, a petite woman, they nearly reached her knees.

The oldest piece in the exhibition, [the Covehithe pendant](#) in gold and lattice-patterned glass, dates to the seventh century (\$135,000). Considered the finest specimen of Anglo-Saxon reticulated glasswork ever found, it surfaced following a cliff slide in 1993 in England.

When asked if she’s religious, Ms. Hindman replied that she was a medievalist. “I believe that people believed in these jewels’ power,” she said. “I believe in their specialness.”

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