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# ‘Treasures and Talismans,’ at the Cloisters, Puts Rings on a Pedestal

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 3, 2015

“Treasures and Talismans,” an exhibition at the Cloisters subtitled “Rings From the Griffin Collection,” also includes sculptures like “St. Gregory as Pope.” Credit Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Why do people wear rings on their fingers? For personal adornment, of course, but as often as not because of the social meanings they bear and communicate. Perhaps the world’s oldest form of jewelry, rings symbolize love, betrothal and marriage. They represent the wearer’s status, group affiliation and ancestry. They express religious, superstitious and moral beliefs. They may be trophies, memorials and, as in the case of the signet ring, a device for sealing and authenticating letters and documents.

In its most basic form as a small hoop made of anything that can be turned into a circle, the ring is the simplest, least encumbering kind of jewelry. Yet, as shown by “Treasures and Talismans: Rings From the Griffin Collection,” an absorbing exhibition at the Cloisters, a ring can be a miniature sculpture of marvelous complexity, skill and imagination.

Rings, including this Roman key ring, are the primary focus of the exhibition. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Organized by C. Griffith Mann, the curator of the Cloisters, the exhibition features more than 60 rings made in Europe from late Ancient Roman times to the Renaissance, and it's amplified by two dozen paintings and sculptural objects relating to ring making. All the rings are from a trove that was acquired over 30 years by a private collector and is on long-term loan to the Met. With rings and other objects involving many varieties of metalworking techniques, all kinds of gems and precious stones and many different social functions, the exhibition is an excellent introduction to a field of study that is both highly specialized and loaded with popular appeal.

A Renaissance cusp ring from Northern Europe. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

One of the most impressive pieces is a Renaissance gimmel ring made in Germany in 1631. A gimmel ring has multiple hoops that fit together like puzzle pieces. This one, made of gold, has two circles that separate to reveal within each one's bezel a little cavity occupied by a baby in one and a skeleton in the other. The hoops are molded in the form of snakes with additional, decorative elements painted in bright enamels. Together they share the inscription "Whom God has joined together, let no man tear asunder."

A sixth-century architectural ring from France. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

At the less complicated end of the spectrum are British posy rings from the 16th and 17th centuries, the simplest of which are ornament-free gold bands with amorous inscriptions on the inside like "I Like My Choyse" and "Providence Divine Hath Made Thee Mine."

(Incidentally, unless you have superhuman vision, you might consider bringing a magnifying glass. Otherwise, for the many details that elude the naked eye you can see every ring in bigger-than-life photographs on the Met's website for the show.)

A gemstone ring. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Some rings are as interesting for their back stories as for their immediate sumptuous presence. One of the collection's rarest pieces, an inscribed sapphire ring, has a large blue stone engraved in Arabic — perhaps in the 10th century — with the name "Abdas-Salam ibn Ahmad." Associated with chastity and purity, sapphires were quarried in Ceylon, Arabia and Persia. This one had traveled along trade routes to the West where, ultimately, a 14th-century Italian

goldsmith set it into a vigorously sculptural gold ring inscribed, “For love you were made and for love I wear you.” There’s the seed of a Hollywood epic in that.

The story of a set of nine, late 17th- or early 18th-century diamond rings from a Spanish convent is similarly suggestive. All have multiple small stones in elaborate, delicate settings, a type of decorative ring for women called “giardinetti” for its garden-like effect. As they are today, diamonds then signified engagement to be married. These, however, were turned over to a nunnery as part of a novice’s dowry, a symbol of her mystic betrothal to Jesus. Who was she and what became of her? Romantic novelists take note.


Among the ring varieties in the exhibition are marriage rings. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Part of the exhibition is devoted to the art of the goldsmith, a craftsman who also was adept at shaping many other precious materials and types of objects. From a leading painter in Bruges, Belgium, Petrus Christus, “A Goldsmith in His Shop” (1449) lucidly details a typical goldsmith’s offerings. Here, too, is one of the show’s most spectacular pieces: not a ring but a string of rosary beads carved from ivory with amazing craftsmanship by an early 16th-century German artist. At either end of the string is a finely sculpted man’s head, half of which has the flesh removed to reveal his skull. Framed by silver mountings, each bead is the size of chicken egg. Five beads portray richly dressed people in profile while a sixth depicts a skeleton. Inscriptions on two of the beads combine to read, “Remember death/This is what you will be.” In other words, believe in God or you will die like a dog.

Conveying a somewhat different message, a 17th-century British memento mori ring has a diamond-studded skull that flips open to reveal a heart-shaped ruby. Maybe love would conquer death. Certainly medicine had thus far done little to slow the grim reaper.

A Renaissance gimmel ring. The exhibition showcases the ring as miniature sculpture and a field of study. Credit Richard Goodbody/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The emotional meaning of the wedding ring is most poignantly expressed in "Portrait of a Young Woman" (circa 1490-1500) by Lorenzo di Credi. Against the background of a verdant landscape, the young widow appears dressed in black. Holding up a gold band between the thumb and index finger of her left hand, she gazes sadly into space thinking, no doubt, of her lost companion. It's a heartbreaking picture.

"Treasures and Talismans: Rings From the Griffin Collection" runs through Oct. 18 at the Cloisters; (212) 923-3700, metmuseum.org.