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Jewels and Jewellery by Clare Phillips

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'Jewels & Jewellery'

by Roberta Bernabei, 2008

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Jewels & Jewellery by Clare Phillips is a book that offers refreshing insights into the world of jewellery. It accompanies the opening of the newly refurbished William and Judith Bollinger Jewellery Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and therefore attempts to distil one of the most prestigious and extensive jewellery collections in Europe. The collection, which totals approximately 4,000 pieces, has been classified into several sections according to typology of jewel, such as rings or tiaras, or by themes including sentimental jewellery. Three of these sections have been selected by the author to form the main structure of the book: Materials, Chronology of Style, and Manufacturing and Distribution.

Materials is a short, but very interesting section full of generic information regarding gems, pearls and other materials. What distinguishes it is how each piece of jewellery is accompanied by an explanation of technical details at a level that is rarely present in commensurate generic texts. For example, the description of how it is possible to prepare tortoise shell for decoration with pique by using boiling salted water to soften it prior to engraving and inlaying with precious metals.

Undoubtedly, some of the jewels selected by the author in the *Chronology of Style* will be well known to an informed audience, having already been published in several jewellery books. In contrast, other pieces are not so well known and are quite distinctive; being peculiar or exceptional in some way. The sense of excitement and intrigue at their discovery is enriched by their concise historical contextualisation through text and illustrations. For instance in 'The Locket' chapter, the context is visually supported by a humorous cartoon by Alfred Thomas, which depicts a lady wearing lots of lockets. Furthermore, a photograph of the disassembled component parts of a handmade locket enables the reader to garner a quick impression of the complexity of the object and how it would have been made.

Within the second part, *Chronology of Style*, the primary emphasis falls on jewellery from after the First World War through to present times. More recent practice is represented by a collection of works from the Royal College of Arts Visiting Artists programme. The addition of this important collection in 2007 has amplified the spectrum of individual jewellery languages on show at the V&A and this is fully reflected in the book. It enables a fulsome understanding of two fundamental aspects; firstly the predominantly European imprint of contemporary practice and secondly an expanded overview of the ways in which the body, jewellery and clothing interact and how jewellery can engage in or provoke debate on social-political matters. The book makes reference to the work of major figures including: Bruno Martinazzi, Otto Künzli, Gijs Bakker, Karl Fritsch, Bettina Dittmann, Giampaolo Babetto and Giovanni Corvaja. However, it is surprising that the pages dedicated to 'The International Exhibition of Modern Jewellery, Goldsmiths Hall, 1961' contain less contextual analysis in comparison.

The final section *Manufacturing and Distribution* offers a concise insight into the world of assaying and hallmarking, which is both complex and fascinating at the same time. Hallmarking varies according from country to country and this book focuses on the UK system. Wisely the author notes how there are differences between hallmarking regulations in different countries, but she does not attempt to go

into any specific details, which might have been interesting as would an indication of how hallmarking technologies have recently embraced laser marking.

The book totals 176 pages and includes an exhaustive bibliography, detailed appendix of illustrations and index. Its format is reminiscent of recent books on jewellery, such as *New Directions in Jewellery I* by Jivan Astfalck et al (Black Dog Publishing – 2005). Generous space is given to life size or larger photographs of objects. It is a book that should be of interest to both neophyte and experts in the field, allowing the possibility to enjoy and scrutinise in detail the peculiarities, intricate decorations, and complexities of many pieces of jewellery from throughout its entire history. The photographs are invariably excellent and their quality reveals the optimum state in which the pieces are conserved and the professionalism of the experts charged with restoring their original appearances. Whilst direct observation of a piece will inevitably give the most genuine reading sometimes details can be overlooked, and this is where this book excels by enlarging particulars such as the micro-mosaic panel of birds in the brooch shown in the chapter '*Souvenirs of the Grand Tour*'.

In conclusion, 'Jewels & Jewellery' definitely provides refreshing insights into the world of jewellery and exceeds, what one imagines being, its primary role of documenting the museum's collection. The content of the latter is perhaps the only limitation on its breadth of enquiry. Nonetheless, it informs the reader succinctly with technical, material and philosophical depth and is therefore likely to instigate further investigation of certain revelations. Furthermore, it is a user friendly book with a long shelf life; one that can be used at different stages and levels of enquiry. Overall, it is a rather brilliant book and therefore easily recommended.