



A selection of jewellery from Christie's sale in July. The single-stone diamond gentleman's ring at the bottom sold for £1,880. (includes premium)

A selection of jewellery from Christie's July sale. To the left is a pair of old-brilliant cut diamond cluster earrings which sold for £1,175. Below them is a diamond two-stone brooch which sold for £1,292.50. (includes premiums)



A selection of jewellery from Christie's sale in July. To the left of the blue earrings, the ring with four different coloured stones sold for £1,762; and in the centre, the large diamond brooch sold for £3,877. (includes premiums)

Introduction to Jewellery

The first of a two-part feature. See also our Two Part Price Guide to Jewellery on pages 4-9.

by **Brenda Greysmith**

Buying antique and vintage jewellery is a complex undertaking: to be successful you need to do some serious homework. The beauty of the items will more than repay your study, but the variety of the materials used, the variations in their quality, plus the enormous diversity of forms and styles can create pitfalls for the unwary.

Much jewellery is made from the so-called precious metals, gold, silver and platinum. Gold and silver have been used in different purities and this will affect the value of the piece. Pure gold is known as 24 carat, but seldom used because of its softness; 22 carat has been used but more common is 18 carat (75 per cent pure); 14, 12 and (the more usual) 9 carat (33 per cent gold) are less valuable. Pure silver is also soft, the preferred mix being 'sterling silver' (925 parts pure silver to 75 parts copper) or 'Brittania silver' (958 parts pure).

British silver and gold items should be 'hallmarked' to reveal when and where the item was stamped, and its purity. Hallmarking (or assaying) has been carried out for centuries in this country and thus many symbols have been used, so even the experienced buyer will refer to such books as the Pocket Edition of 'Jackson's Hallmarks', edited by Ian Pickford and published by Antique Collectors' Club. Hallmarks are small and can also be worn and hard to spot, so carry with you a magnifying lens (or loupe) to make things easier.

Platinum (which is more expensive than gold) only became popular as a jewellery metal in the early twentieth century (particularly for the Art Deco styles of the 1920s and 30s) but was not hallmarked in Britain until 1973. Other jewellery metals include 'base' materials which may have been plated with gold or silver, as well as pinchbeck (copper and zinc), steel, iron, aluminium and, most recently, the refractory metals of titanium and niobium.

Another major factor in determining value will be what gemstones are included in the piece and their quality. Quality in this instance will cover their carat weight (there are five metric carats to the gram), their colour, clarity and cut. Any flaws, muddy colour or a cut which is considered old-fashioned or badly executed will reduce value.

The most well-known gems are diamonds (of course), rubies, sapphires and emeralds, and perhaps the non-mineral materials amber and pearl. However, there are dozens more, ranging from clear blue aquamarine to opaque multicoloured black opal. For an insight, study *Gemstones of the World* by Walter Schumann published by the National Association of Goldsmiths. (It's worth stressing that gemstones do indeed come from around the globe and that this, together with the 'jet-set' style of the wealthiest jewellery owners, has contributed towards making the sale of both new and antique pieces a very international business.)

Values of gemstones depend on individual quality but will also be affected by rarity and the demand for any particular type. Inevitably, there are gem fakes and ones that have been artificially coloured or filled to disguise flaws—and there are synthetically made stones too. So buy only from a reputable dealer. At the top end of the market, gemstones may be accompanied by some certification, for example from the Precious Stone Laboratory of London or the Gemological Institute of America. Diamonds may be coded from ‘Flawless’ (F) down through subtle differences of grade from ‘Very, very slightly imperfect’ (VVS) down to the spotted ‘Pique’ (PK); coloured stones will give the internationally agreed description and state whether that colour is natural.

In addition to basic jewellery materials, value will also depend on the craftsmanship which has gone into creating the piece. Whatever the technique, whether enamelling, cutting cameos or engraving metal, it should reflect skill and care, while the design too should bring out the best in the materials, be wearable and stylish. To develop your own judgement of such esoteric points you will need to see as much good jewellery as you can, getting your ‘eye in’ by handling and really looking at real-life pieces as well as indulging in some of the beautifully illustrated jewellery books available. Look out for *Jewels and Jewellery* by Clare Phillips, from V&A Publications, and *Jewellery* by various contributors, from Thames and Hudson.

Of course some designer names will send prices soaring: if you find a genuine signed Cartier piece or one by Lalique, you’ll be made. But there are other jewellery names, less well known but with a style of their own which is appreciated by the knowledgeable enthusiast, jewellery by the Danish silversmith Georg Jensen, for example, or the French designers Georges Fouquet and Boucheron, or Arts and Crafts exponents such as C.R. Ashbee. Certain companies too are much sought after, Van Cleef & Arpels being among the most notable. Relatively few pieces are signed, or come with named boxes, which is why it’s important to get a sense of jewellery styles and designers through the centuries.

As well as materials, makers and good design, there is one other basic consideration to keep in mind. Is the item something that could still be worn? While some jewellery collectors will keep their treasures locked in a vault, others like to wear their pieces. Mourning jewellery may be too macabre for many and abstract brooches from the 1950s can seem too chunky. We no longer wear chatelaines (waist chains for keys) or jewelled haircombs. Safer bets are rings, earrings and necklaces in a relatively simple traditional style with gentle motifs such as flowers and leaves, birds, butterflies, hearts and bows. And finally, don’t forget that jewellery is linked to fashion: the appeal of necklaces will be affected by today’s necklines, and interest in dangling earrings will be undermined by long hair styles.



A ring from about 1915, with a cushion shaped emerald, a cluster of single-cut diamonds and two pear shaped diamonds sold for £3,055 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



A single-stone ring, with a marquise-cut diamond weighing 4.21 carats and tapered baguette-cut diamond shoulders, sold for £9,400 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



A Belle Epoque two-stone ring, circa 1915, set with a step-cut diamond (2.26 carats), a rectangular step-cut Kashmir sapphire (2.52 carats) and diamond-set detail. Sold for £21,150 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



A pair of earclips with circular coral cabochons surrounded by brilliant-cut diamonds (diamonds totalling about 2.90 carats). Sold for £3,055 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



A late Victorian five stone ring with graduated old-brilliant cut diamonds set alternately with rose-cut diamond points (diamonds totalling about 2.60 carats). Sold for £3,055 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



A ring with an oval mixed cut sapphire surrounded by old-brilliant cut diamonds (the diamonds totalling about 1.50 carats total). Sold for £2,115 at Bonhams. (includes premium)



An Art Nouveau diamond, enamel and chased gold heart shaped pendant by Gautrait, circa 1905. Sold for £2,200 at Bonhams on July 10. (includes premium)