

Antique Jewelry by Joan Stein and Helen Siegel

Circa Antiques Ltd.

“How do you know that this is old?” is the question we are asked most frequently about antique jewelry. In order to unscramble the confusion and avoid pitfalls, we advise some guidelines that might help to enhance the pleasure of owning or buying an antique piece.

The first clue to unraveling the mystery is style. It is, for instance, Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian, Art Nouveau or Art Deco? Each period had distinctive characteristics. Georgian (1790-1837), scarce and expensive today, can be distinguished by its simple styling, square or rectangular shapes, pearl borders and cabochon (smooth) stones. Many paste or synthetic stones, with the mounting being more important than the stone quality, is characteristic of this period. Gold content was usually 18 carat but rarely marked due to a lack of standard requirements. Like the Victorians, Georgians were very sentimental and therefore heart and flower motifs, memorial and love themes abound.

As a result of Victoria's long reign (1837-1901), the Victorians love of adornment and the new technology created by the industrial revolution, a wealth of Victorian pieces can still be found today. Queen Victoria loved jewelry and set the trends and style for an entire generation. Her wedding ring had a snake design, a form that continued in popularity throughout this period and on into the Art Nouveau. Early Victorian delicacy, appropriate for a youthful queen, gave way to a more ornate style as the years passed. When Albert died in 1860 Victoria wore black for the next forty years, thus creating a demand for mourning style jewelry. Wonderful bracelets, large brooches, earrings, beads and rings are found in a variety of materials such as Jet and French Jet (glass) from this time. The Queen loved Scotland and spent much of her time there. Thus, Scottish jewelry, with its beautiful and unique designs, colorful stones, and silver settings is a legacy from this period.

Edwardian (1901-1910) and Art Nouveau (1880-1914) followed the prolific Victorian. A return to simpler, sensuous and natural form is typical. Look for floral motifs, Cupids and delicate flowering lines. Individual craftsmanship opposed to Victorian mass production characterized the Art Nouveau era. These were short periods and we find fewer treasures available.

And finally, for our purposes, we come to the Art Deco (1920-1940) years. Geometric design replaced fluidity. Look for extensive use of platinum, white gold, filigree, precious and brilliant cut stones and new materials such as Bakelite and chrome. The jewelry is elegant and sleek, tailored or whimsical.

In addition to style, we use other “clues.” Hallmarks are important. England used an easy to follow system for 18, 15 and 9 carat gold and silver. Refer to a book on English Hallmarks to learn the year of manufacture of marked pieces.

Next, pay attention to the condition of the item. Does it have worn areas? Some sign of wear should be evident. Has there been repair or alteration? Look for changed earring backs, shanks replaced on rings, new clasps added to pins, missing links, etc. Pin clasps have changed in design over the years.

Early pieces do not have safety features except for a small guard chain. The earlier safety clasps often closed in the opposite direction to those used today, and later clasps are more sophisticated in design. Victorian and Georgian earrings never had clips or screw backs but did have wires that were long and thick.

Experience is important in testing this knowledge. There are many books and materials to study. We would hope that you will rely, finally, on the expertise of dealers that have proven trustworthy. There are a lot of us out there!!! Circa Antiques, Ltd. is exhibiting for the first time at The Birmingham Antiques Festival in Booth 46.