

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Collectors are clamouring for Victorian-era jewellery rich in significance and symbolism.

By Beth Bernstein



THE EYES HAVE IT

Victorian jewellery often featured a miniature portrait. But those who needed discretion chose the “lover’s eye,” said to originate when the Prince of Wales (later George IV) sent his lover a token of affection while preserving his anonymity. Fewer than 1,000 examples remain.

Eye miniature © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



WHEN PRINCE ALBERT proposed to Queen Victoria in 1839, he gave her an engagement ring with a slithering twist: a gold serpent with an emerald-set head. The emerald was the queen’s birthstone, and the snake forming a circle around her finger represented their eternal love. Today the serpent is perhaps the best-known motif of Victorian jewellery. And a highly collectable one: At London’s Bentley & Skinner, sales director Omar Vaga says, “a client recently self-purchased a 19th-century emerald and diamond gold snake bangle for £45,000 [US\$70,718].”

Sentimental adornments of the Victorian era, from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, are much sought after by collectors. Pieces with hidden compartments or secret messages that evoke love and friendship can command premium prices. “Locketts continue to be important sales for us,” says Greg Kwiat, CEO of Fred Leighton. “One of the more recent pieces sold was a magnificent crystal-backed 19th-century pearl and diamond heart locket, very typical of the period.”

In some particularly inventive pieces, gemstones took on added meaning through acrostics. The first letters of

the gems spelled out a word, such as *regard* (ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby, diamond), *adore* or *dearest*. These pieces spread throughout Europe after French jeweller Jean-Baptiste Mellerio designed acrostic jewellery for Napoleon and his wives. On today’s market, higher prices are expected for earlier pieces and those with rare designs—for example, with the acrostics spelled out by gems configured in intricate floral shapes on padlocks or heart locketts.

Hearts and flowers were of course popular motifs, with the Victorian language of flowers translating from petal to bauble: forget-me-nots for remembrance, or pansies (from the French *pensée*, “thought”) for “think of me.” Many symbolic designs beloved during this time originated in the Georgian era, and some date back to the Romans, such as the rings known as *fede gimmel*s (from the Latin *mani in fede*—“hands in faith”—and *gemellus*, referring to the ring’s twin hoops). The concept resonated strongly with Victorians, who embraced versions featuring clasped hands that swivel open to reveal one or two hearts. Such creative craftsmanship reflects the height of Victorian sentimentality—and of modern collectability.

American Victorian jewelled snake brooch courtesy A La Vieille Russie