

jewelry in america 1600 1900

jewelry in america 1600 1900 marked a fascinating evolution, reflecting the changing social strata, economic fortunes, and aesthetic sensibilities of a young nation. From the simple adornments of early colonists to the opulent creations of the Gilded Age, the story of American jewelry is deeply intertwined with the nation's development. This article delves into the materials, styles, craftsmanship, and symbolism of jewelry across three centuries, exploring how it served not only as personal decoration but also as a marker of status, wealth, and cultural identity. We will trace the journey from utilitarian pieces to elaborate statement jewelry, examining the influences that shaped its design and production.

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Early Colonial Jewelry: Simplicity and Symbolism

The earliest jewelry found in America, during the period of 1600 to roughly 1750, was characterized by its relative scarcity and utilitarian nature. Settlers arriving from Europe brought with them only the most precious or sentimentally significant items, and the harsh realities of establishing new lives meant that elaborate adornment was often a luxury few could afford. Pieces were typically handcrafted, often by the wearers themselves or by itinerant silversmiths who served small communities. The emphasis was on durability and practicality, with materials like pewter, brass, and locally sourced silver being common. Gold was reserved for the wealthiest colonists or was incorporated into very small elements of a piece.

Symbolism played a significant role in early American jewelry. Religious and patriotic motifs were prevalent, particularly in items like mourning rings or pendants bearing initials. Lockets, often containing locks of hair from loved ones, served as tangible connections to family and a reminder of those left behind or lost. Personal initials, engraved or applied, were a common form of personalization, transforming a functional item into a deeply personal treasure. These early pieces, while perhaps lacking the intricate detail of later eras, possessed a profound emotional resonance and spoke volumes about the values and beliefs of the colonial population. The scarcity of resources also meant that even simple items were highly valued and often passed down

through generations.

Materials and Craftsmanship of the Colonial Era

During the 17th and early 18th centuries, the materials used for jewelry were dictated by availability and the colonists' financial standing. Silver was the most common precious metal, readily worked by skilled silversmiths who were essential to colonial society. Techniques were straightforward, focusing on techniques like engraving, chasing, and simple casting. Gemstones were rare and typically limited to small, often less valuable stones like garnets, amethysts, and agates, usually set in a closed-back style to enhance their perceived brilliance. Pearls, when available, were highly prized and often incorporated into necklaces or earrings. The craftsmanship, while not always as refined as European counterparts, was robust and functional, designed to withstand the rigors of colonial life. Many pieces were also imported from England and other European countries, bringing with them established fashion trends.

Religious and Sentimental Motifs

The religious fervor of the colonial period often found expression in jewelry. Pendants and rings bearing religious symbols such as crosses, anchors, or doves were common, signifying faith and hope. The concept of memento mori (remember death) also influenced jewelry design, with black enamel or mourning bands used to commemorate deceased loved ones. These pieces served as both a religious statement and a visible act of remembrance. Beyond religious symbolism, the intensely personal nature of colonial life fostered a strong tradition of sentimental jewelry. Initials, family crests, and miniature portraits were frequently incorporated into pendants, lockets, and rings, creating intimate keepsakes that celebrated familial bonds and personal connections in a society where separation was common.

Georgian and Federal Period Adornments: Shifting Tastes

As America moved into the Georgian (mid-18th century) and Federal (late 18th to early 19th century) periods, societal changes and increased trade with Europe led to a greater appreciation for more elaborate and fashionable jewelry. The burgeoning merchant class in colonial cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston began to emulate the styles of the British aristocracy. This era saw a rise in the popularity of intricate designs, often incorporating cut gemstones and more refined metalworking techniques. The influence of Rococo and Neoclassical styles became evident in the flowing lines, floral motifs, and classical imagery that graced these pieces. Jewelry started to transition from purely utilitarian or deeply sentimental objects

to more overt displays of wealth and fashion.

The Federal period, in particular, embraced a more restrained elegance influenced by Neoclassicism. Light and airy designs, often featuring delicate filigree work, pearls, and paste (imitation gemstones), became fashionable. The use of micromosaic, a technique involving tiny pieces of colored glass to create intricate images, also gained popularity for pendants and brooches. This period also saw the increasing establishment of skilled jewelers and workshops within America, reducing the reliance on imported goods and fostering a distinct American style, albeit one heavily influenced by European trends. The growing prosperity of the young nation allowed for a more extensive engagement with jewelry as a means of personal expression and social signaling.

The Influence of European Styles

The Georgian and Federal periods in American jewelry were significantly shaped by the prevailing fashion trends in Great Britain and continental Europe. Georgian jewelry, with its emphasis on elaborate scrollwork, intricate settings, and the use of colored gemstones like amethysts, emeralds, and sapphires, found favor among the American elite. As the period progressed, the Rococo influence brought lighter, more playful designs with floral and foliate motifs. The transition to the Federal period saw a strong embrace of Neoclassical aesthetics, inspired by archaeological discoveries and a renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman art. This translated into jewelry featuring motifs like laurel wreaths, classical figures, urns, and delicate geometric patterns. Paste gems, expertly crafted to mimic precious stones, were widely used by those who could not afford the genuine articles, allowing for a broader participation in fashionable adornment.

Emergence of American Jewelers

While early colonial jewelry often relied on imported pieces or the work of itinerant craftsmen, the Georgian and Federal periods witnessed the professionalization and growth of the jewelry trade within America. Cities like Philadelphia and New York became centers for skilled jewelers who established workshops and boutiques. These artisans not only replicated European styles but also began to adapt them to local tastes and available materials. Silversmiths, who were already integral to colonial life, expanded their repertoire to include more intricate gold work and gemstone setting. This growing domestic industry meant that Americans had greater access to fashionable jewelry and contributed to the development of a nascent American jewelry identity, laying the groundwork for the large-scale manufacturing that would characterize later periods.

Victorian Era Jewelry: Sentimentalism and Ostentation

The Victorian era (1837–1901) represents a pivotal and dynamic period for jewelry in America, characterized by its remarkable diversity, encompassing both profound sentimentality and extravagant ostentation. Queen Victoria's influence was pervasive, and her personal life—from her marriage to Prince Albert to her long periods of mourning—deeply impacted jewelry trends. Early Victorian styles often featured romantic motifs, floral designs, and the popularization of sentimental jewelry. As the era progressed and industrialization accelerated, jewelry became more accessible to a wider segment of the population, leading to both mass production and the creation of increasingly elaborate and expressive pieces. The era's defining characteristic was its ability to encapsulate personal stories and social standing through adornment.

The latter half of the Victorian era, particularly the Gilded Age, witnessed an explosion of wealth and a desire for conspicuous consumption. This translated into incredibly ornate and often massive jewelry pieces. Large diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires were set in elaborate gold and platinum mountings, often adorned with intricate enamelwork and pearls. Brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and tiaras became larger and more dramatic, designed to catch the eye and signal immense wealth. Simultaneously, the enduring Victorian emphasis on sentimentality continued, with the popularity of lockets, mourning jewelry, and pieces engraved with personal inscriptions or dates. This duality of sentimentalism and ostentation makes Victorian jewelry a rich and complex field of study.

Mourning Jewelry and its Significance

Mourning jewelry was a deeply ingrained tradition throughout the Victorian era, reflecting a societal preoccupation with death and remembrance. Following the death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria adopted deep mourning attire and jewelry, setting a powerful precedent. This type of jewelry often featured black enamel, jet (a fossilized wood), obsidian, or vulcanite, materials that were dark and somber. Lockets containing locks of hair from the deceased, often arranged in intricate patterns, were extremely common. Rings, bracelets, and brooches were frequently inscribed with the name of the deceased and the dates of their birth and death. While somber in appearance, these pieces served a vital emotional purpose, allowing individuals to carry tangible reminders of their loved ones with them, offering comfort and continuing a connection in a society where outward displays of grief were expected and prolonged.

The Gilded Age: A Flourish of Wealth and Design

The Gilded Age (roughly 1870–1900) in America was a period of unprecedented industrial growth and wealth accumulation, which dramatically impacted jewelry design and consumption. This era saw the rise of opulent jewelry, often characterized by its sheer scale and the lavish use of precious materials. Large diamonds, cut with increasing precision thanks to advancements in technology, became the centerpiece of many pieces. Elaborate parures (matching sets of jewelry) consisting of necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and tiaras were highly fashionable. The development of sophisticated metalworking techniques allowed for incredibly intricate settings, often incorporating filigree, engraving, and colorful enamel. Platinum, a rare and durable white metal, became increasingly popular for its ability to securely hold large diamonds, creating a dazzling, almost ethereal effect. Jewelry during this time was not merely an accessory; it was a bold declaration of social standing and financial prowess, designed to impress and outshine others at lavish social events.

Popular Gemstones and Materials of the Victorian Era

The Victorian era saw a diverse range of gemstones and materials used in jewelry, catering to different tastes and economic circumstances. Diamonds, particularly the rose cut and later the brilliant cut, were highly sought after by the wealthy. Colored gemstones like rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and amethysts were also popular, often set in elaborate gold mountings. Pearls, both natural and cultured (which became more available during this period), were a constant favorite, appearing in necklaces, earrings, and as embellishments on brooches and pendants. For those with less wealth, paste gems offered a convincing alternative, while materials like jet, coral, and even carved bone and ivory were used for more affordable and often sentimental pieces. The increasing availability of precious metals and gemstones, coupled with advancements in manufacturing, democratized jewelry to some extent, allowing a wider range of Americans to participate in the fashion trends of the time.

The Rise of American Jewelers and Manufacturing

The period from 1600 to 1900 witnessed a significant transformation in the production of jewelry in America, moving from individual craftsmanship to large-scale industrial manufacturing. In the early colonial period, jewelry was primarily made by silversmiths and goldsmiths who operated small, independent workshops. These artisans were highly skilled but their output was limited. As the colonies grew and then the young United States developed, the demand for jewelry increased, particularly among the expanding middle class. This demand spurred innovation and the development of new techniques and machinery.

By the mid-19th century, particularly after the Civil War, America became a leader in mass-produced jewelry. Technological advancements, including steam-powered machinery and improved methods for die-stamping and electroplating, allowed for the rapid and cost-effective production of standardized designs. Companies emerged that specialized in manufacturing jewelry on an unprecedented scale. This shift made fashionable jewelry accessible to a much broader segment of the American population, transforming it from an item primarily for the elite to a common adornment. This industrialization also fostered the growth of prominent American jewelry houses and brands.

From Handcrafted to Mass Production

The journey of American jewelry production from its artisanal origins to industrial scale is a defining narrative of the period. Early American jewelry was almost exclusively handcrafted. Silversmiths like Paul Revere were not only craftsmen but also entrepreneurs who produced a range of functional and decorative silver items, including jewelry. The craftsmanship was meticulous, but production was slow and each piece was unique. The 19th century, however, brought about radical changes. Innovations like the steam engine, power presses, and the development of new alloys and plating techniques revolutionized the industry. Die-stamping allowed for the rapid creation of intricate patterns and designs on metal sheets, which could then be assembled into jewelry. Electroplating, developed in the mid-19th century, made it possible to apply a thin layer of gold or silver onto less expensive base metals, creating affordable, attractive jewelry that mimicked precious metals. This transition democratized adornment, making stylish pieces available to a much wider consumer base than ever before.

Key Manufacturing Centers and Companies

As jewelry manufacturing scaled up, certain cities became renowned centers for the industry. Providence, Rhode Island, emerged as a major hub, particularly for its expertise in producing stamped metal goods, including jewelry. Companies like Gorham Manufacturing Company, originally a silversmith, expanded into a wide range of decorative arts, including fine jewelry. New York City also became a significant center, with numerous workshops and manufacturers catering to the burgeoning demand, especially during the Gilded Age, where luxury goods were highly prized. Other cities like Attleboro, Massachusetts, and Newark, New Jersey, also developed substantial jewelry manufacturing sectors. These companies often specialized in specific types of jewelry, from intricate gold pieces to more affordable stamped and enameled items, contributing to the diversity of American jewelry offerings.

Materials and Techniques Through the Ages

The evolution of materials and techniques is central to understanding the development of jewelry in America between 1600 and 1900. Initially, resources were limited, and craftsmanship focused on practicality and readily available metals. Silver was paramount in the early colonial period, often worked by skilled silversmiths who doubled as general metalworkers. Techniques like chasing, engraving, and simple casting were common. Gemstones were rare, and when used, were often closed-set and less intricately faceted than in later periods. The emphasis was on the intrinsic value and symbolism of the materials.

As trade routes expanded and the colonies prospered, access to a wider array of materials and more sophisticated tools became available. The Georgian and Federal periods saw an increased use of gold, finer cuts of gemstones, and the introduction of techniques like filigree work and micromosaics. The Victorian era, with its industrial advancements, truly transformed the landscape. The ability to mine, cut, and set diamonds with greater precision, coupled with the widespread availability of pearls (both natural and cultured), colored gemstones, and less expensive alternatives like paste, meant that jewelry styles could become more elaborate and varied. The development of electroplating and die-stamping further democratized the creation of jewelry, allowing for intricate designs to be produced at scale, even on base metals.

The Role of Precious Metals: Gold, Silver, and Platinum

Precious metals formed the backbone of American jewelry throughout this period, with their usage evolving alongside the nation's economy and technological capabilities. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, silver was the dominant precious metal for everyday adornment due to its relative affordability and the skill of colonial silversmiths. Gold was reserved for the wealthiest individuals and often used in smaller quantities or for more significant ceremonial pieces. As trade increased and wealth grew, gold became more widely used. The Georgian and Federal periods saw increasing sophistication in goldworking, with techniques like chasing and filigree becoming popular. The late Victorian era, particularly the Gilded Age, witnessed the rise of platinum. Its durability, scarcity, and ability to hold diamonds securely made it the ultimate luxury metal, enabling the creation of the large, elaborate diamond-encrusted pieces that defined the era. The choice of metal was always a significant indicator of the wearer's social and economic status.

Gemstones: From Scarce Jewels to Abundant Sparkle

The availability and use of gemstones underwent a dramatic transformation over these three centuries. In the early colonial period, gemstones were a rarity. When used, they were often small, less valuable stones like garnets, agates, or amethysts, typically closed-backed to enhance their luster. Pearls, highly prized, were more common than faceted precious stones. The Georgian and Federal periods saw a greater influx of cut gemstones through trade, including diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, though they remained expensive. The development of improved cutting techniques, such as the rose cut and later the brilliant cut, made diamonds more popular and brilliant. The Victorian era, especially the latter half, marked a true golden age for gemstones. Advancements in mining and cutting made diamonds more accessible, and their popularity soared. The discovery of large diamond mines in South Africa further increased supply. Colored gemstones also remained popular, and the introduction of cultured pearls in the late 19th century made them more affordable, greatly expanding their use in jewelry. The aesthetic and symbolic value of gemstones, from romantic birthstones to dazzling displays of wealth, became increasingly central to American jewelry design.

Innovations in Setting and Finishing

Beyond the metals and gemstones themselves, the techniques used to set and finish jewelry evolved significantly, contributing to both its aesthetic appeal and its accessibility. Early colonial jewelry often featured simple bezel settings or prong settings for gemstones. The focus was on securement rather than elaborate display. The Georgian and Federal periods saw more refined techniques emerge, such as the use of finer prongs, granulation, and delicate filigree work to create open and airy settings that allowed more light to pass through the stones. The Victorian era, however, was a period of significant innovation. The development of sophisticated prong settings allowed for larger gemstones to be showcased more prominently, while also ensuring their security. Intricate engraving, enameling, and die-stamping became widespread, allowing for the creation of highly detailed and ornate surfaces. The introduction of electroplating allowed for base metals to be finished to resemble precious metals, greatly expanding the market for jewelry that looked expensive but was significantly more affordable. These finishing techniques, from the delicate artistry of filigree to the boldness of die-stamped patterns, shaped the visual character of jewelry throughout the period.

The Social Significance of Jewelry

Throughout the period from 1600 to 1900, jewelry in America served as far more than mere adornment; it was a powerful social signifier, reflecting and reinforcing hierarchies of wealth, status, and social standing. In the early colonial years, even simple pieces like silver buttons or a well-made ring

could denote a certain level of prosperity and respectability. As the colonies grew and society became more stratified, jewelry became an even more critical marker of class. The ability to afford gold, precious gemstones, and intricate craftsmanship clearly distinguished the elite from the common populace. The types of jewelry worn, the materials used, and the sheer quantity of adornment all communicated messages about one's place in society.

Beyond wealth, jewelry also carried significant symbolic weight related to personal relationships, religious beliefs, and civic identity. Sentimental jewelry, such as locket containing portraits or hair, expressed familial bonds and personal affection. Mourning jewelry served as a public display of grief and remembrance. Religious amulets and symbols conveyed faith. As America developed, particularly through the 19th century, jewelry also began to reflect emerging national pride and individual achievement. The evolving styles and the increasing accessibility of jewelry democratized its use, but its inherent capacity to signal status and personal narrative remained a constant, making it a fascinating lens through which to view American social history.

Jewelry as a Marker of Social Class and Wealth

From the earliest days of settlement, jewelry served as a tangible indicator of one's economic standing. In the 17th and 18th centuries, owning gold jewelry was a clear sign of significant wealth, as was possessing rare gemstones. Silver was more common, but the quality of craftsmanship and the size and number of silver items a person owned could still differentiate social classes. As the nation progressed through the Georgian and Federal periods, and especially into the Victorian era, this distinction became even more pronounced. The Gilded Age, with its ostentatious displays of wealth, saw the elite flaunting enormous diamond necklaces, elaborate tiaras, and jeweled brooches that were simply unattainable for the vast majority of the population. These pieces were not just beautiful; they were advertisements of financial success and social importance, worn to impress and to reinforce the existing social hierarchy. Conversely, the development of affordable, mass-produced jewelry in the late 19th century meant that even those with modest means could participate in fashionable adornment, though the distinction between truly precious and imitative jewelry remained clear.

Symbolism in Personal and Public Life

The symbolic power of jewelry extended far beyond mere wealth. In the deeply personal and often transient lives of early Americans, jewelry served as a vital link to loved ones and cherished memories. Lockets containing miniature portraits or locks of hair were cherished keepsakes, particularly important when families were separated by distance or loss. Mourning jewelry, as previously discussed, was a critical part of public ritual and private grief. Religious jewelry, such as crosses or depictions of saints, conveyed faith and devotion. In a society that was often restrictive in its outward displays

of emotion, jewelry provided a sanctioned way to express sentiment, piety, and remembrance. As the nation matured, jewelry also began to incorporate nationalistic symbols or motifs that celebrated American achievements, further embedding it within the fabric of personal and public life.

Jewelry as a Reflection of American Identity

The journey of jewelry in America from 1600 to 1900 mirrors the nation's own evolving identity. Initially, American jewelry was heavily imitative of European styles, reflecting the colonial dependence on the cultural norms of the mother country. However, as the colonies matured and then the United States forged its own path, its jewelry began to develop a distinct character, albeit one that continued to draw inspiration from abroad. The practicality and resilience demanded by frontier life initially shaped simpler designs, while later periods saw the embrace of burgeoning American industrial capabilities and a growing sense of national pride.

The accessibility of jewelry increased dramatically over these centuries, transforming it from a symbol of elite status to a more widely adopted form of personal expression. The American penchant for innovation and mass production, evident in the rise of large jewelry manufacturers, also contributed to a unique national approach to adornment. By 1900, American jewelry was a vibrant and diverse field, reflecting the nation's complex history, its economic prowess, and the evolving aesthetic tastes of its people. It stood as a testament to a society that was increasingly confident in its own cultural voice, capable of both absorbing global influences and forging its own unique path.

From Imitation to Innovation: Developing a Distinct Style

In the early years, American jewelry was largely derivative, with colonists seeking to replicate the styles and quality of goods from their homelands. Silversmiths painstakingly copied European designs, and imported pieces were highly prized. However, the unique environment and practical needs of colonial life subtly influenced designs, favoring robustness and sometimes simpler forms. As America grew and gained economic independence, its jewelry began to show signs of innovation. The Federal period saw a refinement and adaptation of European Neoclassical styles, with American artisans developing their own interpretations. The 19th century, with its industrial revolution, was perhaps the most transformative. American ingenuity led to advancements in manufacturing, making intricate and stylish jewelry more accessible than ever before. While European trends continued to be influential, American jewelers began to establish their own brands and aesthetics, particularly in areas of mass production and the creative use of materials, hinting at the distinctively American approach to design and commerce that would flourish in

the coming century.

The Democratization of Adornment

Perhaps the most profound shift in American jewelry over this period was its democratization. For the first 200 years, significant adornment was largely the province of the wealthy elite. However, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of mass manufacturing fundamentally altered this landscape. Techniques like die-stamping, electroplating, and improved gem-cutting made it possible to produce jewelry that was both attractive and affordable. This meant that jewelry transitioned from being solely a symbol of inherited status to a more widely accessible means of personal expression and fashion. Working-class individuals and the growing middle class could now afford stylish rings, brooches, earrings, and necklaces that had previously been out of reach. This widespread availability of jewelry not only changed what people wore but also fostered a more inclusive culture of adornment, where personal taste and individual expression became increasingly important alongside social standing.

FAQ

Q: What were the most common materials used in jewelry in America between 1600 and 1750?

A: The most common materials for jewelry in early colonial America were silver, brass, pewter, and occasionally gold. Gemstones were rare and usually small or less valuable types like garnets or amethysts. Pearls were also used when available.

Q: How did the styles of jewelry change from the Georgian period to the Federal period in America?

A: Georgian period jewelry in America often featured more elaborate designs with floral motifs and colored gemstones, influenced by Rococo styles. The Federal period saw a shift towards a more restrained elegance, inspired by Neoclassicism, with lighter designs, delicate filigree, pearls, and classical motifs.

Q: What is mourning jewelry, and why was it so popular during the Victorian era in America?

A: Mourning jewelry was worn to commemorate deceased loved ones. It was popular during the Victorian era due to societal emphasis on grief and remembrance. Materials like jet, black enamel, and woven hair were common, often inscribed with names and dates.

Q: How did industrialization impact jewelry production in America by the late 19th century?

A: Industrialization led to mass production of jewelry through techniques like die-stamping and electroplating. This made fashionable jewelry more affordable and accessible to a much wider segment of the American population, transforming it from an item for the elite to common adornment.

Q: Were there any distinctively American jewelry styles that emerged between 1600 and 1900?

A: While heavily influenced by European trends, early American jewelry often emphasized practicality. Later, American innovation in manufacturing and a growing national identity began to shape distinct approaches, particularly in mass-produced items and unique adaptations of popular styles. The sheer scale and accessibility of Gilded Age jewelry also represented a uniquely American phenomenon.

Q: What role did New England play in the manufacturing of jewelry in America during this period?

A: New England, particularly Rhode Island and Massachusetts, became a major center for jewelry manufacturing. Cities like Providence and Attleboro were renowned for their expertise in producing stamped metal goods, including a vast array of jewelry items, contributing significantly to the industrialization of the industry.

Q: How did the value and perception of jewelry change for the average American between 1600 and 1900?

A: Initially, jewelry was a luxury for the few, signifying high status and wealth. By 1900, due to mass production and affordability, jewelry became a common form of personal expression accessible to a much broader population, though distinctions in material and craftsmanship still indicated social standing.

Q: What were some of the most prized gemstones in America during the Victorian era?

A: Diamonds were incredibly prized during the Victorian era, especially with advancements in cutting. Other popular gemstones included rubies, sapphires, emeralds, amethysts, and pearls (both natural and cultured).

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