



JEWEL NOTES FROM MARY ANN

A VIEW OF OUR BACKSIDES

What's the quickest way to tell a novice vintage jewelry collector from an experienced one? The novice sees a vintage beauty, picks it up and thinks "What a gorgeous piece!" The old-timer sees a piece, picks it up and immediately turns it over to take a look at the backside. To the uninitiated, this can look extremely weird. Especially when done in a social situation. "Gee, Sally, that's a really nice pin; can I take a look?" After Sally hands over the goods, you glance briefly at the front, then spend several seconds examining the back, and she's convinced that you're some kind of jewelry pervert. Well, heck, maybe you are, but taking a keen interest in the reverse side isn't at all perverted; it's smart. Some people may be embarrassed to show a backside interest and frankly, I'm glad; they'll pass on the good stuff and leave more for me!

So what can we learn from our backsides? The back of any piece of vintage costume jewelry can often tell you tons more than the front and will provide lots of clues about who made it, how old is it and whether or not it is in good condition.

IDENTIFICATION CLUES

Okay, let's go for the obvious first: Does the piece have any marks? If there's a designer's mark, that is a pretty darn good clue. Of course, even a mark can trip up a novice as we know from all the pieces advertised online as being made by "Pat Pend". One of the most prolific designers of all time, no doubt about it! But seriously, "who made it" is a very important piece of information. And unless it's a logo or name piece designed for a jewelry snob, the name is going to be on the back, not the front.

Other marks might identify country origin, metal content or the date of manufacture. And sometimes these marks are maliciously located in really hard to see places such as the pin stem or on a small jump ring.

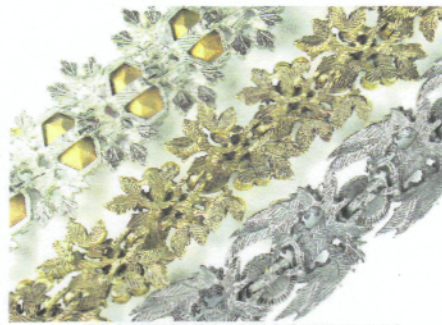
Even without a specific mark for guidance, the backsides of jewelry can still give some great identification clues. DeLizza & Elster pieces, though not signed, have some easy to use id clues such as figure-eight-puddling and five-link bracelet and necklace construction. Unmarked Schreiner brooches may have hook-and-eye construction. A particular texture on the back can be an indication of an unsigned Florenza jewel.

Costume jewelry book authors are beginning to take their backsides more seriously too! Ann Pitman's new book "Juliana Jewelry Reference" is loaded with photos of

the backs of many DeLizza & Elster pieces. And in "Collecting Costume Jewelry 303", Julia Carroll gives some great tips on backside clues in general, and also has specific references for identifying many designers' jewelry using clues from the flip-side.



DELIZZA & ELSTER FIVE-LINK CONSTRUCTION



FLORENZA BRACELET TEXTURES



"MADE GERMANY" ON THE ACTUAL PIN STEM

AGE CLUES

Well some wrinkles and gray hair, or the lack thereof, can tell us a lot about a person's age from the front, and there may not be a lot of age clues from the back view. But unlike being able to tell Granny from her granddaughter, age clues for vintage jewelry are generally more obvious and fruitful from the back than from the front.

Swedged construction is a great example, since it was typically not used after the 1960's. Pot metal, also known as white metal, can indicate pre-1940's manufacture. And sterling was used by many costume jewelry manufacturers during the 1940's war years because of inability to obtain other metals. A smooth back finish says likely made before 1960. An extended pin on a brooch may mean it's an earlier piece. An unusual clip on an earring can be an age clue. The backside clues are virtually endless and invariably valuable. A single clue cannot pinpoint age, but added together with other back and front clues, can determine circa dating for most pieces.



SWEDGED CONSTRUCTION



EXTENDED PIN TIP

CONDITION CLUES

Did I say condition “clues”? I probably should rephrase that as condition good news/bad news. The good news is that there’s a pin stem on that lovely brooch; the bad news is that the back is covered in verdigris (better known as the “greenies”), the pin stem falls short of the latch mechanism and, by the way, did you happen to notice that gray blob that says “I’ve been repaired?”

Condition issues from the front are pretty easy to spot; typically metal wear and missing stones. Condition issues from the back may require a loupe to find, but, believe me, they’re usually more serious in nature and sometimes unfixable. For example, verdigris can be removed, but by its nature indicates that the metal has deteriorated in a way that can only be repaired by replating. As is the case with loss of original plating from wear. A past repair, especially a solder, always needs a second look. If the repair is not a good one, the break may reoccur. If you’re buying a piece for re-sale or for a gift, or you just happen to be a very persnickety person, an obvious repair may not be acceptable to you.

By the way, this seems like a good time to mention that verdigris that isn’t visible using the naked eye or even with a quick loupe examination can miraculously appear when an item is photographed from the back. When in doubt, take a photo in bright light and pray for no greenies!



BRACELET CLASP REPAIR

Anyone notice that I didn’t include a photo showing verdigris? Well, it’s a miracle; I couldn’t find one in my stash of jewels today. And who wanted to see the depressing greenies anyway!

We’ve all done it...not taken a close enough look at a piece and had buyer’s remorse when we examine it closely at home. When shopping in person, always take a long hard look at the back of any piece. However, a word of warning is in order: If you wish to be incognito, hiding your status as a seasoned jewelry veteran when purchasing jewelry in person, count to twenty after you pick up a piece before you turn it over. Otherwise, you might as well be wearing a sign on your forehead, and you may drive up the price and drive down your bargaining power.

I know that I've barely scratched the backsides of our vintage costume jewelry.
There's so much to learn, so don't forget - risk being tagged a pervert and always take
a look at the flip-side!

Sparkles to All,
Mary Ann

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