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Engagement and Wedding Rings: The Old and the New of Them . . . and Engagement Ring Facts

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In ancient cultures it was believed that the third finger of the left hand, had a special vein called vena amoris, the vein of "love," that ran from the "ring finger" finger directly to the heart. There is, of course, no scientific basis for this romantic theory, but the custom has, nevertheless, endured through generations. It was King Edward VI of England who decreed that the third finger of the left hand be designated as the "official" ring finger and, in 1549, the Book of Common Prayer sealed the deal with the designation of the left hand as the marriage hand. Despite the designations, in many European countries brides wear their wedding rings on the right hand.

The circle has always had significance in ancient cultures as a symbol of wholeness and of perfection. Its endlessness is the perfect symbol of oneness and unity without beginning that has no beginning or end. It is also the symbol of the sun, earth and universe, and represents holiness, perfection and peace. Even our earliest forefather, the caveman, bound himself to his mate with a cord of woven rushes as a symbol that their spirits were one. Ancient Northerners believed that a lover's knot was a symbol of love, faith, and friendship. The knot was formed out of the hair of the beloved, woven into a knot that was then worn as a ring. Among the Anglo-Saxons a part of the "wed" was a ring worn on her right hand.

It was a **mixture of cultures and backgrounds from which today's custom of wedding and engagement rings have evolved.** The word "betrothed" comes from the Anglo-Saxon "troweth," meaning truth. Betrothed means giving a truth or pledge and an engagement ring becomes an outward indication to everyone that a woman has pledged her love to one man alone. The Greek "adamant" means steadfast or invincible. It is from this word that the diamond gets its name. Diamonds were believed to be invincible, indestructible, and exceedingly strong. It is easy to understand then why it was chosen to symbolize purity and light, protected against evil. Legend tells us that the diamond's sparkle rose from the lovers' fires, and that it possessed great harmonizing powers. The icy fire of the true white diamond remains the foremost symbol of love.

A diamond cluster ring in the shape of a long pointed oval was popular as an engagement ring during the time of Louis XVI, and remained fashionable for 150 years afterwards.

One type of English engagement ring was named the "princess ring." It contained three, four or five diamonds in a row, across the top. This ring design was very popular in this country, in the early twentieth century.

Historically, the **betrothal ring** was the only one a bride could expect from her groom. Rings have been used throughout the centuries to mark engagements. Rings with gemstones were

popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. The creative gentleman might present his beloved with a gemstone ring where the first letter of the stones within the setting spelled out his name or a word such as, for example, "dearest" (diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, epidote, sapphire, turquoise). Medieval wedding rings were often set with colored gemstones, because of the symbolism of the colors. Gentlemen in the Middle Ages often kept a betrothal ring suspended from the band of their hat . . . ready to send to their chosen beloved.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hearts were a popular motif for engagement and wedding rings. The rings often combined rubies, which symbolized love and diamonds which signified eternity. **Jewish wedding ceremonies, during the Renaissance period,** incorporated very elaborate, intricately-detailed rings. The bezel of the ring was often made in the image of a gabled building, synagogue, or Solomon's Temple.

Also in the Renaissance, jewelers created a new kind of wedding ring called **the gimmel, or twin ring**. It consisted of two or more interlocking rings, joined by a pivot, so they could slide together into one ring . . . symbolizing the union of two lives. The gimmel ring has always remained popular, in a variety of incarnations. A spinoff of the gimmel ring was formed so that the hoops terminated in a pair of hands, which clasped together when the ring was closed. This variation was known as a **fede ring** (Italian for faith). It was introduced around 1600 at the very same time that the Puritans tried--unsuccessfully--to abolish the tradition of the wedding ring.

In Persia, it was customary for a bridegroom to give a ring to everyone who attended the wedding ceremony. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert gave out six dozen rings, each engraved with the queen's profile, at their wedding ceremony. Incidentally, Queen Victoria's engagement ring was in the form of a serpent. The snake motif was believed to be a symbol of good luck.

The smallest betrothal ring on record was given to two year old Princess Mary, daughter of Henry VIII. When she became engaged to the infant Dauphin of France, son of King Francis I, in 1518, a tiny gold ring, set with a valuable diamond, was fitted to her finger.

Giving a second ring, a wedding band, is a relatively recent practice. Since 1477, when Archduke Maximilian I, emperor of Austria gave a diamond betrothal ring to Mary of Burgundy, the diamond has been the gem of choice to seal an engagement.

Wedding bands engraved with orange blossoms and wreaths were particularly popular during the 1920s and 30s. The motif dated back to the Crusaders who would put a wreath of orange blossoms on the bride's head as a blessing.

In 1761, King George III first introduced the tradition of the "keeper," or guard ring. He presented a band encircled with diamonds to his bride, Queen Charlotte. Today such rings continue their popularity as a wedding or an anniversary band. What once was the privilege of only the aristocracy (until the late 1800's) quickly became the choice of the "masses," when the diamond mines of South Africa were discovered. Tiffany's got into the act with their signature, six-prong setting (aptly named a Tiffany setting) in 1886.

The number seems astronomical, but, believe it or not, **more than 6.7 billion dollars are spent annually on engagement rings, in the United States.**

The wedding ring is the concrete sealing of the marriage pact. In every ancient culture can be found rings with inscriptions and designs denoting them as marriage rings. In the 12th century Pope Innocent the Third ordained that marriages must be celebrated in the church, and that the ceremony must include a marriage ring. Consequently, the wedding ring has a religious

significance which the engagement ring lacks. The wedding ring is placed on the ring finger first to be closest to the heart. The ancient Romans exchanged circular bands of iron as proof of a marriage contract. Gold began to be used in the second century A.D.

World War II temporarily took platinum off the market and made it unavailable to jewelers for use in engagement rings and wedding bands. Consequently, during the war years, most such rings made were of gold. Also during World War the **double-ring wedding ceremony, an old European custom, in which the groom and the bride receive a wedding band, saw a resurgence.** Its popularity continues today.

Today's engaged couple faces both traditional and more contemporary choices. The range is anywhere from the tradition diamond in a traditional setting to a glittering range colored gems, or a mixture of the gemstones and diamonds. The bride should be aware that no stone is as durable and strong as a diamond and that gemstones, although lovely, are more delicate. The bride might also choose to wear only one, perhaps unusually ornate, wedding band. Another recent trend has the bride offering her fiancé his own engagement ring, perhaps a solitaire that will be paired with a complementary wedding band, or adding a diamond to his wedding band.

Settings too have also changed recently. The classic raised prong setting of the diamond engagement ring will always be a standard and maintain its popularity, But the bezel setting is also becoming popular. A bezel-set stone is completely encircled by a collar of metal. An even more contemporary setting is the "tension setting." In this setting there are no prongs at all and the diamond is held in place by the tension of the ring itself. Tension settings are usually set in platinum, because the strength of this metal is required to hold the stone securely. **What surely is true is that the wedding and engagement ring are symbols of one's love for the other, so their purchase ought to one that is given due attention and consideration.** Tradition, personal preferences, and budget should all be taken into careful consideration. One would hope that these are rings that will be worn until "death do you part."

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