

## Ancient Egyptian Jewelry: A History

Written by Aimee N. Youngs



*Pendant, 1069-713 BC, Third Intermediate Period, Dynasties 21-22, gold and turquoise - Cleveland Museum of Art*

Only around three to five thousand years ago, the Egyptians started making jewelry. I've always found Ancient Egyptian jewelry to be a particularly impressive body of work, and a personal source of inspiration for my own work. Not because I like gold (I actually abhor it), but because of their elaborate approach, and their pioneering, and trendsetting ways.

When I think of the history of jewelry in general, the first thing that comes to mind is Egyptian jewels. Perhaps because I recall seeing some pieces at a large Egyptian exhibit in NY's

*Written by Aimee N. Youngs for A. Nicola Jewelry*

Metropolitan Museum of Art several years back. A lot of Egyptian jewelry is made of gold, because Egyptians enjoyed the luxuriousness of this metal. It was collected from the riverbeds of the Nile, so it was at their very fingertips. Also, gold is soft, so it's easy to work with. Some silver and lapis lazuli were also imported for Egyptian jewelry making.

Men and women alike adorned themselves in jewels, and even the poor were buried with some less pricey pieces to at least ensure a "reasonable" afterlife. Egyptians even dressed animals in jewels. They believed that wearing jewelry offered protection from evil.

Not only was jewelry a good form of life insurance, but also acted as a symbol of power. Gold, silver, and alabaster jewelry was reserved mostly for the rich, and displayed their rank. King Tut's tomb contained 34 pieces of jewelry. Shells and copper were less valuable, and were used primarily for the poor. Additionally, the color of the shell, glass, and gemstones used had meaning. Here are some interpretations of their color symbolism:

- Green – fertility
- Turquoise – rebirth
- White – purity
- Blue – sky and water
- Red – desert or sun
- Black – the underworld

Amulets were like good luck charms, and were integrated into jewelry design. Some common forms of amulets found on Egyptian jewelry are scarab beetles, which symbolized rebirth, winged birds, jackals, antelopes, tigers, snakes, and the ever-popular eye of Horus, which protected from evil.

Egyptian jewelry was not only favored by their own, but high quality pieces were the most sought after in the ancient world. And in the more semi-recent world, tomb robbers have stolen many of these riches, lost to the world of the black market. However, future kings in other lands also have been found buried with ancient Egyptian jewels.