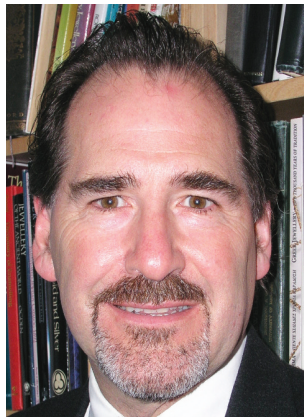


Behind the scenes

Finger Food For Thought



**Jack Ogden,
Chief Executive
of Gem-A, considers
the tradition of
betrothal rings.**

As spring approaches, jewellery designers and retailers begin to think wistfully of engagements and weddings. Not their own, mark you, but those of their customers. Spring is a time when winter dreams of healthy engagement and wedding ring sales should become reality. The recent Royal nuptials have shown that diamonds don't always hold sway the way they did, and there is hope that more couples will start to show a bit more imagination in their choices – although as all about-to-be brides and those selling rings to them should bear in mind, not all types of gems, nor all types of settings are suitable for everyday wear.

It is true that the engaged couple's thoughts are probably of the future, but a few grooms-to-be with their feet still firmly on the ground and their student loans or mortgage debts still firmly around their neck might well wonder "Why the hell did this tradition originate?" So you, as jeweller or jewellery designer, need a bit of background.

First of all, the trend these days is to combine engagement and wedding rings. This is nothing new – what is charmingly called the 'betrothal' ring has a history of some 2,000 years. There is some scholarly stuff about betrothal rings in Roman writings; for example the Roman historian Pliny talks about the betrothal ring being sent as a gift to a woman at the time of betrothal. Pliny died when Vesuvius erupted in AD 79.

A surviving letter, from some 300 years after Pliny, is actually from a man enquiring as to the safe receipt of the ring sent to his bride.

For some more human insights we need look no further than the Roman poet Ovid – always incisive and mischievous. One lovely comment (which I hope will not be censored here) is found in a long poem of his: a man speaks to the betrothal ring he is sending his beloved – "I wish you a warm welcome and immediate installation behind her second knuckle. Fit her as snugly as she fits me."

Perhaps more repeatable in a selling context (but you know your customers best) is Ovid's romantic point (take notice de Beers) that a ring destined for the finger of a woman has no worth except the love of the giver. Indeed, poverty was not an excuse not to get married. When betrothal rings finally crop up in early Christian contexts, we find Augustine of Hippo (later St Augustine) noting that a priest should not hesitate to wed a couple even if they are too poor to give rings to each other.

By Augustine's time, specific betrothal rings were in use – typically showing 'his and hers' clasped hands with the Greek inscription 'omonoia' (harmony). Slightly later Christian betrothal rings can show the man and woman facing each other; below a cross, and often with the same Greek inscription and sometimes their names. Augustine's writings shows that betrothal rings were thought of as a form of contract. But was a ring given to a bride seen as a symbol of the man's 'worldly wealth' or his purchase of the bride? Seriously, that is not absolutely clear.

And which knuckle was Ovid referring to? Roman evidence is for the third finger of the left hand. This, as noted by various classical writers, derived from the belief of the Ancient Egyptians that there was a nerve linking this finger with the heart – then, as now, thought of as the seat of emotions. That's a sweet bit of history to pass on to your customers – but leave out the comment that this belief derived from one of the earliest known records of exploratory dissection of the human body.

And while talking of dead things and rings, if you mix magic and rings, romantic betrothal is not always the desired result. Men haven't changed in 2,000 years. One ring described in an ancient text was supposed to be placed on the man's finger while certain spells were recited. The instructions then said "walk to any place, and any woman whom you shall take hold of will give herself to you." I doubt that is much use to jewellery makers today, so I won't pass on the recipe.

In the next issue I'll look at some of the more recent history of betrothal and engagement rings – but still from well before de Beers was a twinkle in Ernest Oppenheimer's eye.

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