

Gem and Jewellery History

Spell bound

Jewellery set with gems that spelled out names or sentiments was common in the nineteenth century, but working out what was intended is not always easy. Jack Ogden investigates a veritable alphabet soup.

The term 'acrostic jewellery' might not be that familiar, but most readers, especially appraisers and those dealing in antique jewellery, will at least know one example: the 'regards ring'. The regards ring is a band set with seven gems, the initial letters of which spell out the word REGARDS. Indeed, an 1840 American report notes this "delicate way of expressing a sentiment" in England and mentions a half-hoop ring spelling 'regards' as a typical example. Acrostics — initial letters of words spelling out names or messages — date back to ancient times, but their use in jewellery is very typical of nineteenth-century sentiment. The earliest examples are seemingly French and Napoleon was a big fan. There are bracelets surviving that spell out the name of Napoleon's mother Letitia and commemorate events such as the birth of his niece Napoleon in 1806 (yes, he had a niece called Napoleon — born in 1806).

If we go back to the popular 'regards rings' the gems used are pretty straightforward — typically Ruby, Emerald, Garnet, Amethyst, Ruby, Diamond, Sapphire. However, as we've seen with Napoleon, almost any word, phrase or personal name could be spelled out. It is not too difficult to work out what another mid-nineteenth-

century-ring says: Ruby, Amethyst, Carnelian, Hessonite garnet, Emerald, Lapis lazuli. Yes, the name 'Rachel'. Albert, Prince of Wales, gave a ring to Princess Alexandra on their wedding in 1863 set with a Beryl, Emerald, Ruby, Turquoise, Jacinth (zircon) and Emerald. This example of what was called a 'name ring', spelled his name BERTIE (J and I were interchangeable).

But not all gem names are as readily recognizable. What if you came across a Victorian ring set with a zircon, an amethyst, a jasper, a white topaz and an emerald? Believe it or not, this actual example described in 1819, spelled *J'aime* — 'I love' in French. Zircon, known as Jacinth, gave the 'J'. Jasper was 'I' here since, as noted above, I and J were interchangeable. White topaz was known as 'Mina Nova' hence the 'M'. Another example described in the nineteenth century was in French and would not be obvious to most of us today: 'SOUVENIR', spelled out with Sapphire or Sardonix, Onyx or Opal, 'Ukraine' (probably uranite, see below), Vermeille (orangy-red garnet), Emerald, Natrolite (which found some use as a gem in the early nineteenth century), Iris (iris quartz) and Ruby or Rose diamond. You see the complications. Even a simple diamond set

in a piece of jewellery might be supposed to be read as B (Brilliant diamond), D (Diamond) or R (Rose diamond). A Mina Nova (M) could also be interpreted as 'Novas Minas' — N.

The 'slipper' ring shown below is set with an Emerald, two lapis lazuli, Emerald, garnet ('Vermeil'), Opal, garnet ('Vermeil'), Sapphire, garnet ('Vermeil' again) and an Amethyst (the gems at each end are not visible in the photograph). This thus reads in French '*Elle vous va*' which, bearing in mind the central slipper and Cinderella allusion, can be read 'It fits you'.

The second ring illustrated opposite has a political rather than sentimental message. This was made around 1820 and showed political support for Caroline of Brunswick, Queen Consort of King George IV. In the centre is CR for Caroline Regina under a Royal Crown, and around this her name in gems: Citrine, Amethyst, Ruby, Opal, Lapis lazuli, 'Jacinth' (I), Novas Minas and Emerald. If it had been spelled in her native German, the emerald wouldn't have worked. In German emerald is *Smaragd* and would have stood for S, as the nineteenth-century German mineralogist Franz von Kobell reminded us when he pointed out that there were languages other than English and French employed in acrostic jewellery. Kobell also noted an alternative choice for 'U': "Recent times have furnished a name which may assist, namely, a green garnet, containing chrome, from Siberia, which has been baptized after the Russian Minister Uwarow and called Uwarovite." This green garnet, now known as uvarovite, was only discovered in 1832.

Nineteenth-century writers provide extraordinary lists of gems for acrostic jewellery — some of which are blindly repeated in books to this day. Examples include Cacholong (common milky opal),



An early nineteenth-century acrostic ring with Cinderella's slipper which reads in French '*Elle vous va*' — 'It fits you'. Photo Courtesy of Cathy Gordon.

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from this stone caused the 'Iris quartz' next to it to darken — which long prevented its identification.* What did radioactive uranite do to the wearer? Possibly it was lucky that uvarovite turned up as an alternative.

The problem is that with so many alternative and gem names, almost any combination of coloured gems in a piece of nineteenth-century jewellery might have been intended to spell out something. Working out what is what can take the skills of a code-breaker equipped with an FGA. One also wonders whether all were meant to be readily deciphered. Perhaps sometimes they were indeed a secret message of love or political affiliation intended to be understood by the recipient or wearer only. I'm sure than in many cases their secrets are still safe.

* For more on acrostic jewellery and the suggestion about radioactive uranite see <http://sentimentaljewelry.blogspot.co.uk/2008/03/making-silent-stones-speak.html>

I'd like to thank Cathy Gordon and Michele Rowan (www.rowanandrowan.com) for their help in providing information and images.

A gold acrostic ring, ca. 1820, showing support of Caroline of Brunswick and spelling her name.
Photo Courtesy of Cathy Gordon.

Chrysolite (peridot), Diaspore, 'Egyptian pebble' (yellow to brown jasper), 'Fire-stone' (pyrite), 'Krokidolite' (for crocidolite — quartz cat's-eye), Milky opal, Porphyry, Purpurine (glass sunstone), Uranite (a green uranium phosphate), Ultramarine (lapis lazuli), Vesuvianite, Verd-antique (a green serpentinite breccia), Water sapphire (iolite), Wood opal,

Xanthite (a variety of vesuvianite), Xepherine (no idea), Xylotile (probably the variety of chrysolite, less likely the nineteenth-century imitation of ivory) and Zurlite (apparently an old name for melilite). The 'souvenir' bracelet mentioned earlier supposedly contains a uranite and it has been suggested that the natural radiation

Gem-A Calendar

Gem Central

Monday 21 October, 18:15–20:00
Lesser known gemstones — test your knowledge with Andrew Fellows FGA DGA

Career Service

Monday 11 November, 18:00–19:00
A Career in Gem Dealing with Jason Williams from G. F. Williams & Co.

Gem Central and Gem-A Career Service events are held at the Gem-A headquarters, 21 Ely Place, London EC1N 6TD.

Please call +44 (0)20 7404 3334 or email events@gem-a.com for more information or if you plan to attend.

The Gem-A Conference 2013

2 and 3 November,
Goldsmiths' Hall, London

A two-day conference to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first Gemmology Diploma to be awarded and the 50th anniversary of the Diamond Diploma.

Confirmed speakers include John Bradshaw, David Callaghan, Dr John Emmett, Arthur Groom, Brian Jackson, Dr Jack Ogden and Gary Roskin.

For further details go to:
[www.gem-a.com/news--events/events/gem-a-conference-\(1\).aspx](http://www.gem-a.com/news--events/events/gem-a-conference-(1).aspx)

Show Dates

Gem-A will be exhibiting at the following shows:

Gemworld Munich

25 – 27 October 2013

International Jewellery Tokyo

22 – 25 January 2014

AGTA Show Tucson

4 – 9 February 2014