

By Susan J. Torntore



A necklace is a form of jewelry worn suspended around the neck. It is most commonly made in flexible forms such as a chain, as a string of beads, pearls, gemstones, or other natural materials, or made of a more inflexible band of metal embellished with gemstones, pearls, beads, or other techniques such as engraving, filigree, repoussé, granulation, for example. Lengths of necklaces vary, and specific types related to extremes in length range from a short choker or dog collar necklace that fits right around the main portion of the neck to a longer neck chain or string of beads called a *sautoir*, sometimes worn hanging down to or past the waist.

Symbolic Meanings

As with other pieces of jewelry, the necklace has been an important site of decoration for the body but also of communication for the person. As valued material culture, necklaces communicate wealth, power, affiliation, prestige, levels of resources and skill, and elements of identity and position. The durability of jewelry like necklaces made of metal, glass beads, or gemstones provides an opportunity to appreciate and understand the technology, cultural practices, artistry, and aesthetics of other cultures and distant time periods.

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Early Necklaces

A simple necklace made from a string of local organic materials such as shells, teeth, or bone beads is one of the forms of jewelry adopted by early cultures around the world. More precious materials from farther away were also valued for early necklaces, frequently in the form of beads, such as those of Mediterranean red coral found in a Neolithic burial in the Alps

(circa 4200-3400 B.C.E.). Other early types of necklace included the torc or torque, an ancient Celtic neckpiece made of twisted metal, and the *lunula*, a flat, crescent-shaped and engraved variation of the torc found in Bronze Age Ireland and Scotland (circa 1800-1500 B.C.E.).

Style and Trends



Necklaces were made to display appropriate decorative and stylistic features through each period and from region to region. Each period also has some influence upon those following, and revivals of styles, such as classical Greek and Roman necklaces or Egyptian beadwork collars, are prevalent. During the Middle Ages, jewelry became a more integral element of dress, and necklaces replaced brooches as the primary form of jewelry in the late Gothic and early Renaissance periods. Necklaces set with gemstones and heavy gold chain necklaces with pendants were in style as a distinction of wealth and social status from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Trends for wearing necklaces have for the most part followed the style of necklines in European and American fashionable dress. In other words, as necklines were lowered, more, as well as more elaborate, necklaces were seen. But this does not necessarily mean that necklaces were not worn when necklines were high. For example, a carcanet is a type of wide, bejeweled or enameled gold link necklace that resembles a collar. It was worn by men as a status symbol in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, encircling the base of the neck over a man's doublet and under the elaborate lace ruff, or worn with gold chains wrapped around the neck, or hanging over the

shoulders down the front of bodices and doublets.

A Matched Set



The necklace was a central piece in the eighteenth-century parure or matching set of jewelry for a woman, which also included brooch, earrings,

bracelets, and a pendant or tiara. The necklace was meant to be worn as evening wear with a lowered décolletage bodice, while higher necklines of daywear included the brooch or the pendant instead. This concept of a matching set lasted through the early twentieth century until dress became more casual and when affordable but still attractive costume jewelry became widely available. New materials such as plastic and new technologies related to mass production and mass media have greatly expanded the social repertoire. Necklaces in the late twentieth century were styled to follow both fashion and popular culture trends, but also to meet various needs for women's dress based on occasion, taste, or preference, and levels of fashionability and affordability.

Materials

Certain materials have long held reign for necklaces throughout the Western history of dress, including gold, diamonds, and pearls. The diamond necklace is one of the most expensive symbols of wealth, glamour, and prestige throughout history. Pearls were the material of choice for Roman women, and revivals of Classical period details seen in Renaissance or early-eighteenth-century neoclassical dress have included strings of pearls. The pearl was also beloved by Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century, sparking a trend for long pearl necklaces draped and pinned over elaborate stomachers. In the mid-twentieth century, the short strand of pearls became a classic gift for young American and British women on their sixteenth birthday, and it remains a popular choice for women's professional and business dress ensembles and bridal costume. The creation of imitation and synthetic diamonds and cultured pearls equalizes to some degree the concept of preciousness in jewelry and makes the look of these prestigious materials available to a wide and diverse audience today.

Not Just for Women



Both men and women throughout Western history wore necklaces until the eighteenth century, when they became primarily a feminine purview. However, American popular culture influences such as the 1960s hippie "love beads" and the 1970s disco dance craze made it more fashionable for European and American men to wear necklaces as part of popular fashion. These include gold chains, some strung with amulets or charms like the gold Italian horn or a gold cross. This trend became very prominent in the late twentieth-century hip hop music scene, when ostentatious platinum and gold chains hung with diamond-encrusted pendants displayed, as conspicuous consumption, the newly acquired wealth for African American men. Necklaces for men in certain occupations never went out of style, and higher ranks of clergy, such as Roman Catholic or Anglican bishops and cardinals have, since the Renaissance, continued to wear elaborate and expensive neck chains with large hanging pectoral crosses or crucifixes as part of their ecclesiastical regalia.

Mainstream Use

Within the broad style category of ethnic jewelry, necklaces have today transcended their original or traditional use by ethnic groups around the world and are collected and worn by European Americans of both genders as fashion or adornment regardless of, or perhaps even in reference to, their original indigenous functions or meanings. However, throughout history, the necklace as indigenous tribal or non-Western ethnic jewelry has been and continues to be a significant expression of all of the uses and meanings of jewelry outlined in this volume. In many cultures, the necklace has taken precedence over other forms of jewelry as the most important piece for adornment and communication in expressing identity or position. In

addition, ethnic necklaces made from precious materials such as gold and silver, or precious organic materials like coral are frequently the repositories of a woman's or family's wealth. For example, in many nomadic cultures around the world, particularly in Central Asia, North Africa, and throughout the Middle East, heavy silver necklaces, perhaps including expensive elements such as amber or coral beads and incorporating silver coins, are portable "savings accounts" or forms of wealth and currency that could be converted to money when required. The heavy silver collar-type necklaces of the Hmong and Hmong-American ethnic group, originally from Southeast Asia and now predominantly living in the United States as political refugees, may include hundreds of silver coins and several pounds of silver metal. These necklaces serve a primary function of displaying the family's monetary wealth when worn by young women in courting rituals at Hmong New Year's celebrations. Gold necklaces, among other items of jewelry such as bangles or earrings, are purchased by women in Asia and India, for example, as their income warrants. These are put aside for future needs as investment and savings and brought out for display at weddings, for instance, especially when worn by the daughter of the family as a bride. In many instances, gold or silver jewelry is the only form of wealth that a woman may have access to. In another example, expensive Italian coral beads are collected and made into necklaces by ethnic groups in West Africa, such as the Kalabari Ijo in the Niger River delta. Worn by both men and women at ceremonial functions, these necklaces are important markers of identity but also a significant vehicle for displaying family wealth and prestige.

Pendants

A pendant is an ornament that is suspended from another piece of jewelry such as a necklace, neck chain, ribbon, brooch, bracelet, or earring. Pendants take many forms including large gems or pearls, cameos, crosses, lockets, amulets, or watches. Amulets as pendants have been most significant as one of the first forms of prehistoric jewelry. As pendants, amulets retain an unprecedented popularity in the early twenty-first century as good luck charms, as talismans, and as protection from the evil eye or any number of other perceived disasters or supernatural forces. Pendants are frequently made to be detachable so they might be used on different necklaces, or made with a pin-back so they might also be worn as a

brooch.

Religious Symbolism



The cross or cruciform shape is an important type of pendant in religious and amuletic categories of jewelry that has been worn since the development of early Christianity. It can carry ornamental, protective, and devotional or religious meanings. Wearing a cross can visually signify a person's religious affiliation, and different shapes of crosses can symbolize different branches or subcults of Christianity. A crucifix is a type of cross showing Christ's crucified body, worn predominantly today by religious clergy. Crosses have been made from various precious and nonprecious materials to suit a wide range of styles, tastes, and economic standings. Crosses in the Middle Ages and Renaissance were made as reliquary pendants to hold what was believed to be a relic of the true crucifix. In contemporary Western Christianity, small gold crosses on a chain are important gifts for a child's christening or first communion. Crosses have also been worn as charms or amulets to ward off evil or to protect the wearer from disease. For example, small gold crosses made with coral beads are worn in southern Italy today as an amulet that combines the amuletic protection of red coral against the evil eye with the symbolism of Christianity. This cross is seen as more socially acceptable than wearing the red or gold horn amulet called a *cornio*. In the late twentieth century the cross has been appropriated as a trendy sub- or popular culture motif worn without religious overtones or with a sense of defiance against its traditional symbolism. Other types of personal pendants that might be worn to signify religious affiliation include the Roman Catholic saints' medals, the Jewish Star of David, the Islamic Hand of Fatima, the Hindu Om mantra symbol, or the phylactery or amulet case worn in Jewish, Islamic, and Tibetan Buddhist

religions. This last example is a small decorated metal box enclosing a prayer or scripture passage written on paper.

Locket

A locket is a small pendant in the form of a flat, round, or oval case with a hinged cover, worn usually on a neck chain or suspended from a necklace of various styles. It is worn as a sentimental piece, meant to hold a memento such as a lock of hair, a photograph, or, before the invention of photography, a miniature portrait painted on ivory. They are made from various metals and with diverse techniques, often set with gemstones and engraved or enameled. Early lockets were worn as devotional or reliquary jewelry, made in the Middle Ages and renaissance to hold a saint's relic. In the sixteenth century, monarchs like Elizabeth I often presented gifts of lockets holding their portrait to favored courtiers. One famous example of a commemorative type of locket is Elizabeth's "Armada Jewel" (circa 1588) with a cast gold and enameled profile portrait of her on the front and an enameled depiction of Noah's Ark on the back, made to celebrate England's victory over the Spanish Armada. Lockets were very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and this continued into the twentieth after photography was developed. Nineteenth-century Victorian lockets were an important betrothal gift or sentimental gift of personal devotion. Lockets were frequently made as watchcases for men and worn suspended on a watch chain or fob.

See also [Brooches and Pins](#); [Costume Jewelry](#); Jewelry.

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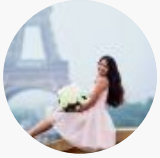
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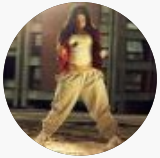
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