

Jewelry University: The Enduring Strength of Platinum

The illustrious story behind the shine.

BY STELENE VOLANDES DEC 2, 2020



Platinum is one of the oldest and rarest elements on Earth. Today, jewelers are using this exceptional material to reimagine and transform classic styles into timeless treasures, which is why we've teamed up with [the experts at Platinum Born](#) to uncover the rich history behind the world's most precious metal. In this installment of Jewelry University, we celebrate the craftsmanship and enduring versatility of platinum.

Strength can be intimidating. Perhaps that's why it took so long—from the time of Ancient Egypt to the 18th century—for jewelers to truly figure out the secret of platinum's shine. Luckily, once they did, the world witnessed all that this metal could do, and masterpieces were born.

Platinum is prized for its luster but also for its strength, which was at one point, ironically, its greatest weakness. It was difficult to work with a material so fierce—one that could seemingly withstand everything, including fire. But after the 18th century, technical advances allowed metal smiths to generate enough heat to finally be able to work with the precious element. When a jeweler began to fashion pieces made of platinum for the French royal family, the rare material came into favor with high society. Once King Louis XVI declared platinum the metal of kings in 1786, the race was on. Various methods were devised to melt platinum at volumes that could meet demand, but it wasn't until the 19th century that the use of liquid oxygen came to the rescue and changed jewelry design forever.

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The new technique used platinum's strength to its advantage. It was still strong but now malleable as well, so it could withstand hand craftsmanship. And so, it became the preferred metal of the jewels of the Edwardian era, those beautifully delicate ribbons and bows with finely etched borders, almost exclusively rendered in platinum and diamonds. Even as the romance of art nouveau gave way to the strong and geometric pieces of the art deco era, platinum endured.



A platinum-dipped brooch that was once in the collection of the French Crown Jewels.
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS ARCHIVEGETTY IMAGES

Jewelry from the Art Deco period remains some of the most collectable and admired, and platinum is at the forefront of that appreciation. Platinum jewelry, including the pieces created at the finest jewelry houses in the world, signaled access to the best jewelers, and also of good taste. Take, for example, Empress Eugenie's currant leaf garland brooch set which sold at the infamous sale of the French Crown Jewels at the Louvre in 1887. One of the brooches turned up at jeweler Paul Flato's workshop around 1930, where the oxidized silver piece was promptly dipped in platinum to meet the standards of his clientele. When the brooch appeared at auction again in 2014, it was sold for \$2.3 million.

World War II proved challenging for platinum jewelry lovers, though it allowed the strength of platinum to shine through, and also help the country. With an inherent resistance to erosion and a melting point much higher than steel, platinum became a crucial commodity for the war effort, and was even used in aircraft engines on the frontlines. Platinum, which had defined the jewelry of the preceding period, was banned for non-military use during the war. This gave rise to the bold yellow and rose gold designs of the 1940s.

And though it took a few decades for platinum to once again take hold of jeweler's imaginations, when platinum did come back at the end of the 20th century, its strength was, as always, its calling card. What better metal to fulfill a dream of beautiful jewelry that can be worn every day and on every occasion? Platinum is the strongest of metals, and while it has been used in pieces for kings and queens, that also makes it ideal for jewelry worn by those with less royal, but equally noble, lives.

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