

Collector's Foreword

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This collection began with a ring decorated with a gemstone depicting Septimius Severus, a Roman Emperor of the second and third century. He wears a military cloak over a cuirass, and as we look closely at the impression made by the engraving, we can also see the pattern of the wreath around his head, the curls in his beard and a face that looks more patient than the usurper's violent history might suggest. Rings like these were given to officials and to high ranking military officers, so we can imagine the new emperor presenting the gift as a reward for loyal service—or an attempt to win it.

It's a beautiful work of craftsmanship but the ring offers even more: the gold is pitted and the stone is discolored, suggesting that it may well have lain for a long time in the sea. And so we can imagine a general or aristocrat being wrecked on his way to govern some distant part of the empire, or a later owner sinking, with his prized possession, in a storm off a Mediterranean coast. From one ring, the decoration of the artist who created it and the effect that time has had on it, we are able to have a glimpse of events in the past.

In building my collection, I have always looked for that nexus of artistry and narrative, rings that are both beautifully crafted and rich in meaning. A cornelian gem depicting fourteen cows, seven thin and seven fat, reminds us of the biblical story of Pharaoh's dream. The engraving of a young hunter on a first-century BC ring might depict Eros or a season, but in his jaunty walk and swinging hare we also feel the joy of every youth as he returns home with a dinner that he's caught and captured himself. A gold Roman ring with the names Claudia, Maxima and Lydia inscribed on a rotating triangular prism suggests a faithful husband carrying through a public forum the names of his wife and daughters like a modern sports star proudly boasting a set of family tattoos—or reveals a third century Lothario, cunningly spinning the bezel as he turns from one mistress to the next.

The collection stretches across cultures from the Egypt of Amenhotep II to the Zoroastrian symbols of the Parthian empire, and through time from the mid-second millennium BC to the end of the Roman period. As we traverse the ancient world, the symbols depicted on the rings change. Bearded faces belong to an emperor on one ring, to Zeus—recognizable by the bolt of lightning he grips in his left hand—on another, and to the mythical Herakles strangling the Nemean lion on a third. Animal symbols include the Egyptian crocodile-god Sobek-Ra; lions and griffins; a bull, head down and well-muscled, ready to charge; the rearing horses of Nike's carriage; a pair of long-horned ibexes standing under a lunar sign.

But even as the iconography changes, the artistry remains. The collection contains some of the earliest examples of diamonds, rough and unpolished, on ancient rings. Ornate filigree in the shape of palmettes and spirals decorates a Phoenician ring from the sixth century BC. Two pairs of writhing snakes offset a cabochon emerald, which is itself surrounded by two rows of fine granulation. Whether we are in the reign of Thutmose III in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt or admiring the openwork of a gold and nicolo ring made towards the end of the Roman Empire, we are always aware of talented craftsmen, designing and carving and producing works of art that will still be admired millennia after they were made, and long after their skills have been lost.

I am grateful to many people who have helped me to build the collection over the years but special thanks go to Professor Jeffrey Spier and Dr. Jack Ogden. Their unmatched knowledge and expertise, generously shared, has been a source of both learning and inspiration.

Too many private art collections are still kept hidden and unpublished. My hope is that this catalogue will allow everyone to enjoy the beauty and skill of the artworks they contain and also inspire other collectors to publish and share their collections with the public. The objects themselves were made for private owners, but their creativity, their history and their stories belong to us all.

