

Diamonds are a girl's best friend...

# "With this ring, I thee wed..."-an enduring custom

One of the most enduring and beautiful traditions associated with engagement and marriage is the giving of a ring. Today, most brides receive two rings from their fiancés—one at the time of the betrothal and one at the wedding ceremony itself.

It seems likely that the betrothal ring originated as a replacement for dowry money—naturally enough, considering the ancient Roman custom of giving a ring to seal an agreement.

While this act was binding in most cultures, the Vikings gave rings not to ratify the bargain, but to commemorate it, much as we do today.

Of course, fashions in engagement rings change with the

which originated in France, was called a Regard ring. Its name stems from the fact that in it were set several gems—Ruby, Emerald, Garnet, Amethyst, Ruby, Diamond—the first letters of whose names formed an acrostic of the word "regard." In the same tradition, sometimes the initials of the names of the stones spelled out the name of the bride-to-be.

Another distinctive betrothal ring is the gemel or gimmel ring, which Martin Luther is commonly considered to have introduced, four centuries ago.

The gemel ring was a double or triple ring. When closed, two bands of the double ring would appear to be one—a most apt metaphor for the oneness of man

and wife. It was traditional to separate the intertwined rings at the time of the betrothal, which was solemnized over a Bible with a witness present.

In the case of the triple gemel ring, the man and woman being betrothed would separate the upper and lower rings from the middle one, which the witness would take. At the time of the wedding, the three portions of the ring would be reunited. The ring would then be used for the wedding ceremony, and worn afterwards by the bride.

Which brings us to the wedding ring itself. This band represented the essential unity of

the married couple—a meaning which was perfectly symbolized by its circular form. Though silver rings were most common prior to the 19th century, gold, the purest metal, predominates today.

Wedding rings are customarily worn on the fourth finger of the left hand—this, because the ancients believe that there was a vein which ran to this finger directly from the heart, the seat of feeling in the human body.

According to *With this Ring*, by Elizabeth Laverack (Elm Tree Books), a fascinating compilation of information on the history of many aspects of marriage, it is generally accepted that the wedding ring

originated in the ancient Egyptian custom of placing a piece of ring-money (in use prior to the introduction of coins) on the bride's finger as an indication that her newly-wedded husband was endowing her with his wealth.

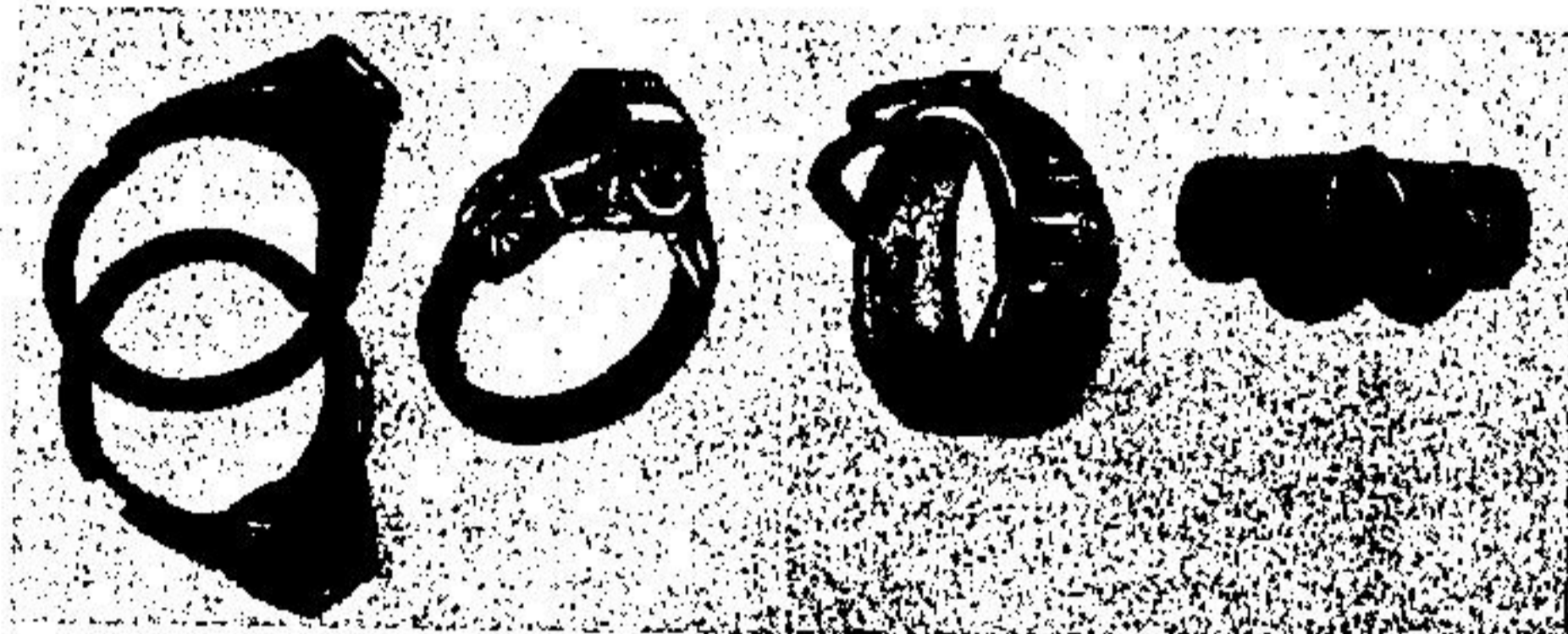
In a parallel fashion, the ancient Romans gave their brides key-rings. The presentation of a key-ring would occur after the man had lifted his bride over the threshold of her new home,

and was symbolic of the trust her husband placed in her, and of the fact that she would share his worldly possessions from that time on.

The Anglo-Saxons favored golden rings which were worn upon the third finger; in Medieval times, a saint might be represented on the wedding ring—this gave it the power to ward off ills.

In the Tudor period in England, wedding rings were frequently richly embellished with precious stones which boasted mystical significance. For instance, the emerald represented peace and happiness; the diamond, faith; the ruby, glory; the sapphire, hope; and so on.

The exchange of rings parallels the exchange of vows, and is the symbol of the deep mutual commitment both partners have made. What could be more romantic?



Photos courtesy: Jewelry Industry Council.

WEDDING AND BETROTHAL RINGS over the ages have followed the dictates of fashion and fancy. The German gemel ring, left, from the 16th century, is composed of two separate rings that look like one when they're unified, the perfect symbol of the essential oneness of man and wife. It bears the inscription in Latin, "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder." The English wedding ring, right, which dates from the 15th century, boasts clasped hands and a heart motif, and is inscribed with the motto, "God Helps."

times—their form is as dependent upon current tastes and values as their meaning is immutable and unchanging.

### Diamond "I do's"

The diamond engagement ring, today's darling, has been around for quite a long time. It goes back, in fact, to the 15th century, when the Archduke Maximilian of Austria presented his betrothed, Mary of Burgundy, with a golden ring decorated with a diamond-studded M, his initial, on top. Interestingly enough, prior to that time, the diamond was a gem worn by men, not women.

One type of betrothal ring,

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