

Antiques

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LES ENLUMINURES

Rings with the figures of a newborn and a skeleton, made in Germany in 1631, from the Benjamin Zucker family collection.

Resonant Gold Rings

Benjamin Zucker, a third-generation gemstone dealer in New York, wonders about the habits of past owners of his rings. When he sees a crack in a 16th-century diamond, he said, he can picture the wearer using the stone to etch a message into a windowpane. In his imagination, he said, "I can almost make out the message, but not quite."

He and his family have sold about 40 gold rings to Les Enluminures gallery in Manhattan, where they will go on view next Friday (at prices from \$15,000 to over \$1 million each, and with a catalog from Paul Holberton Publishing). The Zuckers have shown them at institutions including the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The pieces were made between the second and 19th centuries, mostly in Europe and the Middle East. Motifs of hearts, clasped hands and skulls celebrated milestones from cradle to grave. The gems were mined in Sri Lanka, India, Burma, Afghanistan, Persia, Egypt and Bohemia, and the rings are inscribed in Eng-

lish, Latin, Hebrew, Kufic, Coptic and Lombardic.

Mr. Zucker began collecting them four decades ago. "The rings for me were just the most emotion-laden, and so personal," he said.

"I'm a very big believer that the magic of the collector somehow adheres to the object," he said.

A 1630s ruby and diamond ring made in Germany, sculpted with figures of a newborn and a skeleton, belonged to Rothschilds for much of the 20th century. Records show that it was looted by the Nazis and later restored to the family.

The Zuckers still own dozens of rings, many on loan to the Walters. Mr. Zucker is writing a novel based on one of them, a diamond ring containing a portrait of Peter the Great.

This fall's other major look at a New York jewelry collection examines medieval precious metalwork donated by the philanthropist Eugene V. Thaw to the Morgan Library & Museum. In a new book, "Bright Lights in the Dark Ages: The Thaw Collection of Early Medieval Ornaments" (Giles), the jewelry historian Noël Adams describes developing research.

A copper alloy strip in the collection, about two inches long, is embossed with a bird's head. No one knows how it was originally used. "Experts can find no parallels for this fragmentary piece of beautifully executed metalwork," Ms. Adams writes.

The book's detailed provenance listings make some of the prices paid by Mr. Thaw easy to trace. In 2003, at Christie's in New York, he spent about \$3,800 on two polyhedral bead earrings from the seventh century and \$4,800 on a garnet eagle most likely worn by a fifth-century Roman or German official.