

Virtual Soapbox



Buttons: Small Markers of History and Fashion

Sadie Jackman

Buttons are an important element of both military uniforms and civilian wear. A button collector explains why holding either type of vintage button is like holding history in the palm of your hand.

The origin of attaching the first button to clothing is lost to history but it is assumed that early man held his furs and cloaks together with fragments of bone or bark and a twist of vine or animal gut. Warmth and maybe modesty would have been the motivators of invention.

There are surviving records from a French button maker's guild in 1250 AD that confirm buttons as an important commercial product with a high degree of artistry. The natural materials of bone, wood and shell were augmented with metals.

Royal decrees dictated the styles that could be worn by the under-classes. Only royalty and the very wealthy were allowed the fancy, finely crafted or jeweled buttons. As buttons became more important as ornaments, they were inevitably elevated to symbols of rank or affluence.

The merely wealthy copied the styles of the French court. King Francis I reigned from 1515–1547 and was considered the first Renaissance monarch. His patronage of grand art and fashion contributed to France's being the center of the world's button makers. He is reputed to have had a formal costume adorned with 13,600 buttons that would have resembled a mirrored ball under lights.

In the last half of the eighteenth century, Louis XIV was famous for a button buying habit which, along with four wars and the new palace at Versailles, ultimately cost France over five million dollars, thereby draining the national treasury. The court favored gold buttons embellished with precious stones.

Gentlemen also commissioned the most famous artists of the day to paint their mistresses' portraits, as well as their horses or hunting dogs, on ivory under glass with diamond or paste borders.



Hand-painted portrait on vegetable ivory under glass.

The fashionable competed to sport the most costly and unique sets of buttons.

The most ornate and flamboyant buttons of this period were mainly worn by men, but women wore them too. Large diamond buttons (circa 1770s), previously owned by Catherine the Great of Russia, were offered at auction in London within the past decade.

Jewelers in Eastern Europe were also busily employed creating intricate buttons with pearls and jewels. The most ornate are today referred to as "Hungarian jewels." Many examples of this 17th and 18th century artistry survive to the delight of modern collectors.



Austro-Hungarian 19th C. silver and vermeil button.

Reminiscent of the artists and jewelers of the 18th century, Jean Schlumberger, famous for his jewelry creations for Tiffany, began his career as a button maker for French designer Elsa Schiaparelli. He came up with the concept of realistic shapes for buttons in the 1930s. The 18K gold trapeze artists for her silk circus print suits were an innovative example. This whimsical concept is credited as the inspiration for millions of cheaply manufactured, realistically shaped plastic buttons at the same time. These are sought by collectors today and referred to as "Goofies." Finding complete sets can be

difficult because most were lost to the tip of a hot iron or wringer washing machine.

Some of the small buttons, markers of history that you can hold in your hand, are reminders of more serious events. During the 1940s, a shortage of metal forced the United States military to turn to plastic for the manufacture of its uniform buttons. This simple change freed tons of metal for use in weapons.



Five different late WWII plastic military buttons, including two different Navy, a USMC, an Army, and a Army WAC.

In Eastern Europe, their military faced the same problem, and their government turned to the glass makers of Bohemia. Uniform and military buttons are a large category of button collecting and the values vary from extremes of one dollar to thousands.

One of the most available sources for today's collector is the button crazed Victorian era. Many dresses or jackets required twenty-four buttons or more for closure and many more used as trim or ornamentation. Hundreds of thousands of these examples survive in all price ranges.

Black glass is one of the most common materials, due to Queen Victoria's extended mourning period. It is often referred to as

“jet” but only the color is the same. Real jet buttons or jewelry from that period are rare. Scarcity is the criteria of value for any collectible, so a beautiful, intricately molded glass button that is more than a hundred years old can still be worth less than a dollar. Many of the small pictorial metals buttons from the same time period also sell for small amounts.

These buttons are a special type, designated as “Victorian Jewels” or “Gay ‘90s” (circa 1890s). They are recognized by the large percentage of the surface design dominated by the faux jewel and the distinctive long sturdy shank on the back. They were normally used on heavy fabrics because of their weight and size. It's easy to envision these on a lush velvet or brocade opera cape or fur coat.



Victorian Jewels buttons.

Buttons of each era are as distinctive as the fabrics and silhouettes of the fashions.

Many designers and crafters favor vintage buttons for use in costume repair, jewelry and fashion design. Many quilters, knitters and wearable artists also seek out older buttons because the quality and craftsmanship are superior to modern ones.

Today, buttons are utilitarian items, protecting us from exposure or keeping the weather at bay. However, these small pieces of shape and color are one of the most collected items in the world. The hobby was officially organized in 1938 when clubs formed to share enthusiasm and information.

There are hundreds of groups defined as city, state, or national. Each state has one or two shows or conventions each year and the national society hosts an annual convention each August with vendors and shoppers from all states and several European countries. Visit the [National Button Society](http://NationalButtonSociety.com) web site for a club near you.

Costumers will enjoy reading the magazine that is included with membership in the National Button Society. It is a solid investment for the calendar of events alone, but each issue also has well researched, colorful articles on buttons and their history. There are also advertisements for books, auctions and buttons for sale.

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