

Sherman

Enduring Elegance

Story and Photos by
Evelyn Yallen & Sandra Caldwell

Sherman jewelry, beloved by women for its extraordinary sparkle and quality when it was new, still attracts collectors for the same reasons more than 60 years after its manufacture.

In 1947, as a native of Montreal, Gustave Sherman founded his namesake company. However, before settling into the jewelry business, he tried his hand at a number of careers. According to his son Mark, Gustave Sherman's life encompassed a varied past that included a stint in the US Cavalry in Texas, enlistment in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II, and a short-lived post-war career in the life insurance industry. He also earned a living in rural Quebec buying and selling gold at a small profit to smelters. Through this profession he learned firsthand how women responded to and loved their jewelry – and an idea for a business was born.

After many fruitful years, the company's fortunes suffered when rhinestone jewelry dropped in popularity and Sherman turned to more tailored gold-tone pieces. Eventually the company stopped producing rhinestone jewelry altogether in favor of sterling silver and gold designs. Gus Sherman closed the doors of his company in 1981, and passed away shortly thereafter in 1983.

Sherman's Reputation for Quality

Quality was paramount for Gustave Sherman, and in his son's words, "He only knew one way to do things, and that was the right way." There were no cheaper diffusion lines, no seasonal collections, and Sherman's employees focused on quality in

jewelry manufacturing.

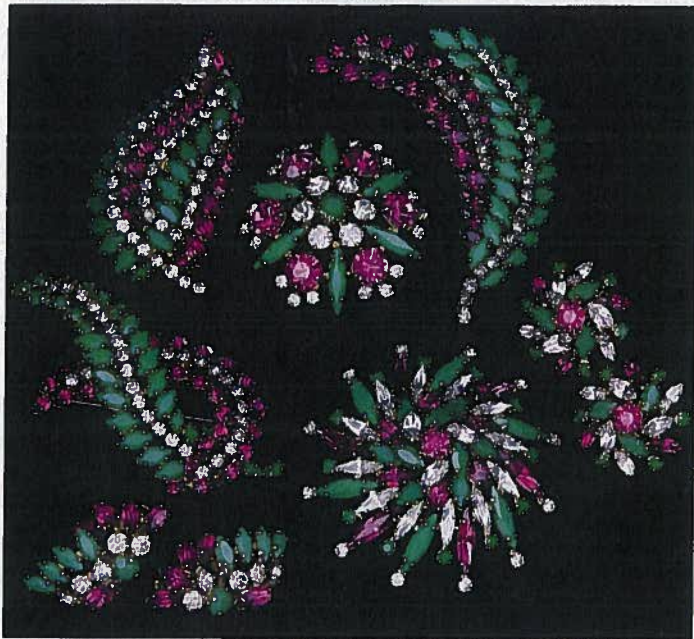
Sherman used only the finest materials – Swarovski stones, superior findings and formidable plating methods. The company's primary stone supplier, GH Ashley in Toronto, shared that Sherman embraced new and different cuts and colors, and wanted to be among the first costume jewelry manufacturers to use them. In a meeting with one of Sherman's longest-serving employees, it was confirmed that the company's pieces were triple-plated with rhodium or heavily plated with gold.

Jewelry made by Sherman was sold at high-end independent jewelers across Canada, and at respected jewelers like Birks and mass jewelers like People's. The jewelry was also distributed to major department stores such as Eatons, Morgans (now defunct), and The Hudson's Bay Company now known as The Bay.

New Sherman Information Surfaces

Like so many of our jewel-loving friends, we began collecting Sherman jewelry precisely because its quality endured the test of time. The stones were still vibrant and sparkling decades after the pieces were made, and settings shone as though they had just come out of the box for the first time. We wanted to know more about these beautiful collectibles – but there wasn't much to be found.

Since the publication of our book, *Sherman Jewellery: The Masterpiece Collection* in 2008, we have been fortunate to learn



more from Sherman's family and a key employee about the way the company operated. We were also keen to see if we could shed light on the issue of signed versus unsigned pieces, which continues to elicit debate in the collecting community.

In a November 2009 meeting with Mark Sherman and a long time employee of the firm who has asked us to identify him as Mr. Carmine, we were excited to learn more about production methods, how salesmen worked, and when and why paper tags were used on some pieces. We brought some cherished and rare pieces for the two men to look at and in turn, we were delighted to see some of the special items Mr. Carmine had worked on, and to hear the stories behind them.

It was a thrill for us to see the two men reminiscing, drawing a diagram of the workshop floor, and talking about who sat where and did what. And at the end of the afternoon, we asked them both to sign a copy of our book for us. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to hear first-hand how the company operated and hear their recollections of how the jewelry was produced.

The Production of Sherman Jewelry

The company employed a bare bones production line where settings were manufactured, stones were set, pieces were sent for plating and polishing, and finally, assigned to boxes awaiting shipping to customers. Mr. Carmine keenly remembered where he sat and how busy the workroom was under Gus Sherman's steady and benevolent presence. The job was not always 9 to 5. Often shipments were mailed on Saturdays, and before Christmas the work was near constant to meet the demand.

Among the many types of jewels Sherman manufactured, the men confirmed that the company indeed made tiaras for the Miss Canada pageant (there is one tiara shown in our book). Mr. Carmine pulled out a spectacular pearl and crystal crown he had made for his daughter's First Communion, and it was complete

with a soldered on Sherman tag. They also showed us jeweled belts. These remain scarce today and rarely come up for sale on the secondary market.

We were also surprised to learn the answer to why there are so many color combinations for some designs. Salesmen would take samples to jewelers and often they would order a piece but ask for a specific grouping of stones to be used. If the stones were available, the orders were generally filled so there may literally be one-off designs in specific colors if they were requested by only one jeweler. Added to Sherman's eagerness to use new Swarovski stones, this explains the variety of color combinations we've come across in the same design.

The Unsigned Debate

We showed Mr. Carmine unsigned pieces that had come as part of original sets where one or more pieces was signed – but not everything in the parure (complete set). He offered no explanation but did say sometimes paper tags were used when a piece was too small or perhaps too ornate for a soldered on Sherman tag. We talk more about the signed versus unsigned debate in our book. In a nutshell, we believe (and provide photographs we think back up our assertions) that not all pieces in a parure were signed, though Gus Sherman was indeed proud of his branding and used marked boxes, cards and hang-tags prolifically.

Sherman Jewelry Values

When talking to people about Sherman jewelry, we are frequently asked, "How much is it worth?" The answer can be difficult and depends on a number of factors. We deliberately did not include a price guide in our book. Our feeling at the time we wrote it was that prices were bound to fluctuate – and we were right.

When we started the project, a cuff bracelet (considered top of the line by Sherman collectors) in a desirable color was selling for as high as \$5,000. Today, that same bracelet might



The color combination and design make this bib necklace uncommon for Sherman, which favored small, dainty necklaces over larger bibs. It features the use of narrow marquise stones, which Sherman used extensively.



Sherman did several designs using these opaque fuchsia, jade and clear crystals, which some refer to as Christmas pieces because of the juxtaposition of the raspberry pink and green. We actually don't know if these were retailed at a specific time of year. However, they don't turn up that often so it's likely their production was limited. The cuff is particularly rare, and may be a one-off.

fetch \$2,000 if there was a bidding war on eBay, and could go for significantly less. We have seen eBay prices for Sherman, including rare and collectible pieces, drop in the past two years. We've contemplated why this has happened.

Beyond the strained economy affecting many countries over the past few years, it's possible that people with significant collections have reached the point where there are very few Sherman pieces they don't already have so they are simply buying less. It's also possible, as with any type of collectible, the market has settled down from a high point to a more reasonable level. We do think this is good news for people just beginning to collect Sherman.

As for what things should cost, we believe it's more fair to look at the jewelry in terms of value by category, rather than individual prices. Bracelets, especially wider ones, and elaborate necklaces and earrings, remain the most sought after by collectors. Certain colors will always fetch higher prices – red, purple, orange and pink for example. Japanned settings tend to elicit interest as well. We believe the cuffs and wide bracelets should continue to be valued in the top tier, selling anywhere from \$800 to several thousand depending on the design, color of the stones and condition.

Necklaces that are wider than two inches should also command similar prices, again depending on condition, color and design. Bead necklaces have dropped in price but the chain strung bibs remain elusive and expensive, selling anywhere from \$300 to as high as \$800 for desirable colors. Lavish earrings will likely top out at about \$250. Sets will command higher prices and, of course, in an auction setting all you need is two determined bidders for prices to rise to sometimes unbelievable levels. Pins are generally a good buy right now, unless (again) they are extremely large, rare designs like figurals (butterflies and insects tend to sell high, but even they have dropped in price).

Buying online remains the best place to find Sherman jewelry,

and prices will vary from website to website, depending on the prices paid by dealers and what they feel their clientele is willing to pay. We have found less and less Sherman at brick and mortar antiques shops and shows in the recent past.

Beginning a Sherman Collection

As we noted, this is an excellent time to buy. Because Sherman was sold primarily in Canada, your best bet remains eBay and online shops. If you are visiting Canada, it's worth a look in local antiques stores as you never know when a treasure will turn up. Rarities are not as plentiful, but there is a good sampling of Sherman designs across the color spectrum available online in most venues today at excellent prices. As with anything else, we suggest collecting what you like and are drawn to!

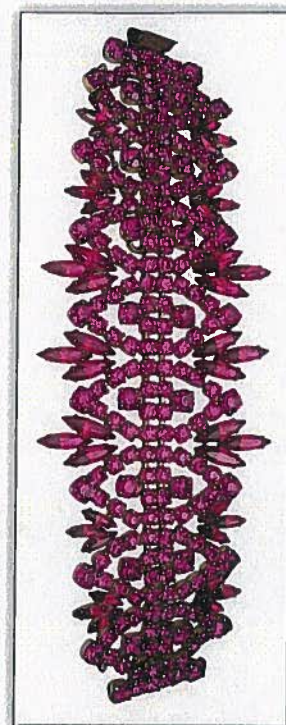
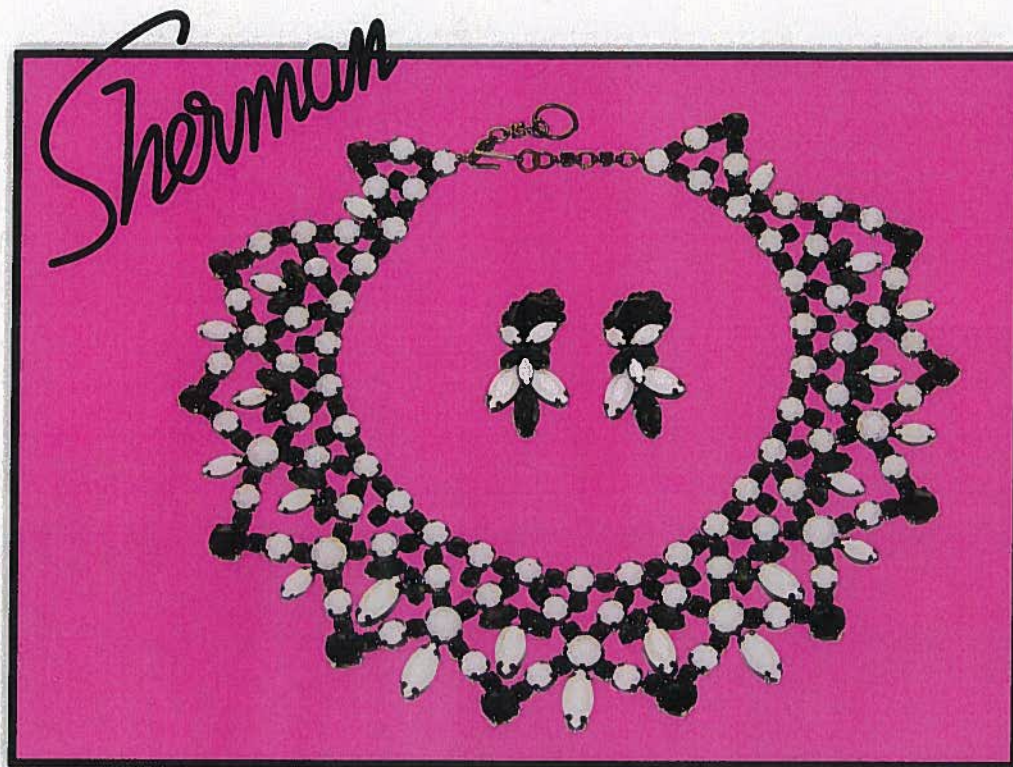
Designs in crystal, topaz and aurora borealis remain plentiful and very affordable. As with any collectible, it's important to gauge wear and any damage accurately, as missing stones may be difficult or impossible to replace. Avoid pieces with damage to plating as well.

Suggestions for Seasoned Collectors

As for the experienced collector, the picture is slightly different. You will most likely continue to pay premium prices to acquire choice pieces. And, unfortunately, it's not as good a time to see high end pieces, especially if you acquired them at the height of the market. We would encourage long-time collectors to use



Both pins (see page 4) share the japanned setting, but look quite different with the use of crystal and siam red stones. Pins are fairly large (about two inches across), with the flowers built on different levels. A nice example of Sherman's design sense.

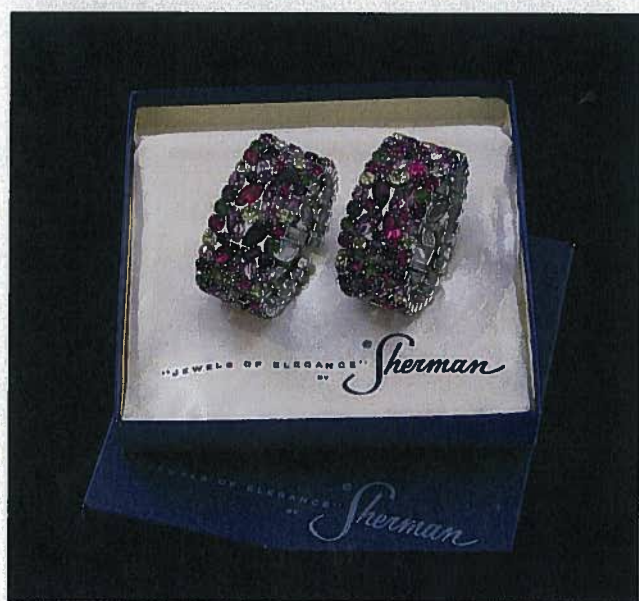


Above: This black and white set is unusual for several reasons – the use of two types of opaque stones, reverse set stones (atypical for Sherman), and the japped setting. The width of the bib also makes it very desirable to collectors. Bracelet, right: While we have yet to find advertisements placed by Sherman, it appears that some of his retailers did promote his jewelry. One ad dates the pink bracelet shown here as circa 1967. However, as Sherman often reused designs, it's possible and even likely that this design was made before and after this date. The ad shows the price as \$20; today this bracelet would likely sell for between \$600-\$2,000, depending on the color combination and plating color.

what we see as a pricing lull to augment their collections with items they might previously have overlooked, or were unable to afford.

But what does the current pricing mean in the long term? We remain bullish on Sherman. Prices for collectibles do fluctuate. With costume jewelry, we have seen them nosedive (sometimes permanently) when fakes of very popular designs were introduced. We have not seen this happening with Sherman and remain skeptical that it would even be possible to produce pieces with the same high quality for the price of a counterfeit. That lack of quality would be a telltale sign, especially to avid collectors. And while pricing will always vary, the amount of jewelry available remains finite. As collections grow, there are fewer of the really good pieces available on the secondary market.

Nevertheless, we believe, as it has since 1947, that Sherman jewelry will remain elegant and timeless – an enduring testament to Gustave Sherman's dedication to quality craftsmanship. This jewelry will be amassed and worn by collectors for decades to come.



A flat variation of the Sherman cuff, which often featured two layers. Rare use of multicolored stones in this palette, and displayed on an original Sherman box.

Evelyn Yallen and Sandra Caldwell are the authors of Sherman Jewellery: The Masterpiece Collection, which can be ordered online at www.intotemptation.com.

Sherman MARK EXAMPLES



1



2



3



4



5



6

OVAL MARK

There is a belief that the applied oval (1) Sherman signature is the earliest one he used. However, we have also seen this used on pieces we believe to have been manufactured later in his career, so it isn't a perfect way of dating.

RECTANGULAR MARK

The rectangular mark (2) is by far the most commonly used Sherman mark.

NECKLACE MARK

Sherman's necklaces are generally distinguished by the use of crimped rhinestone chain on the extender and a shepherd's crook closure, as seen here. On this example, the signature is on the last stone of the extender (3), but this is not always the case.

EARRING MARKS

The signature will depend on the type of finding used; we have shown three examples here: oblong (4), earring back clip (5) and earring mark side (6). We have also seen earrings marked on the back of the earring post, the drop of an earring, or engraved onto the screw portion of screw-back earrings. Sherman used both script and block lettering.

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