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The History of the Wedding Ring – A Recognizable Symbol of Love

The wedding ring, that most famous and instantly recognizable symbol of the (hopefully perpetual) joining of a man and a woman as husband and wife in the institution of marriage, has a long, wide spread and mysterious history. Its beginnings lie in the deserts of North Africa, where the ancient Egyptian civilization sprang up along the fertile flood plains of the river Nile. This river was bringer of all fortune and life to the Pharaoh's people and from plants growing on its' banks were the first wedding rings fashioned. Sedges, rushes and reeds, growing alongside the well-known papyrus were twisted and braided into rings for fingers and larger bracelets for wrists.

The ring is of course a circle and this was the symbol of eternity for the Egyptians as well as many other ancient cultures. It had no beginning and no end, like time. It returned to itself, like life; and the shape was worshipped in the form of the Sun and the Moon. The hole in the center of the ring is not just space either; it is important in its own right as the symbol of the gateway, or door; leading to things and events both known and unknown.

It is not difficult therefore, to see how the ring and the gift of a ring began to be associated with love, in the hope that this most worthy of emotions could take on the characteristics of the circle and capture eternity.

They wore it like we do today, on the third finger of the left hand, because of a belief that the vein of that finger directly traveled from the heart. This legend was later taken up by the Greeks, when they conquered Egypt under the generalship of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. and from them passed onto the Romans, who called this the 'vena amoris', which is Latin for 'the vein of love'.

These early rings usually lasted about a single year before wear and tear took their inevitable toll. Hemp was probably the first choice, but some decided that they wanted a longer lasting material, and opted for leather, bone or ivory to craft their token of love.

The Art of Metallurgy Takes Over

When in later years, the arts of metallurgy became known this naturally took over, but surprisingly only very gradually. These early metal rings were often quite clumsily made and uneven in the extreme, so for wedding gifts they had precious and semi-precious stones set into them and these can be seen represented by hieroglyphs in Egyptian tombs. At this time Jewellery was usually more for show than sentiment and used to express wealth. Before coinage gold rings were used for currency and often hidden away until the owners were actively trading.

In early Rome it was iron that was adopted as the metal of choice rather than copper or brass as mostly elsewhere. This symbolized the strength of love a man felt for his chosen woman, though rust was a problem.

The act of giving and acceptance of the ring was now also considered to be legally binding and therefore enforceable. This tied the woman as the property of the man to some views but in truth also protected her rights as bride-to-be, and was summoned upon to prevent her from having her primary position usurped by rivals.

Gold or silver rings were given on occasions, to show all the bridegroom trusted his betrothed with his valuable property, and to symbolize this further, the ring was sometimes shaped as a key rather than a normal circular band. This was not presented at the wedding ceremony as the custom nowadays, but when he carried her in his arms across the threshold of her new home.

After coinage gold was rapidly promoted to first choice and later in medieval Europe gemstones were again a common addition. With rubies chosen for their color of red like a heart, sapphires, blue like the sky above, or most valued and sought after of all; the

indestructible diamond.

In renaissance Italy silver made a comeback, and was now selected for the new idea of the engagement, or betrothal ring. These were often highly ornate and usually inlaid with niello, (which is a very decorative form of enamel engraving, colored in black to stand in contrast to the bright metal) on a round or oval bezel. And rather than traditional simple bands, they had clasping hands emerging from the hoop at the front.

Silver became more pre-eminent briefly in the seventeenth century in England and France when they were widely used for wedding rings at the height of the fashion for poesy, or posy rings; this comes from the word 'poesy' meaning a 'love poem'. They were sentimentally inscribed with such, around the wedding band, either within or without, and often faith and hope were included in the verse as well. These were highly popular indeed, as frequent referrals to them in the works of Shakespeare prove. Gold however, began to take over again later, and pushed back silver to the Italian idea of engagement again, with a golden duplicate of the original replacing it on the wedding day.

Bad Luck if it's Not Made of Gold

Indeed, it was thought in Irish folklore to be bad luck or even illegal to be married with a ring made of anything but gold. But this was never so in actuality and, like elsewhere many different metals were used. A gold ring though, was often provided for weddings throughout Europe for those who could not afford one, (and immediately reclaimed afterwards).

Other world superstitions include the absolutely essential point of making sure the ring is a perfect fit, for woe betides the future of the marriage if it isn't. A too-tight ring might point to painful jealousy or the stifling of one party by the other. Too loose, and a parting of the ways through careless acts or forgetfulness is indicated as a future danger to watch for.

The Church of England holds no brook with this however, and does not concern itself with the size or material of the ring so long as it is there. An irony, and a change of heart for sure, as the early Protestant puritans claimed that wedding rings were pagan and not to be used by the Godly. They were further enraged on the subject by a Catholic legend that Joseph and Mary had used one constructed either of onyx or amethyst; and that various churches in Europe had throughout history claimed to hold the ring (which was capable of performing miracles) to attract pilgrims to their vicinity to spend money and hence increase the wealth of the competing abbeys.

Today, almost all Christians accept the wedding ring, (a notable exception to this being the Quakers), doubtlessly helped by the christianization of the old vena amoris tale. Whereby in middle ages England, the bridegroom would slip the ring part way up and then down his bride's thumb, then first and middle finger, reciting: 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Ghost' as he touched each one before fixing it in place on the next finger in line; the third finger of the left hand.

Why the Left Hand?

Well, in some parts of continental Europe it is and always has been the right. There doesn't seem to be any particular reason that the Christians should have mostly kept this the same as the original. But one thought is; as the man, facing his bride, reaches straight out with his right hand (most people are right handed) he naturally touches her left. As she does his, as now, with more and more men wearing one also, when the rings are exchanged.

This is a modern practice begun mostly during the second world war, a consequence of increased numbers of men being separated from their loved ones and seeking a cheering reminder. This almost happened earlier in history, with the advent of the gemmal ring, alternatively spelled gimmel or gimmel. This was two or three decidedly ornamental links, usually with hands and hearts or knots, fastened together by a hinge, or interlocking like the Olympic rings, and being capable of joining into one. At betrothal, they would be separated, with one given to the woman, one kept by her lover, and if present, the third held by a witness until the wedding day when all would be reunited and henceforth kept by the bride.

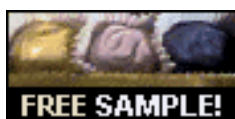
Back to fingers though, and the thumb briefly challenged the accepted norm in Elizabethan days as fashionable ladies deemed to wear their wedding rings there, but this did not last and so today it is as it was in the beginning, just like a circle really, or a ring.

About The Author

Matt Jacks is a successful freelance writer providing tips and advice for consumers purchasing diamond wedding rings, western wedding invitations and perfect wedding dress. His numerous articles offer moneysaving tips and valuable insight on typically confusing topics.

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