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**MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, TO DEBUT NEW GALLERY  
SHOWCASING GEMS AND JEWELRY OF THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN**



*Earring with Nike driving a two-horse chariot, Greek, about 350–325 BC*

BOSTON, MA (September 24, 2012)—The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), will open tomorrow, September 25, a new gallery of Gems and Jewelry of the Ancient Mediterranean with more than 250 beautiful objects, many of them precious and rare. Half of the works will be gems from the Museum's world-class collection of about 700 Greek and Roman gems, considered the finest in the United States. The other half of the gallery will showcase brilliant examples of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman jewelry, such as one of the MFA's most famous pieces, the renowned 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC *Earring with Nike driving a two-horse chariot*, a masterpiece in gold. To enhance the appreciation of these works, new magnifying devices were specially designed for this gallery, which will allow visitors to view the objects up close. Also displayed will be a selection of works (a painting, sculpture, and decorative items) representing ancient women wearing jewelry, such as a funerary portrait of a young woman

from Roman Egypt and a funerary relief from Palmyra, the great trading city in Syria that linked the Roman Empire to the East. In addition, a video of a contemporary gem maker using ancient techniques to carve a gem will be presented in the gallery. Located on Level 2 of the MFA's George D. and Margo Behrakis wing, this is the Museum's second gallery dedicated to jewelry. It opens a year after the debut of the Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan Family Foundation Gallery.

"For the first time these ancient jewels are brought together and treated as a distinct group. They create an intimate and sparkling gallery," said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the MFA. "This treasury of ancient jewelry adds a new dimension to the Museum's displays, emphasizing precious materials and exquisite craftsmanship."

In Greek, Roman, and Etruscan society, jewelry was worn by women, men, children, and even representations of the gods. Appreciated for its beauty, it also signaled prestige, fashion, or a personal connection to religious cults and worship. To people in the Classical world, jewelry was treasured as an artistic medium and as a symbol of portable wealth. Some also believed jewelry possessed magical properties to heal and protect. A fascinating group of magical gems, recently researched and uncovered in storage at the MFA, reveals magical spells and monsters; others gems include invocations to *Adonai* (Hebrew word for God or

Master), as personal appeals to greater powers. Gold jewelry and carved gems were decorated with various gods and goddesses that associated the wearer with their favorite Olympians, a favorite philosopher, or their emperor.



*Cameo with portraits of a Roman emperor and his wife, Roman, mid-1st century AD*

The origins of the still popular cameo technique—whereby ancient jewelers used the unaided eye along with a few tools to create extraordinarily detailed and dazzling works of art—also will be explored in the gallery. The earliest cameos come from Alexandria under the Ptolemies, rulers who sought to have their portraits carved in miniature into precious gems. Many portraits of Roman rulers survive in cameo and offer a miniature counterpart to the marble portraits that were the hallmark of Roman art, such as *Cameo with portraits of a Roman emperor and his wife* (Roman, mid-1st century AD), which shows an emperor with the edge of his toga pulled over his head in an attitude of piety.

It is made of sardonyx and executed in exceptionally high relief. Another important cameo in the collection is the onyx *Cameo with head of Medusa* (Roman, 2nd–3rd centuries AD), depicting the famous gorgon, Medusa, who would turn onlookers into stone.

“To showcase these exquisite works, we wanted to create a memorable and dramatic visitor experience with a jewel-box effect that will compel return visits and inspire wonderment,” said Christine Kondoleon, the MFA’s George D. and Margo Behrakis Senior Curator of Greek and Roman Art, who organized the gallery.

The best known object is undoubtedly the Nike earring, measuring almost two inches. It represents the winged goddess of Victory (in Greek *Nike*) driving a two-horse chariot. When worn, either as an earring for a cult statue or by a priestess or royal personage, it dangled from the ear and dazzled with its dynamic movement—the wheels of the chariot actually spin. Made of more than 100 pieces of gold soldered together to create a masterful miniature sculpture, it is a technical tour de force. Also from the same period of expert Greek gold production, the fourth century, are two gold wreaths made from paper-thin gold inspired by natural oak and laural leaves.

The Gems and Jewelry of the Ancient Mediterranean Gallery is featured in two stops on the MFA Guide. One highlights the MFA’s priceless *Earring with Nike driving a two-horse chariot*, magnifying the earring and describing how it was made. Another, the *Cameo of Medusa*, explaining how cameos are carved and discussing other representations of Medusa in art history, such as the MFA’s John Singer Sargent mural of gods and heroes in the Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Rotunda and Colonnade. MFA Guides include audio, video, and image slideshows focusing on works in the Museum’s galleries. They can be rented at ticket desks and the Sharf Visitor Center for \$5, members; \$6, non-members; and \$4 for youths. Visitors to the Museum’s website also can learn about the new Gems and Jewelry of the Ancient Mediterranean Gallery by viewing its dedicated page at <http://www.mfa.org/ancient-jewelry-gallery>, where a slideshow of select works is featured.

## MFA JEWELRY COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

Works on view in the Museum's two jewelry galleries (Gems and Jewelry of the Ancient Mediterranean Gallery on Level 2 and the Kaplan Family Foundation Gallery on Level 1) draw from the MFA's collection of some 11,500 ornaments representing a rich variety of jewels, gems, and treasures. Spanning nearly 6,000 years of civilization, the comprehensive assemblage includes adornments from several continents and represents a wide array of materials, techniques, and functions. Objects in the jewelry collection, amassed over a 135-year period, were acquired through gifts and purchases, and excavations conducted by the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Highlights of the collection include:

- Beadwork from Egypt's Pyramid Age and jewelry from ancient Nubia (Sudan)
- Ancient Near Eastern, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman adornments, including engraved gems and cameos
- Early medieval pendants
- 19<sup>th</sup>-century revivalist adornments from Italy
- 18<sup>th</sup>-century French sablé beadwork ornaments
- American colonial and federal jewelry
- Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau ornaments
- 20<sup>th</sup>-century studio jewelry (The Daphne Farago Collection)
- Ancient American goldwork and jade
- 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mughal ornaments with gemstones and enamel
- Japanese inro with attached ojime and netsuke
- European and American high-style jewelry

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND PRESS IMAGES

High-resolution images featuring works on view in the Gems and Jewelry of the Ancient Mediterranean Gallery are downloadable in the Press Room image library at <http://www.mfa.org/news>. For more information about the MFA, please visit [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).

Join the conversation about the MFA on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/mfaboston> and Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/mfaboston>, and watch MFA-related videos at <http://www.youtube.com/mfaboston>.

*The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is recognized for the quality and scope of its encyclopedic collection, which includes an estimated 450,000 objects. The Museum's collection is made up of: Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments. Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are Saturday through Tuesday, 10 a.m. – 4:45 p.m.; and Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 9:45 p.m. Admission (which includes one repeat visit within 10 days) is \$25 for adults and \$23 for seniors and students age 18 and older, and includes entry to all galleries and special exhibitions. Admission is free for University Members and youths age 17 and younger on weekdays after 3 p.m., weekends, and Boston Public Schools holidays; otherwise \$10. Wednesday nights after 4 p.m. admission is by voluntary contribution (suggested donation \$25). MFA Members are always admitted for free. The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For more information, visit [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org) or call 617.267.9300. The MFA is located on the Avenue of the Arts at 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.*

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