

“CERTAINLY A VERY FINE OBJECT”

MILDRED AND ROBERT WOODS BLISS, COLLECTORS OF JEWELLERY AND WEALTH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

ELIZABETH McCORD

IN 1937, a substantial collection of rings—including hundreds of medieval rings—went on auction at Sotheby’s in London. The collection belonged to Ernest Guilhou (d. 1911), a French collector. Among the hundreds of rings to be auctioned, the catalogue highlighted a seventh-century Byzantine marriage ring, lot 460, what I will refer to as the Guilhou ring (Figure 8.1). The ring had first been in the collection of Baron Jerome Pichon. The preface to the auction catalogue refers to Pichon as one of Guilhou’s “brother-collectors” (along with Frédéric Spitzer, another contemporary) whom he had outlived. Guilhou had consequently “bought at [Pichon’s and Spitzer’s] sales all their most cherished specimens.” The 1937 sale drew the notice of Mildred (1879–1969) and Robert Woods Bliss (1875–1962), who were ultimately unsuccessful in purchasing it. Instead, Jacob Hirsch acquired it at the 1937 auction, followed by Joseph Brummer (in 1943), and, only in 1947, the ring arrived at Dumbarton Oaks, the Blisses estate that they had by then transferred to Harvard University.¹

The Blisses, wealthy collectors of Byzantine and Ancient American Art, were rapidly ramping up their purchase of Byzantine objects in 1937, in preparation for the transfer of Dumbarton Oaks to Harvard University. Mildred, an heiress, and Robert, a diplomat, were step-siblings who mar-

* Portions of this essay originally appeared in McCord, “One Woman’s Wealth,” 51–58. I thank Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, Carla Galfano, and Jonathan Shea for their help with this earlier iteration. Abbreviations used are: DOIA (Dumbarton Oaks Institutional Archives); MBB (Mildred Barnes Bliss); RT (Royall Tyler); and RWB (Robert Woods Bliss).

1 “Catalogue of the Superb Collection of Rings”; Brummer Gallery Records N5532.

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ried, buying the property they named Dumbarton Oaks in 1920. Their ambition for Dumbarton Oaks—a Georgetown property in Washington, DC that included a Federal-style house built in 1801—was to house research collections in Byzantine, Ancient American, and Garden and Landscape Studies. They began substantial planning for these collections and the transfer to Harvard in 1936, just a year before the Guilhou auction. Central to this planning was the acquisition, advised by their art consultant and friend Royall Tyler, of high quality, beautiful pieces. The auction of Guilhou’s “superb collection of rings” contained many such examples, and letters between Tyler and the Blissés contain discussion of around a dozen rings for potential purchase. Central to these discussions was the Guilhou ring, a “most important and rare Byzantine ring.”²

Byzantine marriage rings, once used to offer good wishes and blessings upon a newly married couple, and possibly as a symbol of the exchange of property that accompanied the rites of marriage, became notable parts of collections across Europe and the United States in the twentieth century. The Guilhou ring, “the early marriage ring of Petros and Theodore,” was particularly outstanding. The bezel of the ring depicts the couple—Petros and Theodore (or Theodote) “crowned by haloed figures of Jesus and Mary (or a personification of Ecclesia, the Church), who stand in the center.” Surrounding the edge of the ring’s bezel, a Greek inscription reads “Lord help thy servants Peter and Theodote.” Several biblical scenes are depicted on the ring’s edge—the Annunciation, the Salutation, the Nativity, the Presentation at the Temple, the Baptism in Jordan, the Ecce Homo, and the Resurrection. The Blissés and Tyler ultimately judged that such a ring was “of sufficient importance, interest, and of the aesthetic standard we try to maintain.”³

Using the Bliss and Tyler fascination with the Guilhou ring as an entry point, in this chapter I consider a longer duration of medieval rings’ social lives, which extended into the twentieth-century art market. In doing so, I place these rings in the context of collectors’ broader financial holdings, highlighting the capitalistic nature of art collecting practices. This approach helps us gain insight into the essential connectivity between wealth and these rings—not only in their original contexts but in this more recent history as well. My analysis relies upon a close-reading of the Bliss–Tyler cor-

2 Carder, “Washington, D.C., and the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library”; “History,” Dumbarton Oaks website, www.doaks.org/about/history; “Catalogue of the Superb Collection of Rings.”

3 Letter RWB to RT, October 11, 1937; Letter RT to RWB, October 20, 1937; “Catalogue of the Superb Collection of Rings”; Zwirn, “Octagonal Marriage Ring.”



Figure 8.1. Octagonal Marriage Ring with Holy Site Scenes, ca. seventh century. Dumbarton Oaks, BZ.1947.15. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.

respondence. This collection contains nearly one thousand letters and telegrams between the Blisses and Royall Tyler from the years 1902 through 1953, gifted by Royall Tyler's son to the Harvard University Archives in the 1970s and digitized beginning in 2008. These letters include personal correspondence between friends as well as, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, conversations about potential art acquisitions. In addition to these letters, I rely upon files from the Dumbarton Oaks archives relating to Mildred Bliss' will in order to gain a fuller understanding of her holdings in addition to the formal Dumbarton Oaks collection.

Portable Wealth: Rings as Commodities

The Guilhou ring is somewhat typical of marriage rings of the seventh century—several extant rings depict the married couple and inscriptions blessing the couple to be married. Marriage rings such as this one were typically made of gold and therefore the cost of such a ring would only have been affordable to upper class families. For example, a lighter gold ring in the Dumbarton Oaks collection weighs approximately 4.4 grams or the weight of one solidus, which equates to around one month's average wages at the time, already out of reach for non-elites. However, the religious scenes depicted on the facets of the Guilhou ring's band; the greater weight of the ring; and the fact that, as observed in a more recent catalogue entry, the hollowed-out bodies of the bride and groom on the ring's bezel suggest that they previously held gemstones, likely indicate that this particular marriage ring was much more costly.⁴

⁴ Williams, "Women, Wealth, and the Late Antique Household," 20; Zwirn, "Octagonal Marriage Ring"; Alicia Walker noted that a similar ring found in a seventh-century archaeological context has been associated with the Byzantine emperor Constans II, and therefore this ring may also originate from the imperial circle, see Walker, "Marriage," n. 73.

Although marriage rings were not necessarily exchanged in betrothal or marriage ceremonies, they did play a role in the exchange of wealth involved in Byzantine marriages, and this ring could likely have served as a part of this exchange between members of a wealthy bridal couple. This function distinguishes the function of Byzantine marriage rings from those of marriage rings in early and high medieval Western Europe, where gifting of rings upon betrothal or marriage was not common.⁵ Grooms typically gave marriage jewellery to their brides, but women had to bring wealth to the marriage as well. Byzantine weddings were expected to be between social equals and Byzantine law protected women's dowries as inalienable, meaning husbands could not use or profit from them during the marriage. Though modern Western marriage practices typically do not include such an explicit exchange of wealth as dowries or bridal gifts, they do still involve financial dealings—particularly for the very wealthy. Prenuptial agreements, for example, are becoming increasingly popular in the United States.⁶

Just as in the medieval era, ownership of the Guilhou ring would continue to be limited to a small, wealthy elite in the twentieth century. At the 1937 auction, the ring sold for £1,120 (around £64,000 today). This was by far the highest price of any object in the auction, as well as being over three times the estimate that Sotheby's had communicated to Royall Tyler prior to the sale. Such an extreme mark-up caught the attention of, and drew alarm from, the Blissés and Tyler. Tyler wrote in a letter to Robert Bliss a few days after the sale: "I was horrified by the prices fetched by the Byzantine things at the Guilhou sale. It is dreadful that No 460 should have fetched £1120." He went on to express concern that Elie Bustros, from whom the Blissés were in the process of buying the Byzantine marriage belt (BZ.1937.33) that is a centrepiece of the Dumbarton Oaks museum's collection, would hear of the sale: "I only hope that the prices reached at the Guilhou sale will not come to Bustros's knowledge." In a letter the next day, Tyler wrote that he was "still suffering from the shock of No 460 having gone for £1120."⁷

Tyler's concern centred on what the sale price of the Guilhou ring would mean for the market in Byzantine art. Up to this point, the Blissés had benefited from the relatively lower prices of Byzantine pieces compared to the more popular Ancient or Renaissance artworks. Reiterating the poten-

⁵ See Chapters 1 and 3 in this volume.

⁶ Walker, "Marriage"; Williams, "Women, Wealth, and the Late Antique Household," 15–20; Waters, "Prenups Aren't Just for Rich People Anymore."

⁷ "Superb Collection of Rings," 240; Letter RT to RWB, October 20, 1937; Letter RT to RWB, November 16, 1937; Letter RT to RWB, November 17, 1937.

tial impact of the Guilhou sale on the marriage belt's price, Tyler wrote on November 20 of that same year: "I was really frightened lest [Bustros] might have got wind of the prices fetched at the Guichon [sic] sale, on the 11th, by the Byz. things. If that ring No. 460 (with the nielloed scenes) fetched £1120, which it did, what would the belt have fetched? Certainly more, I should say: perhaps twice as much." Two months later, Tyler reiterated the concern for the changing prices of Byzantine art: "The other disquieting thing that keeps recurring to my mind is the terrific price which [Jacob] Hirsch gave for that Byzantine ring in London. If that price is taken as a standard, then the Madonna [BZ.1938.62] might easily be worth, even to a dealer, more than what you paid for the round Emperor [BZ.1937.23]."⁸

Concern for the changing prices of artworks, and what they might mean for the Blisses' portfolio, were not unique to this one instance. Like the collecting of other wealthy cultural philanthropists, the Blisses' collecting was necessarily an economic process. The art market, like any other segment of the market economy, responded to changes in supply and demand. Due to the insular nature of the market for antiquities, buyers such as the Blisses yielded great influence. The Blisses' correspondence with Tyler at times reads as a Who's Who of early-twentieth-century wealth, with mentions of Andrew and Bunny Mellon, J. P. Morgan, and Arthur Sachs (of Goldman Sachs).⁹ Their letters frequently mention price negotiations for artworks and the effect of new archaeological finds on pricing for certain types of artifacts. These conversations bear an alarming casualness when one considers that in our time there have been growing demands for the return of cultural objects derived from illicit archaeological excavations.¹⁰

⁸ Letter RT to RWB, November 20, 1937; Letter RT to RWB, January 10, 1938.

⁹ Letter RT to MBB, March 14, 1931; Letter RT to MBB, June 17, 1929. The letter of March 14, 1931 contains an interesting discussion of the behaviour of art dealers trying to artificially influence the market: "I imagine that the Soviets, while very anxious to sell, are doing all they can to avoid their sales being talked about, and are only allowing people whom they regard as serious clients to see the important works they are offering for sale, in order to avoid the effect on the market which would be produced if it were generally known that they were selling on a large scale."

¹⁰ Anderson and Ivanova, eds., *Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline?* See especially "Introduction," 1–38; and in the same volume Winnik, "The South Kensington Museum," 145–52. An example of Royall Tyler and the Blisses conversations about price negotiations is in Letter MBB to RT, July 29, 1938: "But what can we do about those prices? It is too amusing his saying that Robert always beats him down. Of course he does. What a fool we should be if we followed Kelek's [Dikran Kelekian] first figures. And whereas the first figures may be put up so as to

Perhaps the Blisses were particularly attuned to getting a good deal on certain artworks due to the relatively recent growth of the Blisses' fortune. Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss's enormous wealth was primarily Mildred's. Her father, Demas Barnes, owned significant stock in the Centaur Company—a pharmaceutical manufacturer. On his death, in 1888, his stock went to Mildred's half-sister Cora Barnes, and on her death, in 1911, to Mildred. Mildred and her mother, Anna Blaksley Bliss, sold the stock in 1923 for \$13 million, and on Anna's death, in 1935, Mildred inherited more than \$12 million (\$260 million today).¹¹ Thus the considerable balance of the funds used by the Blisses to expand the Dumbarton Oaks collection came into their possession just two years before their attempted purchase of the Guilhou ring.¹²

Regardless of the reason for it, the Blisses and Tyler carefully considered the prices at which they would be willing to purchase even the most coveted items. As Robert Bliss wrote to Tyler in 1938, sometimes "risks of losing a fine thing have to be taken." The Blisses took such a risk in the case of the Guilhou ring, although they did pursue it even after the initial auction. In early December 1937, Robert wrote to Tyler that he had stopped by to see Jacob Hirsch and the ring, noting that "it is certainly a very fine object, but I do not yet feel like giving Hirsch the price he paid for it, plus a reasonable percentage ... I did not ask him what his selling price would be, but I did ask him how much he would ask for [a different ring from the auction], and he calmly said \$600 net; he paid £45 for it at the auction. For [another ring], for which he paid £52, he asked me \$1300." While we do not know the price Hirsch eventually sold the prized Guilhou ring for, Joseph Brummer—a dealer with galleries in New York and Paris from whom the Blisses frequently bought art—purchased the ring in 1943 from Aldo Jandolo for \$5,700 (over \$100,000 today) and sold it to Dumbarton Oaks for \$8,000 (around \$112,000 today) four years later. Seven years earlier, in 1940, Brummer had gifted the Blisses two simpler marriage rings (BZ.1940.32 and BZ.1940.33). Such gifts were a

enable him to graciously come down, that was certainly not the case with Hestia as he never came down and kept us some seventeen years!"

11 Carder, *A Home for the Humanities*, 5, 12; "Cora F. Barnes, Last Will and Testament, 1911," available at Ancestry.com; "Anna B. Bliss, Last Will and Testament, 1935," available at Ancestry.com; "Miss C. F. Barnes Left \$4,952,195"; "\$12,386,000 Estate Left by Mrs. Bliss."

12 "Cora F. Barnes, Last Will and Testament, 1911"; Anna B. Bliss, Last Will and Testament, 1935"; "Miss C. F. Barnes Left \$4,952,195"; "\$12,386,000 Estate Left by Mrs. Bliss."



Figure 8.2. Marriage Ring, ca. sixth–seventh century. Dumbarton Oaks, BZ.1969.77. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC. Reproduced with permission.

tool for cementing relationships with clients, paying off later when the clients purchased other more valuable works at higher prices. This strategy called back to the long history of patron–client relationships built on gift-giving, including in late antiquity where gift-exchange was integral to the formation of alliances and preservation of position in society. In the case of the Blisses' purchase of the Guilhou ring, Brummer's gifts bore fruit when he realized a forty percent profit on this sale. Though this sale took place after the transfer of Dumbarton Oaks to Harvard in 1940, it realized the ambition of the Blisses to own the exceptional marriage ring and concluded the collecting social life of this ring.¹³

A Ring in Good Company: Mildred Bliss's Personal Collection

Though exceptional, however, the Guilhou ring is far from the only example of a marriage ring in the Dumbarton Oaks collection. The collection has at least eight others, including another (BZ.1947.18) originally purchased by Jacob Hirsch at the Guilhou sale—for which Hirsch had asked Bliss for \$1300—and later purchased by Joseph Brummer, who sold it to Dumbarton Oaks (then part of Harvard University) in 1947.¹⁴ The last marriage ring to enter the Dumbarton Oaks collection (BZ.1969.77), itself had an interesting social life (Figure 8.2).

¹³ Letter RT to RWB, January 10, 1938; Brummer Gallery Records N5532; Messer, "Origen of Alexandria"; Brummer justified his high prices as part of a strategy to "have extremely cordial business relations with agents abroad ... To have such relations with these agents it is necessary that one purchase many objects of minor quality constantly in the hope that someday these people may have something extraordinary on which he shall have first call. All those unimportant pieces we are obliged to sell at a loss. It is therefore a matter of absolute necessity that we make profit on the few exceptional objects which we can secure," cited in Brennan, "The Brummer Gallery," 112.

¹⁴ The marriage rings in the Dumbarton Oaks collection are: BZ.1947.18, BZ.1953.12.3, BZ.1953.12.4, BZ.1953.12.8, BZ.1959.60, BZ.1961.3, BZ.1968.7, BZ.1969.77.

Included in Mildred Bliss's will, on her passing in 1969, were several pieces that would become part of the Dumbarton Oaks collection. Having transferred Dumbarton Oaks' collection to Harvard in 1940, the Blisses continued their personal collection—largely of furnishings—with the intent to donate them to Dumbarton Oaks on their deaths. One bequeathed piece was a Byzantine marriage ring Robert's sister Annie had gifted the couple on their wedding anniversary in 1958. Annie's gift resembles one potential original purpose of Byzantine marriage jewellery—a gift to congratulate, protect, and convey blessings upon the couple. It was also not the first collection item the Blisses received in connection to their marriage. On their wedding day itself, Mildred's mother Anna—who bequeathed her fortune to Mildred in 1935—gave the couple a Gothic tapestry (BZ.1908.01.(T)). This tapestry today is prominently displayed in the Dumbarton Oaks music room, once the Blisses' room for entertaining and the location of the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conversations—a diplomatic meeting that laid the groundwork for the formation of the United Nations. Still another gift came from Thomas Whittemore, an archaeologist and founder of the Byzantine Institute, who gifted the Blisses several small fragments from the Kariye Camii archaeological site for their fiftieth anniversary.¹⁵

This collection of marriage gifts reflects the varying meanings of their collections for the Blisses. While they held a genuine fascination with the Byzantine and Ancient American worlds, they were also wealthy collectors interested in portraying their wealth to their social world. In the same bequest that included the marriage ring from Annie Bliss and Whittemore's fragments, the art and furniture listed alone were worth nearly \$200,000, which is more than \$1.5 million in today's money. The probate record lists each item alongside its appraised value, akin to accountings of late antique dowries preserved in documentary papyri.¹⁶

As previously mentioned, the Blisses' collecting was also a thoroughly financial exercise, reflected in their concern for and haggling over prices. Placing their art collection in the context of their, and particularly Mildred's, broader financial holdings further reveals its significance as a financial legacy and as a tool of social power. Mildred and Robert's annual income was primarily passive income from stocks. Although Robert was employed as an ambassador, his annual salary would have paled in comparison to dividends

15 Probate Record for 1537 28th St, NW, Washington, DC, 1969, Blissiana, Folder: Bliss, Mildred Barnes: Estate, Dumbarton Oaks Institutional Archives, Washington DC.

16 Probate Record for 1537 28th St, NW, Washington, DC, 1969, Blissiana, Folder: Bliss, Mildred Barnes: Estate, DOIA, Washington DC.

from Mildred's inheritance. Consequently, changes in the market and regulations concerning capital gains could have implications for their collecting ambitions. In February 1931, Mildred passed on buying a rug from Asia Minor due to her fear that there would be "increasing taxation in the United States," but expressed hope that the Blisses' financial advisor would help limit the damage done. In considering the purchase of the tapestry "Fragments of a Hanging with Nereid" (BZ.1934.2), Mildred wrote to Tyler that "after seeing our lawyer and gaining some idea of what one's income is likely to be for 1932, we will cable [you]." While at times declines in the stock market limited the Blisses' purchasing, they were also able to take advantage of unstable market conditions due to the Great Depression and World War Two.¹⁷

In addition to their stock portfolio and art collection—of which personal ornaments were a prominent part—Mildred Bliss's own jewellery collection was extremely valuable. In January 1970, the Parke-Bernet gallery auctioned her personal collection of 112 pieces for over \$420,000, over \$3.3 million today. Dumbarton Oaks was the beneficiary of the sale. In an annotated copy of the auction catalogue, someone (perhaps an executor or lawyer handling Mildred's estate) included the appraisal value from the probate record, the price range suggested by Parke-Bernet, and the final sale value of each item. In a note included inside the inner cover, this same person has noted the exact number of items that sold below the value included in the probate record.¹⁸

Concern for an exact measure of the wealth stored in these jewels reveals that in materials as well as in function, Mildred's jewellery resembled that of the women of late antique society. While late antique women adorned themselves with jewels to signal wealth and the ability to afford expensive materials, the discovery of adornments in archaeological hoards alongside collections of gold coins suggests that they were also simply elements of a family fortune. Moreover, Mildred's most exquisite, and most valuable, pieces feature gems that in antiquity travelled for months from sources in India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and elsewhere. In fact, these materials remained so in fashion in the early twentieth century that Belle da Costa Greene, first director of the Morgan Library and herself an expert in illuminated manuscripts, owned a pair of Byzantine pearl and sapphire earrings. Similarly to Mildred Bliss,

17 Carder, *A Home for the Humanities*, 5, 12; Letter MBB to RT, February 14, 1931; Letter MBB to RT, November 11, 1931; Carder, "Washington D.C. and the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library."

18 "Parke-Bernet Sale to Benefit Harvard"; Correspondence Re: Estate, Blissiana, Folder: Bliss, Mildred Barnes: Estate, DOIA, Washington, DC.

who bequeathed her collection for the benefit of Dumbarton Oaks, Greene bequeathed her personal jewel collection to the Morgan Library to be sold with proceeds benefitting the Library.¹⁹

The highlights of the auction of Mildred Bliss's jewels included an unusual brooch shaped like a peacock feather made up of sapphires, emeralds, topazes, amethyst, and diamonds. Discussion of the brooch in contemporary newspapers solidified its status as a piece of valuable property, rather than merely a beautiful accessory. In 1970, a Tiffany's jewellery designer noted that the labour costs required to make such an object would be "prohibitively expensive" making it "flamboyant, but not economically sound." Such description reflects the Bliss's correspondence with Tyler over the feasibility of purchasing the Guilhou marriage ring at Hirsch's asking price.²⁰

As reported following the auction, the head of the jewellery department at Parke-Bernet noted the significance of the Bliss auction in establishing price points for coloured gems:

The big jewel market today is in coloured stones, but no one really knows the value of a ruby, for example. It's different with diamonds ... But the depth and quality of colour in a coloured stone cannot be measured. It has different esthetic appeals to different people. The Bliss collection is remarkable. We haven't had a sale with such a comprehensive spread of good colour stones since 1966. The fact that it drew high prices indicates that even in a tight money economy, coloured stones are holding their appeal.

The article went on to note that dealers at the auction house would be advising their associates worldwide to raise coloured gem prices as a result. Both the prices fetched by sought-after Byzantine art as well as by much-desired gems demonstrate how buyers and sellers influenced prices on the art market.²¹

Mildred Bliss's friends recalled seeing her wear the flamboyant brooch only once, and in general they were not aware of the size and value of the entire collection, because she did not wear much of it or speak of it often. Instead, Mildred's jewellery was largely treated as inherited wealth—she received much of it in her mother's will—and it remained unworn. And yet the value of her collection of jewels was somehow known. Following her death, numerous jewellers contacted the executors of her estate to express

19 Williams, "Women, Wealth, and the Late Antique Household," 19. Williams argues for a reinterpretation of late antique jewellery and household adornments as symbols of wealth; Belle da Costa Greene is the subject of a major 2024–2025 exhibition at the Morgan Library. See www.themorgan.org/belle-greene/exhibition.

20 Ross, "Rather Nice Jewels."

21 Nadel, "Bliss Auction Lifts Colored Gem Prices."

interest in handling the sale of her collection. Some had been party to earlier sales of smaller amounts of her jewellery. Others may have simply acted on the assumption that a woman of such great wealth would necessarily own significant, valuable adornments.²²

Mildred's primary ownership of much of the Bliss's wealth parallels the wealth of the ring's potential original owners. It also is a culmination of women's position as holders of wealth in Western culture for centuries prior. For example, the origin of the marker "Mrs." is not in representing marriage status but in recognizing certain property-owning women as "Mistress—shortened to Mrs." In early modern Britain, for example, women called Mrs. were primarily identified this way because they owned capital, regardless of whether they were married. Moreover, recent scholarship has shown a more insidious side to American women's wealth. White women—long thought by historians to be passive participants in the institution of slavery—were active participants and enslavers themselves.²³

Mildred Bliss was not alone as a controller of substantial wealth—just as her Byzantine counterparts were not. Indeed, she was not even alone in the world of twentieth-century art collecting. Other wealthy women collectors include Dominique de Menil and Helene Crocker—both of whom owned objects now in the Dumbarton Oaks collection.²⁴ For these women, their collections served as signifiers of status—both in evidencing their financial capability to engage in the trade of antiquities and in connoting their sophisticated interests, much as demonstrating one's *paideia* ("literacy") was a tool of elites in late antiquity. For their late antique counterparts, conveying knowledge of classical Greek and Roman mythologies through household objects and jewellery signalled sophistication and access to education.

* * *

The continued value of medieval rings and other jewellery—from a medieval transfer of property to the twentieth-century art market—offers the opportunity to reflect on the commodity value of such objects. While in their original Byzantine worlds, rings such as the Guilhou ring symbolized the

22 Ross, "Rather Nice Jewels"; "Anna B. Bliss, Last Will and Testament, 1935"; Correspondence Re: Estate, Blissiana, Folder: Bliss, Mildred Barnes: Estate, DOIA, Washington, DC.

23 Erickson, "Mistresses and Marriage," 39–57; Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*.

24 Menil's object is Loan.BZ.2000.001, a grooved turning key bit that fits into a seal ring, BZ.1958.19. Crocker's objects are BZ.1960.60 and BZ.1966.7.

wealth transfer present in marriage rites, in the twentieth century the art market dictated these rings' value, at times confounding the expectations of seasoned collectors such as the Blisses and Tyler. These rings became part of substantial collections that facilitated wealth transfer over generations—whether to Ernest Guilhou's heirs or to the beneficiaries of Dumbarton Oaks research fellowships in the present day. Collectors such as the Blisses were keenly aware of the financial implications of their acquisitions, considering them alongside personal wealth that, in the case of Mildred Bliss, included her own inherited jewellery collection. Alongside their financial understanding of their collection, the Blisses and Tyler appreciated the rings' aesthetic value as they sought to create a collection of only high quality, beautiful items. The later lives of these rings can therefore be understood as legacies of multiple kinds—a testament to both the collectors' wealth as well as their elite status as appreciators of far-off worlds.

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