



1

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3

Of History and Identity

In recent years, Blackamoor jewellery has become controversial in pop culture. But as *Nia Tahani* writes, the art has a complicated history that demands serious engagement—and curiosity.

My experience as *the other* in the vintage and antique fine jewellery landscape has, in part, been a yearning to connect with those who look like me, a Black person, objects of adornment notwithstanding. In a world where collectors of the diaspora are few and far between, Blackamoor jewellery—generally speaking, jewellery depicting people of African descent—has offered me a complicated kind of familiarity.

Blackamoor is, at root, a European art form. The term traces back to the exonym Moor, a label for the Arab and African Muslim rulers of the Iberian peninsula. In Italy, *moro* or *moretto*—plural *moretti*, meaning “dark-skinned”—became part of the language around these figures and still echoes in the Venetian jewellery later repopularised in the 20th century by



MOOR IS MOOR

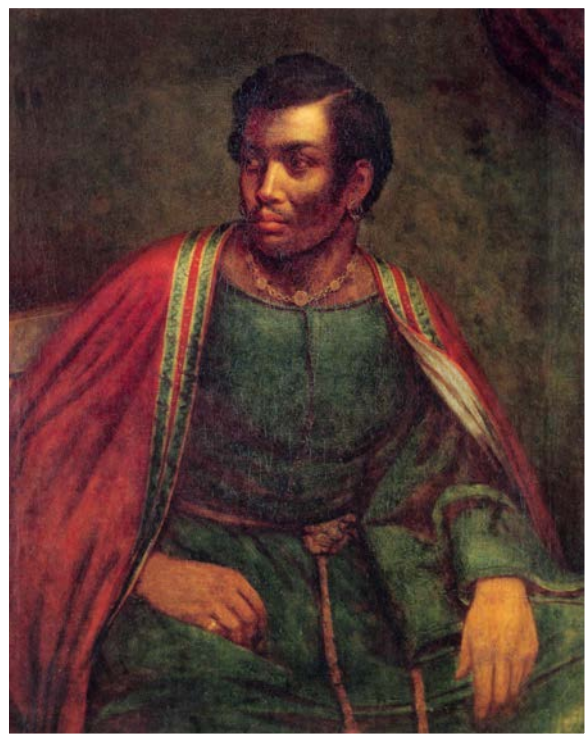
Jewellery scholar Nia Tahani collects and sells fine Blackamoor pieces dating from the 18th to 20th centuries.

Venetian firms Nardi and Codognato. From the 15th century on, as anti-Moor sentiment grew and Europe moved towards greater religious and ethnic homogeneity, many Moors resettled elsewhere, particularly in what is now Italy and Turkey.

As a collector and jewellery scholar, I have long admired the handiwork of gem engravers, especially those Renaissance and Victorian hardstone cameos carved from vitreous agate and sardonyx, set in ornate goldwork. These time-intensive glyptographs are already rare, the most common subjects being neoclassical portraits of white people. The Blackamoor jewel is rarer still. For me, rarity holds a particular charge. In a field where I have felt like an exception, here was an image of Blackness rendered in fine jewellery.

When I started an Instagram account called The Gem Corps in 2015, it was initially a post-public relations career outlet for waxing poetic on fine jewellery. Soon after, Clint Jack, an antique jewellery and watch dealer in the UK, appeared in my feed as Blackamooruk. Like me, Clint “saw the political context” of Blackamoor, but also its “workmanship, the symbolism and the theatrical elegance”, as he told me.

So why, then, do we allow complexity when confronting some of history’s most painful and contested subjects, and deny it for Blackamoor jewellery? Certainly some pieces of jewellery that are categorised as “Blackamoor”, featuring caricatures or grotesque depictions of racist tropes



A COMPLEX PROFILE
 1. Cameo brooch, c1860. 2. Georgian cameo ring. 3. 19th-century cameo in chalcedony with Tahitian pearls. 4. *Ira Aldridge as Othello*, by Henry Perronet Briggs, c1830. 5. Victorian carved jasper Blackamoor cameo. 6. 1960s ebony moretto and Georgian chatelaine seal fob. 7. 1960s Italian gold and coral moretto.

interrogation of Blackamoor artforms. Popular e-commerce platforms began banning pieces. On social media, where people now discover estate jewellery, the absence of breadcrumbs—a simple hashtag such as #blackamoor—made these rare jewels even harder to find. Fear entered the room: fear of being deemed politically incorrect.

The field of Black people deeply studied in jewellery history who publicly engage the topic is extraordinarily small. Tanzy Ward, author, antique jeweller and historic preservationist, is one such voice. “Many times when I’ve stumbled upon Blackamoor cameo collections, it was in the possession of white people and they’re fascinated with Black history too.” Tanzy had observed the same thing that I’d noticed about Blackamoor jewellery collectors—they’re predominantly of European descent. But the number of Black collectors continues to grow.

As a Black woman, I don’t come to these objects from a position of neutrality, nor do I pretend to. My relationship to Blackamoor jewellery has been shaped by identity, scholarship, professional experience and the discipline of an eye that is actively cataloguing history. I know what it is to encounter an object that feels familiar in one register and fraught in another. I know what it is to resist both easy celebration and easy condemnation.

So what of Blackamoor’s future? Estate jewellery dealer and Blackamoor collector Louis Briscoe provides some insight: “I have a daughter and I want her to understand things from all sides, all perspectives. Her life as a result will be much more enriched.”

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education The Gem Corps provided about these pieces, in my mind they were examples of colonisers mocking people of African descent,” she says.

When Princess Michael of Kent wore a Nardi *moretto* brooch to a 2017 Christmas luncheon attended by Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, the incident sparked widespread criticism as well as a broader

My journey with Blackamoor jewellery has taught me that the most responsible way to engage such objects is through seriousness, curiosity and a belief in the possibility of evolution. In a culture that rewards hot and quick takes, I remain committed to the slower work of study. It’s not the easiest position to hold. But it is, I believe, the most enriching. **VF**

(savage, mammy, servant, delinquent), evoke unpleasant visceral responses and rightfully so. “If I see that kind of stuff, I tend to not want to buy anything from that store or dealer,” says Ashley Hicks, estate jewellery seller and Blackamoor collector, on the less desirable spectrum of the motif. Some might argue that those pendants, charms and brooches are not “true Blackamoor”. In my opinion these pieces should not be excluded from the discussion, but personally I do not collect them.

Along my journey as a jeweller and lecturer, I came to collect and sell fine Blackamoor jewellery, spanning from the Georgian era through to the mid-century. My approach is grounded in the idea of responsible stewardship as a necessity of preservation. So in 2023, I began building awareness about Blackamoor jewellery on a foundation of historical context, which developed into conversations via Instagram Lives, posts and messages with dealers, collectors, jewellery enthusiasts, designers and thought-leaders in the art world.

Two things quickly came into focus. First, the controversy was producing an erasure