



A DAZZLING DISPLAY

The latest Bulgari retrospective charts the trajectory of a contemporary legend.

BY DIANA JARRETT



Each sparkling gem tells a story at “The Art of Bulgari: La Dolce Vita & Beyond, 1950 - 1990,” the latest exhibition to hit the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Through Feb. 17, 2014, the Golden Gate Park-based museum will host an exquisitely curated, 150-piece presentation chronicling four key decades in the history of the venerable Italian jeweler. Visitors can reflect on pivotal milestones for the family-owned company beginning with the post-war economic upswing of the early 1950s and continuing through the 1970s and 1980s, when the brand’s embrace of modernism broadened the meaning of high jewelry, making it fashionably acceptable to wear decadent pieces every day.

Since Bulgari’s inception, the company has flaunted distinctive traits that have endeared its pieces to serious collectors. The jeweler’s pairing of cabochon-cut gemstones, which feature flat

undersides and a polished rather than faceted round dome, with precious stones, was considered iconoclastic at the time. Meanwhile, its bold coupling of disparate stone types and analogous colors—much like those found in the brand’s legendary bib neckpiece, which includes turquoise, emerald and amethyst—stunned fans of traditional jewelry pieces.

Most significantly, Bulgari’s pieces express a fusion of art and cultural narrative, thus reflecting the decades in which they were created. Martin Chapman, curator of European decorative arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and a co-curator of the de Young show, sees Bulgari’s relevance as essential to the company’s success.

“It was [Bulgari’s] extraordinary ability to respond to fashion trends, whether with long gem-set sautoirs in the 1970s worn with

then-popular pantsuits, or snake bracelets, which have since become Bulgari classics,” he explains of the company’s persistent influence.

When that influence expanded overseas from Italian film goddesses to Hollywood divas like Elizabeth Taylor, the brand exploded. “Seeing Bulgari jewelry on Sophia Loren or Gina Lollobrigida boosted the brand,” Chapman reflects. “Before Bulgari expanded abroad in the 1970s, it was the jeweler of Rome. So when jewelry lovers visited Rome they would go to Bulgari.” In fact, several of Taylor’s most extravagant pieces from Richard Burton are featured in the exhibit.

Later, the shoulder-padded 1980s played the perfect foil to the Italian jeweler’s voluptuously proportioned gemstone chokers. “I think your jewelry is the ‘80s,” Andy Warhol once remarked to company heir Nicola Bulgari.



1. Emerald and diamond necklace, 1961
2. Multicolor Carré brooch, 1987
3. Model Marisa Berenson in Bulgari, 1969
4. Actress Sophia Loren in Bulgari, 1960
5. Serpenti bracelet-watch, 1967
6. Playing Card sautoir, 1972
7. Tubogas choker, 1974

Such a rare assemblage of jewels sourced from multiple historic periods took some effort to compose. Chapman was directly involved with securing several of the loans in California. The rest of the items, many of them storied accessories with lengthy histories, primarily arrived from Bulgari's Heritage collection in Rome.

"I have so many favorites, but the grand necklace acquired by [Revlon mogul Charles Revson's wife] Lyn Revson is iconic for the 1960s, and studded with cabochon gemstones in those unusual color combinations of amethyst, emerald and turquoise," Chapman comments of one such collectible. "It's also beautifully made. In the show display, you can see how the back was almost as important as the front to the jeweler making it."

The show also promises an exclusive peek at a handful of rare stones. According to Chapman,

the central stone in a brooch that once belonged to Taylor is a treasure. "The most remarkable gemstone in the exhibit is probably the emerald in the brooch that Richard Burton gave to Elizabeth Taylor for their engagement," he says. "The British Gemmological Institute says it is one of the finest emeralds known due to its color and clarity."

While visitors to the exhibit can expect to witness Bulgari's evolutionary process, they'll also be astounded by the breadth of the presentation's offerings. The wide array of forms and styles from over the decades, Chapman says, signals the creativity and flexibility of Bulgari as a design house. He adds, "The extraordinary variety of types, from formal high jewelry like the Taylor emerald necklace to simple pieces made in the form of candy or ice cream cones deliver a surprise in every room of the exhibition." M



Bulgari: From Past to Present

1881: After arriving in Rome, founder Sotirio Bulgari opens several silver and antique shops.

1910: Along with sons Giorgio and Costantino, Bulgari transitions to working primarily with precious gems and jewelry.

1932: Bulgari's sons assume control of the operation, and the brand's pieces begin to bear distinctive traits like geometric motifs and dramatic combinations of colored stones.

1940s: The company transitions to using predominately yellow gold along with more natural shapes.

1950s: The prevailing optimism of the postwar period inspires Bulgari's profuse uses of precious white metals and diamonds.

1960s: During the Dolce Vita era, Italian film goddesses like Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida boost awareness of the brand, prompting American film icons to don their own Bulgari pieces.

1970s: The third generation of the Bulgari family begins to helm the operation, infusing experimental exuberance into the brand with pop art and Americana themes.

1980s/1990s: The brand's frequent use of yellow gold and precious stones cements the signature Bulgari look in collections inspired by nature and history.

2000s/2010s: Today's Bulgari nods to its stellar past with cabochons, updated serpent cuffs and the extravagant use of colored gemstones set in lacy floral necklaces.



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THE AUTHOR'S
HIDDEN LIFE

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THE ALOHA WAY

SHOPPING
THE WORLD'S
HAUTE SPOTS

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