

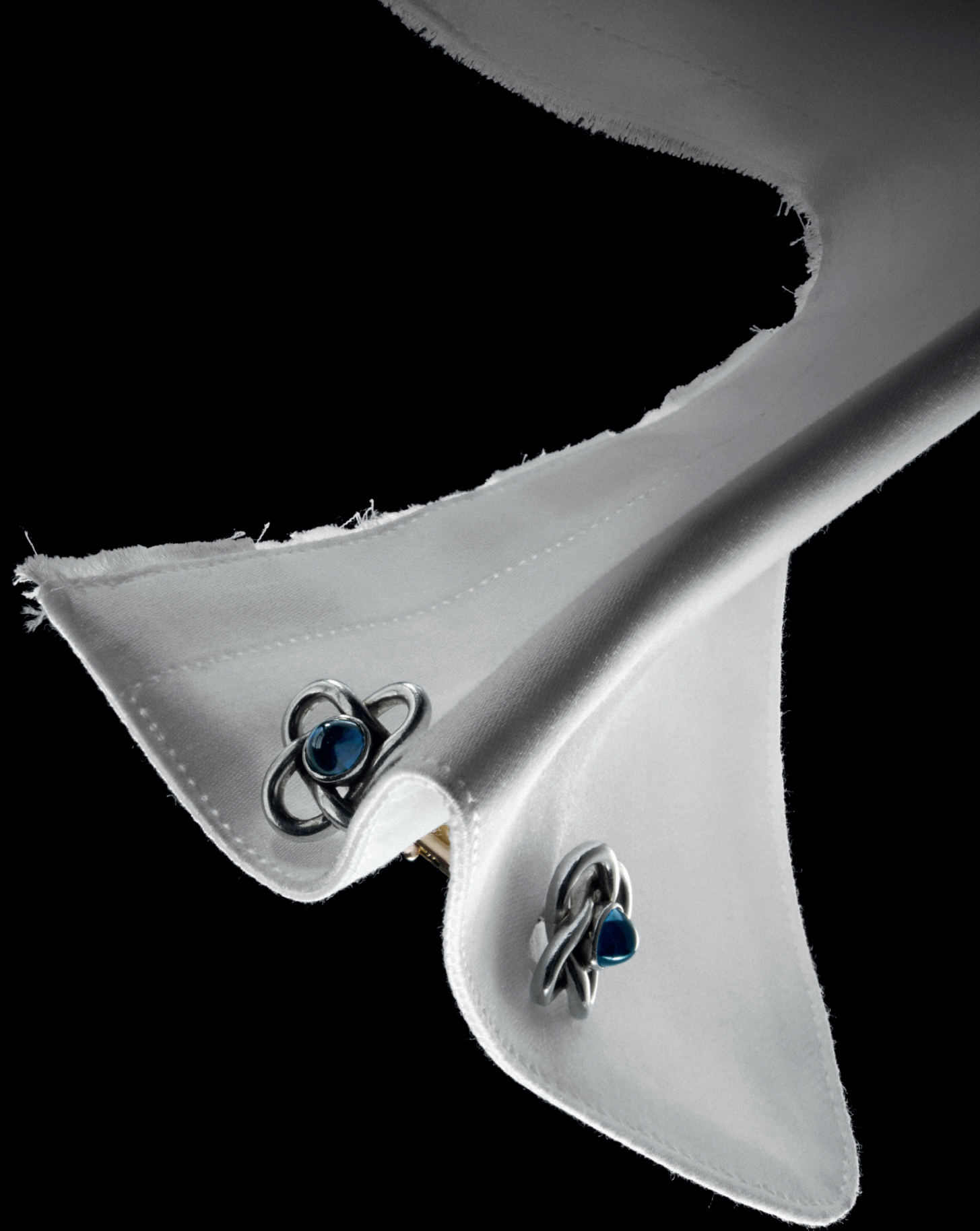
LITTLE *GEMS* BIG STORIES



AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS
52° 22' 23" N, 4° 53' 32" E
PHOTOGRAPHY BART OOMES @ WITMAN KLEIPOOL
POSTPRODUCTION DOG POSTPRODUCTION
WORDS MATTHEW CURLEWIS

Small and insignificant? To the untrained eye, perhaps –
but watch out for flashes of rubies and diamonds.

PLATINUM AND 18K YELLOW GOLD WITH SAPPHIRES, ART DECO



Often misunderstood as being fussy or unnecessarily formal, cufflinks are, in fact, neither. Instead, they can be one of few options for men to express themselves through jewelry. Collectors of unique vintage pieces (like the ones pictured on the following pages) are willing to part with tens of thousands for them. But even a humble silk knot can do a lot. A story about two-faced jewelry.

Part of the enduring appeal of cufflinks, to designers, is the specific challenges they pose. Size constraints dominate their design. The stage for a cufflink to perform on is always small – a mere cuff, often partially obscured by a jacket sleeve. The links themselves must lie smartly on the sleeve. And whether there are four identical faces or different ones, or two faces with unadorned backs, the images must relate to each other aesthetically.

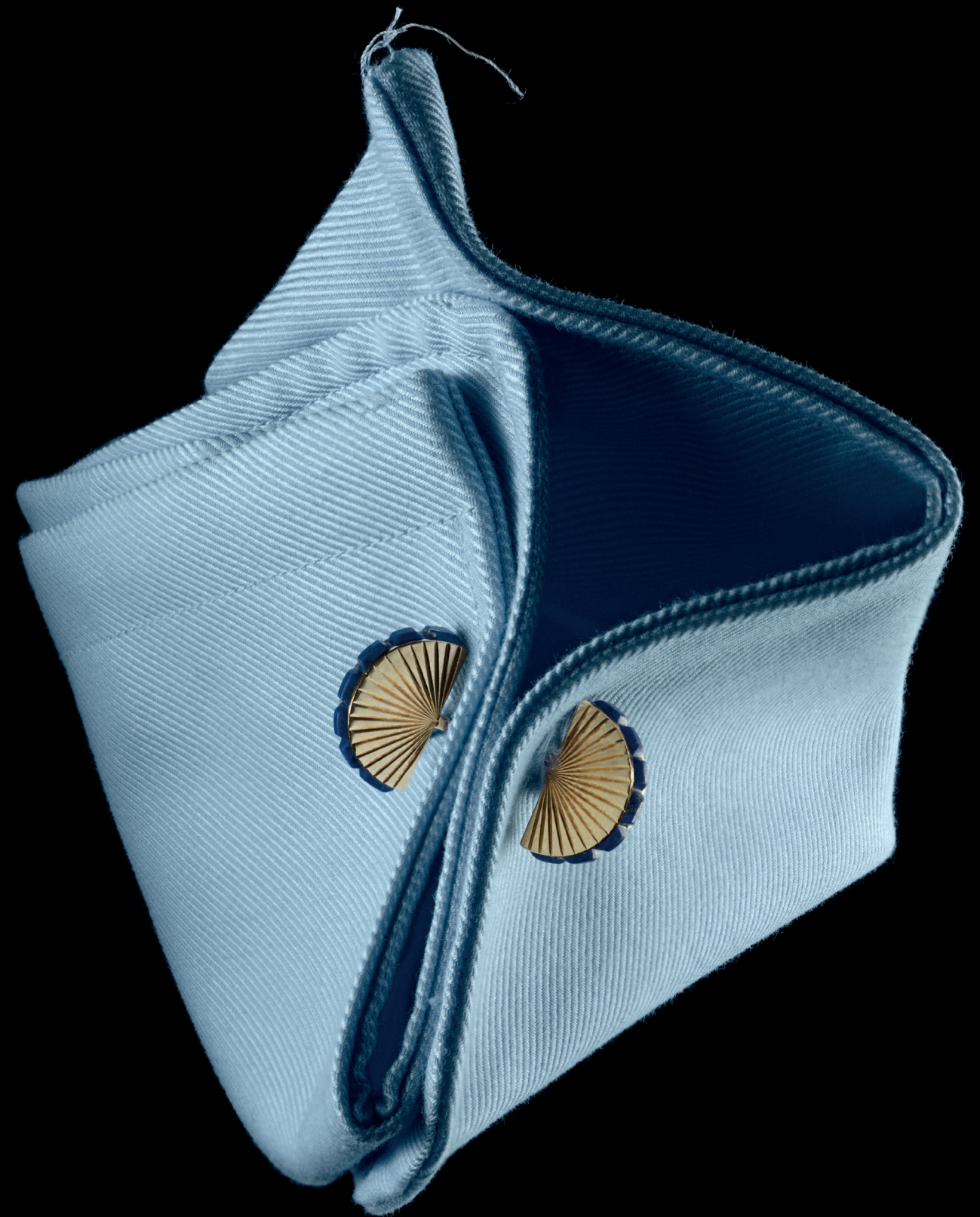
For their wearers, the appeal lies elsewhere: ‘The best part for me is that cufflinks are jewelry,’ says Mart van Drunen. The appraisal expert, jeweler and owner of Amsterdam’s Statement Jewels, which carries a very diverse collection of cufflinks, is fascinated by them. ‘As a man today, it is rarely acceptable to wear jewels. The standard items are a nice watch and a wedding band, and that’s about it, except for cufflinks. For a man to wear a jeweled brooch, earring, bracelet, ring or necklace – it’s just not done in regular social and work settings.’

Daniel Girod, independent jewelry expert, agrees: ‘Cufflinks are the only piece of jewelry we can wear without being seen to be “overdressing.”’ ‘The range of men’s style options in today’s corporate world is quite limited,’ adds Adam Patrick, manager at New York’s renowned A La Vieille Russie, a Fifth-Avenue fine arts and antiques dealer specializing in Russian treasures and antique jewelry. ‘Cufflinks allow you to express yourself.’

“Basically, the women got all the jewels – and men got left with cufflinks”

As a result, the design possibilities for the lone pieces of jewelry are exploited to the fullest. ‘We recently sold two pairs that were perfect miniatures of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings,’ says Patrick. ‘They were created when those buildings were completed. These are both history capsules and wearable, very small artworks – when you whip something like that out of your sleeve it’s a great conversation starter.’ Girod agrees: ‘I used to have a pair that contained antique, miniature paintings – people found that quite fascinating.’

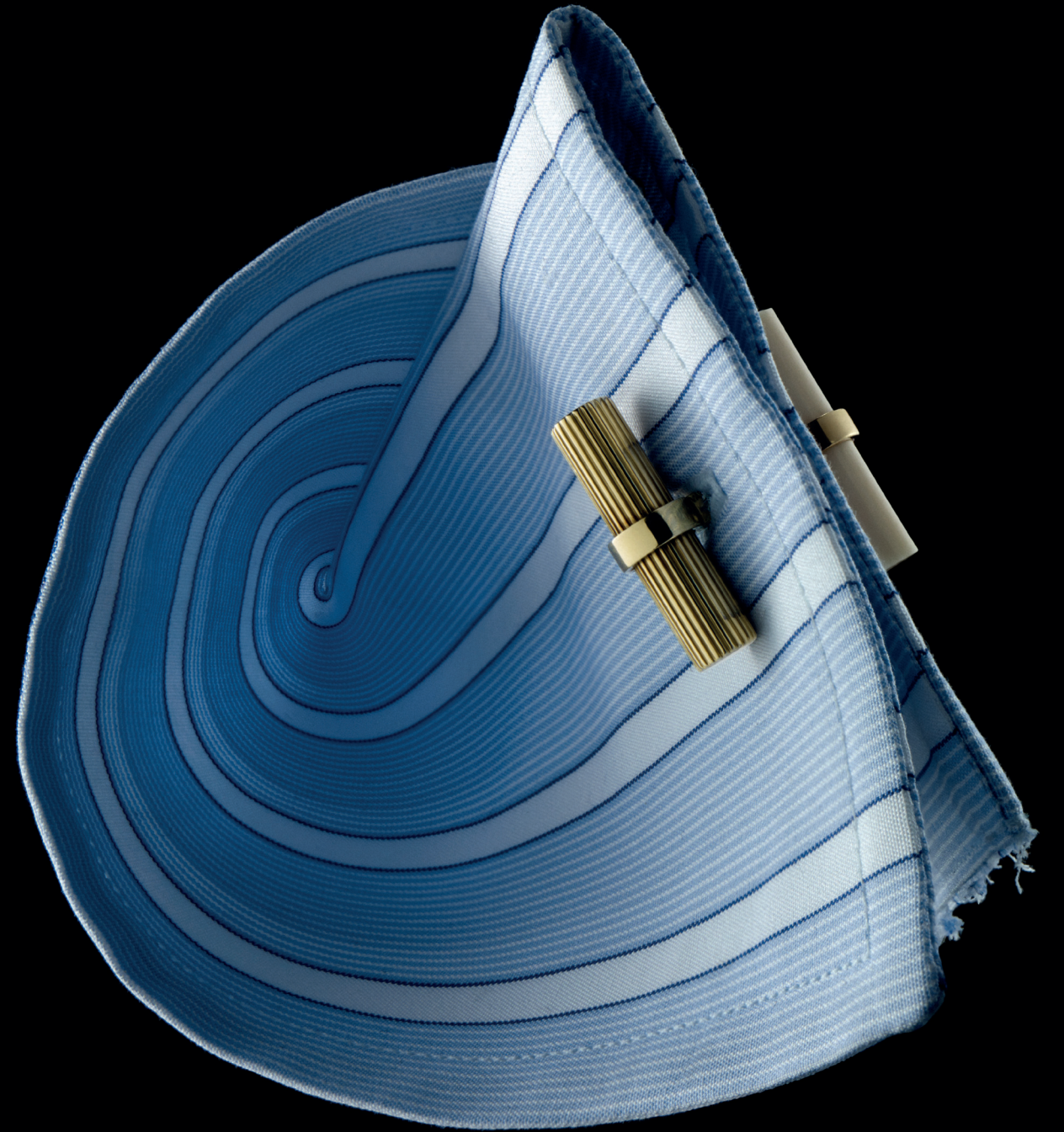
The little conversation starters have come a long way indeed. It was only after the late Middle Ages that men’s shirts evolved from their existence as undergarments. The visible areas – neck, sleeves and front – began to get decorated with frills and embroideries, with fabrics and styles functioning as markers: the more lavish they were, the greater the wearer’s wealth and status. ►



18K YELLOW GOLD WITH LAPIS LAZULI, CARTIER PARIS, 1930S



18K YELLOW GOLD WITH SNAKEWOOD, SOUBRENIE ET BOIS, 1970S



18K YELLOW GOLD AND IVORY, VAN CLEEF & ARPELS, 1930S



PLATINUM, 18K YELLOW GOLD, DIAMONDS AND GARNETS, 1940S

18K YELLOW GOLD WITH BLUE AND RED ENAMEL, DAVID WEBB, 1960S-1990S



18K YELLOW GOLD AND ELEPHANT HAIR, BOUCHERON, 1972



14K YELLOW GOLD WITH CITRINE, AMETHYST, PERIDOT AND ORANGE CITRINE, 1950S

Eventually, sleeve frills streamlined and begat cuffs – separate fabric constructions to ‘end’ the sleeves. These cuffs had small openings and were held together by strings to prevent flapping. Today’s decorative cufflinks first appeared in the mid-1600s, when fashionable men moved on from strings to wearing pairs of identical, or similar, buttons joined by a short chain, using the twin or double-sided cufflink system that is still popular today.

Somewhere on the way, other jewelry options for men diminished: ‘Before the early 1800s, men wore a lot more jewelry,’ says van Drunen. ‘Jeweled buckles, belts, big rings, bracelets, necklaces – it was a way of showing off status. At that time a king’s diamonds would always be bigger than his queen’s; the same for maharajahs and maharanis. What shifted though was that during the 1800s, the wife became the way for the husband to show his status. It was his wealth – but displayed on her, which leads us all the way to today. Basically, the women got all the jewels – and men got left with cufflinks.’

“They can function as a message, a sort of code for you to transmit a passion of yours”

And so they’d better be put to use. ‘Cufflinks can lend an outfit a unique and individual look. They can tsay something about a person’s sense of status and style,’ says van Drunen. ‘These days you can simply display your playfulness or sense of humor. I have a pair of laughing skulls I wear. Some people don’t get them at all. Others think it’s wonderful that diamonds drop into their eye sockets when you tilt their jaws open. What better way to have a bit of fun with a stylish accessory?’

In addition, cufflinks can work as tiny beacons. ‘Something I enjoy,’ says Girod, ‘is that they’re a bit secretive. They can function as a message, a sort of code for you to transmit a passion of yours, or a profession perhaps. For example, I created a pair for myself of 18-karat yellow gold and blackened silver auctioneer’s hammers, linked by gold chains. I had worked in auction houses for many years – that was my world. And when I was outside of that world, those cufflinks were my coded message about my profession.’ Van Drunen adds: ‘Stockbrokers can wear bulls and bears, oilmen can wear derricks; eyes with a teardrop can signal the wearer is in mourning.’

The message can even get political: ‘When the women’s suffrage movement was getting going in England and America in the 1890s, it wasn’t “done” in many circles to support their cause,’ says van Drunen. ‘But the suffragettes’ colors were green and purple. As a man, by wearing cufflinks in those colors you could signify, on the down-low, that you were a supporter.’

With all that history and storytelling, it’s no surprise that cufflinks are beloved by collectors all over the world. ‘Cufflinks sort of fly in under the radar,’ says van Drunen. ‘The options of what’s available are endless.’ And there’s another reason: ‘They’re the perfect thing to collect because’ – van Drunen pauses to drop an exquisite pair of art deco platinum and sapphire cufflinks into a tiny silk bag – ‘they’re so small!’

Over the phone from Surrey in the UK, Blane Thompson from antique jewelers and valuers Thompson and Oliver says: ‘I’d say I have three main client groups: One is the older generation who only buy occasionally. They already have the hand-me-downs. Insignia from the regiment – that sort of thing. Another

is financial business types who wear cufflinks regularly in their work setting, some of them more expressively than others. And the third is young collectors who see that cufflinks are great for dressing up. My twenty-one-year-old son, for instance, will wear cufflinks whenever he can get his hands on them!’

‘Qualities I look for as a buyer,’ says Patrick, ‘are rarity and exceptional craftsmanship. I find that people either know cufflinks, or they don’t. Some simply haven’t been exposed to cufflinks or even double cuff shirts, so don’t know what they are or what to do with them. But for the ones who know, they love their cufflinks. And then a very small group of my clients *really* love their cufflinks, and are huge collectors. And for that group it’s tricky – exceptional-quality cufflinks are actually very hard to find. Give me a million dollars to spend on “normal” cufflinks, and I can do that for you, no problem. But ask me to spend a million on unusual, exceptionally made cufflinks? It will take me a long time to spend that money. These pieces are very, very difficult to find.’

Expensive rarities aside, cufflinks are gaining popularity as everyday wear. ‘More men wear them these days – sometimes just silk knots, but even then those little splashes of bright color are great,’ says Girod. And Thompson adds: ‘I’m a pretty casual dresser, often in corduroy trousers and a shirt – and cufflinks can make you look chic without being flashy. They don’t have to be expensive, but they should certainly be interesting. There are plenty of plain cufflinks around – but they get noticed when they’re a bit different, like small works of art.’

Not only do cufflink designs vary wildly, there are also several ways to link the cuff. ‘I prefer double-sided,’ says Thompson. ‘I don’t like the pivot kind with only one side.’ And Girod: ‘Double-sided, definitely. Linked by chains. The best European or American cufflinks always have two pieces to them. I never wear single-sided.’

So you can use pieces of string, silk knots, or some of the various systems of cufflinks made in the last 400 years. But what makes a statement of now? Pondering this for a moment, van Drunen says: ‘Black rubber, steel, blackened gold, and black diamonds – those are four elements you’re seeing in cufflinks of today that really position them as now.’ ♦

All cufflinks via *Statement Jewels* ▶ statementjewels.eu

PLAIN PIVOT

Consists of a 'viewing' side and a plain, functional 'back' side. Normally, this type will have its viewing side immobile, attached to a rod or bridge connector with its closing side capable of pivoting 90 degrees in two directions. It is the system most in use today for standard cufflinks.

PIVOT, SUPPORT BACK STYLE

A pivot link as described above, but the 'back' side is slightly decorated.

WRAP-AROUND

A band that wraps either partially or totally around the side of the cuff.

BARBELL

Resembles a barbell, i.e. a straight or sometimes bent bar or rod with a shape at both ends.

BARBELL WITH MOVABLE PIECES

Barbell where one end can be detached and re-attached by screwing or clicking.


TWIN or DOUBLE-SIDED

Two ends of equal shape and size joined together by a chain, bar, rod, bridge or wrench.


FLIP or STIRRUP

A bar with rings at either end, which can fold flat. This is inserted through the buttonholes, and then the rings are 'flipped' up at 90 degrees.

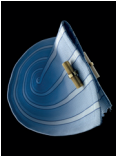
CUFFLINKS CREDITS




1930S; ART DECO PLATINUM WITH SAPPHIRES; TWIN SYSTEM LINKED WITH 18K YELLOW GOLD CHAINS; AMERICAN. THE ART DECO PERIOD WAS ALL ABOUT SPEED AND PROGRESS – THESE CUFFLINKS REFLECT THE TIMES IN THEIR DEPICTION OF PROPELLERS.




1930S; CARTIER PARIS 18K YELLOW GOLD; BARBELL SYSTEM WITH LAPIS LAZULI; FRENCH. ART DECO FEATURED MANY SUB-STYLES – THESE SHOW THE ORIENTAL INFLUENCE OF FANS.




1930S; VAN CLEEF & ARPELS 18K YELLOW GOLD BARBELL SYSTEM WITH ONE REMOVABLE BATON – SHOWN ARE IVORY AND YELLOW GOLD, BUT BATONS ARE ALSO AVAILABLE IN MATERIALS SUCH AS LAPIS LAZULI, MALACHITE, TORTOISE SHELL, ROCK CRYSTAL, TURQUOISE, TIGER EYE, OLIVE WOOD, ROSE WOOD, GREEN CHALCEDONY, WHITE GOLD AND HEMATITE. SHOWN HERE IS AN EARLY ITERATION OF THIS SYSTEM. LATER VERSIONS FROM THE '60S ONWARDS, FROM VAN CLEEF & ARPELS AND OTHER BRANDS, ALLOW INTERCHANGEABILITY OF ALL FOUR BATONS.




1940S; PLATINUM, 18K YELLOW GOLD, DIAMONDS AND GARNETS; TWIN SYSTEM LINKED WITH YELLOW GOLD CHAINS; AUSTRIAN. A PRE-WAR INDUSTRIAL, YET LUXURIOUS DESIGN.




1950S; 'HARLEQUIN'-STYLE 14K YELLOW GOLD TWIN SYSTEM LINKED WITH YELLOW GOLD CHAINS; WITH CITRINE, AMETHYST, PERIDOT AND ORANGE CITRINE; ALL INTERCHANGEABLE; GERMAN. THIS STYLE, STILL IN PRODUCTION TODAY, HAS BEEN POPULAR SINCE THE 1850S.



1970S; SOUBRENIE ET BOIS 18K YELLOW GOLD AND SNAKEWOOD; SUPPORT BACK PIVOT SYSTEM; FRENCH. THE LARGE RECTANGULAR OR 'LOZENGE' SHAPE IS TYPICALLY '70S.



1972; BOUCHERON RARE WRAP-AROUND LINK SYSTEM WITH 18K YELLOW GOLD AND ELEPHANT HAIR; FRENCH. THE '70S MARKED A MOVE AWAY FROM PRECIOUS STONES TO MORE ALTERNATIVE MATERIALS SUCH AS WOOD, ELEPHANT HAIR, IVORY, TIGER EYE AND MALACHITE.



IN PRODUCTION FROM THE '60S-'90S; DAVID WEBB 18K YELLOW GOLD WITH RED AND BLUE ENAMEL; SUPPORT BACK PIVOT SYSTEM; AMERICAN. INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE AS 'SILK KNOT' CUFFLINKS, BUT HERE RENDERED IN DELUXE MATERIALS.

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