

NOBLE JEWELS: NORTH AFRICAN JEWELRY AND PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE XAVIER GUERRAND HERMÈS COLLECTION

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Reviewed by Valerie Behiery

Sometimes the story around art becomes an integral part of it. This is clearly applicable to *Noble Jewels*, an exhibit of late 19th and early 20th century North African jewelry and photography from the collection of Xavier Guerrand-Hermès, present director and vice-president of Hermès. That the fifth generation descendant of the famous family, still vital arbiters of taste and fashion, amassed a huge collection of such artifacts is indubitably as exotic to western eyes as the Orientalist fantasies conjured up by the artifacts themselves. Monsieur Guerrand-Hermès bequeathed a part of his vast collection a few years ago to the Museum for African Art in New York, the institution which has organized the touring exhibit that was on view at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn this summer before traveling to Philadelphia. If the collection indeed inspired by the years Xavier Guerrand-Hermès spent living in Morocco might be seen as the continuation of French colonial fascination with North Africa, its documentary aspect and its emphasis on the region's ethnic and religious diversity more properly reflect the philanthropic collector's interest and implication in various seminal interfaith and peace organizations.

Noble Jewels contains approximately thirty photographs taken for the most part by well-known early European photographers in Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. These highlight the multicultural reality of the Maghreb as the viewer encounters Arabs, Jews, sub-Saharan Africans and Imazighen, better-but erroneously-known as Berbers. They also provide vignettes of contemporary life and therefore help the visitor to contextualize the artifacts. The small number of pseudo-documentary images of racial types and Arab women are obviously and inherently problematic. However despite being underwritten by notions of European ethnic and cultural superiority, they nonetheless offer some factual information on dress and adornment, which is particularly important because in North Africa, as in many other parts of the Muslim world, dress and adornment overlap. The photographs evincing how fibulae, belts, earrings, headbands, and necklaces were worn and how they formed an integral part of dress therefore make the show more accessible and of greater interest to the general public.

The approximately eighty pieces of jewelry are almost exclusively Moroccan. Only a very few pieces are unequivocally urban in design and craftsmanship, for example the gold plated ornate belt buckle decorated with blue and green enamel designs, or the charming conical silver hat once worn by Muslim and Jewish ladies and whose semi-naturalistic floral arabesque designs still echo much earlier Mediterranean artistic traditions. The rest of the artifacts are Amazigh (Berber) or fashioned in Amazigh style and thus reflect the tastes and productions of semi-nomadic and rural contexts. Spread across North Africa from Egypt to Morocco, the Imazighen indigenous to the region have always possessed a strong sense of their singular cultural identity,

but they too have historically drawn upon and assimilated motifs and techniques, not only from surrounding Arab and Turkish Muslim urban cultures, but also from the rich enduring legacy of



Fibulae, 20th c., Marrakech, Morocco, gold-plated silver, coins.



Left. Hand pendant (Khamsa) with Six-Pointed Star, 19th or 20th c., Morocco, Silver plate



Right. Hand pendant (Khamsa) with Salamander Motif, 19th or 20th, Morocco, Silver, bronze.

the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. In short, indigenous traditions like urban ones are dynamic and both are enriched by and constantly refashioned through cross-cultural interactions.

In Amazigh culture, jewelry possesses functions beyond embellishment. As part of a woman's dowry, it affords some economic power to women. Jewelry also serves to mark social status and

group affiliation, as well as to protect from harm. Stylistically, and again reflecting aesthetic trends found throughout the Muslim world but also perhaps throughout Africa, Amazigh adornment shows a proclivity for abundance and the ingenious combination of disparate elements into a harmonious whole. Like clothing, jewelry is donned in layers with amber and now plastic bead bracelets paired up with well-crafted enameled silver ones.

Noble Jewels covers a wide range of production types and thereby offers a realistic portrayal of Amazigh culture rather than only displaying, as museums often do, the more luxurious artifacts. This is most apparent in the necklaces on view most of which have been strung by the women themselves. Amazigh women express their creativity and individuality through color, rhythm, and the juxtaposition or not of coral, amber, amazonite, glass and shell beads with silver coins, and silver round or square pendants bearing a variety of traditional geometric designs. One of the most beautiful necklaces is a two-tiered short necklace, each tier made up of a triple strand of naturally shaped coral beads from which hang tear shaped silver pendants each decorated with a simple but powerful niello spiral shape design said to represent eternity. Other necklaces were unquestionably made by professional craftsmen such as the elegant gold-plated *Lebba* necklace from Fez with its cascading lacelike pendants handsomely bedecked with red and green stones. *Lebba* were worn by brides and more generally by women on feast days. If they added sumptuousness to marriages and feasts, they were also considered apotropaic protecting their wearer from the evil eye or spirits locally known as *djouns*.

In fact amulets and pendants of various sorts believed to have magical and prophylactic qualities are central to Amazigh art. Analogous to the Arab Muslim world at large, the most popular amulet is the hand of Fatima also known as *khamisa*, the Arabic word for the number five. If in Islamic culture, five refers to the five pillars of Islam or to the five prominent members of the Prophet Muhammad's household; the symbol often depicted with an eye probably possesses a much longer history. Some scholars associate it with the Phoenician goddess of the city of Carthage, Tanit, again pointing to the layered, rich, and complex history of the Maghreb. The *khamisa* is also not exclusive to Muslims. As the hand-shaped pendant with Hebrew biblically inspired inscriptions in the exhibit confirms, it was also adopted by Sephardic Jews. The most beautiful example of the symbol in *Noble Jewels* is the Amazigh silver necklace bearing three large hands of Fatima decorated with amber color stones and a variety of engraved ornamental designs.

Some of the most impressive pieces of *Noble Jewels* are the fibulae or *tizerzai* that Amazigh women have traditionally worn to fasten their garments. Worn in pairs, the actual pin is attached to a circular open ring, its base always embellished with filigree work, stones, and/or engraved designs. If all fibulae serve an ornamental and not only a practical function, the largest pairs of fibulae double as necklaces as they are attached by decorative chains with pendants and coins. In many of these pieces, the fibulae and circle are attached to a large triangular base another protective symbol because related to the eye motif, the ancient goddess Tanit, and femininity. In fact one must note that the Imazighen's preference for silver itself carries a symbolic dimension as the metal connotes blessing, purity, and light. The elaborately crafted fasteners underscore not only how dress and jewelry are intertwined but also how Amazigh jewelry is made not only for the eye but also for the ear as the various coins and pendants jingle and tinkle as the women walk.

The headbands, earrings, bracelets, fibulae, and pendants collected by Xavier Guerrand-Hermès demonstrate the unity of Amazigh art and culture even if specialists obviously attribute distinct characteristics to specific regions and groups. Viewers who consider the photographs and artifacts together will most appreciate *Noble Jewels* as they will have realized that the very notion of jewelry is itself defined culturally. In North Africa, jewelry is a part of overall adornment but equally possesses significant social, economic, cultural and magical dimensions. The exhibit reveals how Imazighen have retained a strong sense of their identity within the melting pot of North African history but the more important message and unmistakably the one Guerrand-Hermès wants to articulate is the syncretism and hence interdependence of all cultures and cultural practices.



Left: Three-Strand Necklace, Late 20th c. with 19th c. elements, Aït Atta people, Jebel Sarhro, Morocco, Amber or copal, wool, metal rosettes. (+ detail). Right: Fibula, Late 19th c., Aït Yenni people, Great Kabylie, Algeria, Silver, coral, enamel.

Amber beads represent wealth while the large enameled beads called *tagguemout* symbolize fertility.