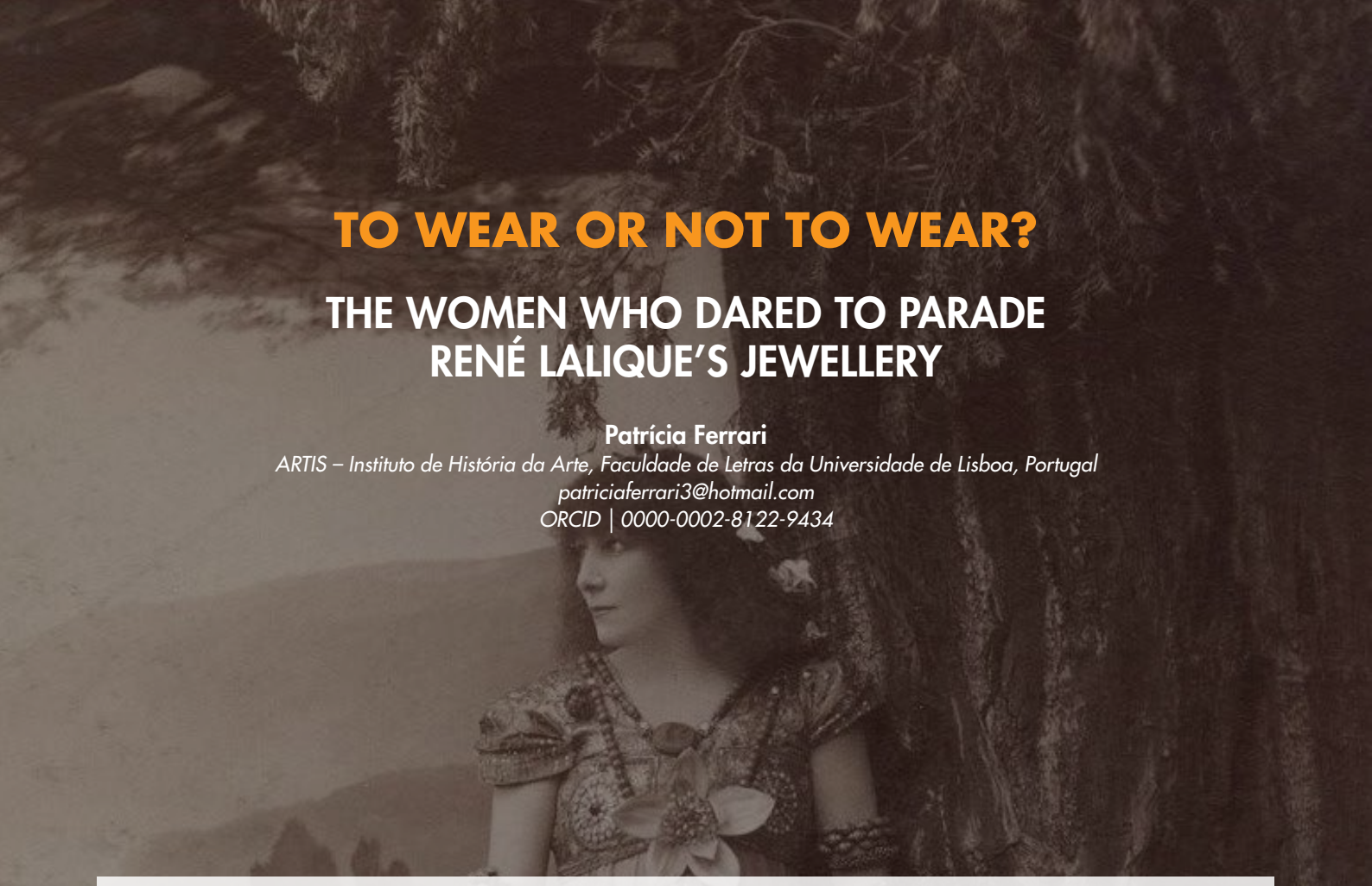

TO WEAR OR NOT TO WEAR?

THE WOMEN WHO DARED TO PARADE RENÉ LALIQUE'S JEWELLERY

Patrícia Ferrari
ARTIS – Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
patriciaferrari3@hotmail.com
ORCID | 0000-0002-8122-9434

ABSTRACT

Since 1895, when René Lalique (1860-1945) first exhibited his jewellery in Paris, some of his creations were perceived as eccentric museum pieces and considered unwearable by some critics. More than a century later, the same question still stands about these jewels: were they wearable or not? Although they frequently resemble works of art that should be displayed in a museum, these pieces were actually made to be worn, but not by just anyone. In this sense, the aim of our essay is to reflect upon the wearers of these jewels, namely the women who dared to display them on their apparel. By categorising them in separate groups, we intend to understand who wore Lalique's jewellery and what connection they had with their pieces. This will allow us to better understand the importance of the wearer in the reading and study of jewellery.

KEYWORDS

René Lalique | Jewellery | Art Nouveau | Collecting Studies

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of the nineteenth century René Lalique was one of the biggest names in the world of jewellery. His creations were a delight for the public at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900. However, though appreciated for their beauty and technical complexity, his jewels were frequently deemed unwearable. The purpose of this article is to demystify that idea and introduce some of the women who wore Lalique jewellery.

Considering the very intimate nature that characterizes jewels, knowing these women and the connection they had with their pieces will allow us to better understand thework of the artist and the role of the wearer in its development.

BETWEEN ADORNMENT AND ART – THE JEWELS OF LALIQUE

Precious, charming, sentimental, magical, protective, distinctive, meaningful – these are a few of the attributes that can define a jewel. Jewellery is, we dare to affirm, the most intimate and complex kind of artistic expression when it comes to symbolic dimension. It is a material extension – a projection – not only of the one who creates it but also of its wearer. Given the multiplicity of objects that can be seen as jewellery, what mostly defines this genre is the fact that it is made to be worn on the body and has an ever-present symbolical function (Unger, 2020). In the words of Liesbeth den Besten (2011: 12) «jewellery whether fine, costly, traditional or avant-garde, can be read as a symbol, precisely because it is brought into the public domain».

The use of jewellery is a human phenomenon that can be traced back at least 100000 years (Unger, 2011). Regardless of one's social class, gender, ethnicity, age, or other factors, anyone can wear jewellery; and almost everyone does. Even those who chose not to carry it usually keep charms and lockets in a safe space, around the house or in their wallet, just for the sake of protection or because it reminds them of someone or something they identify with. But this is not the general idea we get when talking or reading about jewellery. We are used to the concept of shiny, expensive, over the top objects, worn by movie stars, royals, singers, and billionaires, sometimes even by common people, but only on very special occasions.

That is the picture that comes to our minds when the names of Cartier, Boucheron or Tiffany's are mentioned. Those pieces are commonly defined as Fine Jewellery and represent the highest class of 'objects of adornment'. The nineteenth century saw, however, a boom in Author Jewellery, or, as the historian and theorist Marjan Unger (2020: 26) defined, «Jewellery as personal expression of the maker». According to Unger, «these items are a reflection of contemporary culture and their value is mainly determined by their artistic quality» (2020: 26). They are created by artists and made to «express artistic ideas and concepts that still pay respect to taste, fashion or society, albeit on its own conditions» (Besten, 2011: 209). This is the point where a line between adornment and art may be drawn.

The French jeweller René Lalique (1860-1945) was one of those responsible for the expansion of Author Jewellery. Especially from 1890 onwards, his creations defined *Art Nouveau* Jewellery in France and revolutionized the very concept of jewel. Notwithstanding the great technical mastery of his work, the artist made an effort to distinguish himself among his peers through the use of less common, cheaper materials – such as coloured stones, ivory, horn, and glass –, unconventional settings, figurative motifs – including the human figure –, and an endless supply of themes – from Nature to Mythology and Literature. Lalique's jewels also stood out for their sculptural quality. They still do, as one may observe in museums such as the *Musée*

des Arts Décoratifs in Paris or the *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum* in Lisbon. Their closeness to a sculpture is such that people often question their wearability. A few historians even assume that some of these jewels «were never intended to be worn» (Bayer; Waller, 2005: 17). Therefore, these works are often seen as museum pieces and not as jewellery, and that perspective can be traced back to the time of their creation, when critics, including Henri Vever, «denied them any practical use» (Brunhammer, 1998: 24).

WEARABLE ART – DEFYING TRADITION

Starting in 1895, when Lalique first exhibited his jewels at the *Salon de la Société des Artistes Français*, not every art critic praised his creative work – although his abilities were never questioned. Lalique, who until then had been producing pieces for other *Maisons* according to the traditional fashion, was eager to explore a more artistic approach to jewellery and ready to let the public decide if they were worthy of their taste (Vever, 2001). For some critics, such as Louis de Fourcaud, Charles Blanc and even Henri Vever – who later recognized Lalique's genius –, many of his creations were tasteless and eccentric, namely for their size and the portrayal of female nudes. Perceived as 'complicated', 'bizarre' and 'unwearable', defined as 'museum objects', 'showpieces' or '*bibelots*' (Müller, 1998), was Lalique's sculptural jewellery intended for people or showcases?

This question seems to prevail today, possibly because most studies about these works have been focused on the artist. The names of Lalique's clients are usually mentioned as curious details, their connection to the pieces being overlooked. And though some of his jewels were probably never used, having been encased in museums or private display cases like art objects, they were, in fact, made to be worn. A close observation of the objects shows how they were conceived with the human anatomy in mind. Furthermore, in the words of the historian Sigrid Barten (1998, 140), Lalique «always ensured that his jewels were wearable by fitting hinges or joining the individual parts with circular links». Even his most complex works, like the *Dragonfly* or the *Serpents* corsage ornaments, both from Gulbenkian's collection, are suitable for the human body. Hence, the pieces were physically wearable. But were they socially bearable?

«The brilliant jeweller needs to face the truth: Our wives and sisters are not Cleopatras or queens of Saba», exclaimed Louis de Fourcaud (1897: 174) in his review of the 1897's *Salon*. Since the 1860s, French Fine Jewellery was essentially composed of pearls and diamonds, its delicate shapes inspired by nature and a neo-rococo aesthetic. Women's clothing followed the same style; incorporating ruffles, lace, velvet and embroideries, featuring arabesques, flowers and tendrils (Boucher, 1987) – everyday fashion was also stuck to conventions. In Jewellery, the focus on gems had the artistic features relegated to a secondary role. These jewels were mainly a way for men to show off their wealth by showering their women with precious stones (Falize, 1896). Though some pieces might also have had intimate or secret meanings, mostly as tokens of love, they were essentially status symbols. Lalique's works, on the other hand, followed the lines of Author Jewellery, revolving around the artistic value and content of the works. This pushed away most people since it conflicted with the *bon ton* of *Belle Époque*'s attires (Müller, 1998). Yet, it appealed to those who were looking for a way to distinguish themselves other than by the amount of money in their safes.

These were the same people who resorted to *Haute Couture* fashion, in order to stand out from their peers. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great changes in this field, namely in France. Prominent women went to *Rue de la Paix,* at Paris 2nd *arrondissement*, to stock their wardrobes with the newest models from the *Maisons* of Paquin, Doucet, Redfern or Worth (Boucher, 1987). The last one, Charles Frederik Worth, was the great instigator of a revolution in the world of dress. The *couturier* introduced the practice of displaying pre-designed exclusive models, which were then selected by the customer and made-to-measure. He was also the first to use live models to exhibit his creations and initiated the practice of launching seasonal collections (Lipovetsky 1989).

Similar to what happened with jewellery, the attention that until then had been given to fabrics and materials was now being granted to the creativity and artistry of the dressmaker. However, this change only effectively took place between the decades of 1910 and

1920 (Müller, 1998). While traditional Fine Jewellery followed its path among the usual customers, sometimes influenced by the sinuosity of *Art Nouveau* (Bennett; Mascetti, 1994), Lalique's jewels, like *Haute Couture*, were meant for modern people, especially for irreverent women ready to take up space in the *fin de siècle*'s society. These objects were «designed with a very select clientele, a financial-cum-cultural elite in mind» (Brunhammer, 1998: 41) and, despite the negative opinions of some art critics, the jewels had a public of their own. In reality, Lalique achieved such popularity that by 1900 he had to resort to external workshops in order to meet the requests of his demanding clientele (Vever, 2001). But who were the people that bought these jewels? More importantly, who were the wearers, the audacious women who defied tradition?

DARING WOMEN – SETTING TRENDS

By the end of the nineteenth century, the absence of a trend-setting royal court in France's Third Republic led people to the search for new role models in society (Barten, 1977). Fashion was then defined by an intellectual and cultural elite that included «politicians, established painters, writers, newspaper publishers, actors, aristocrats and a financially strong, economically influential bourgeoisie» (Barten, 1977: 133). Lalique's whimsical creations fitted perfectly in their jewel boxes. Money also had its play in the equation, but more than that was needed for someone to carry a Lalique. A sense of artistic taste, cultural and literary knowledge, charisma and the boldness to embrace novelty were among the requirements.

Cultural events, such as exhibition openings, theatre performances and opera nights were an opportunity for the *femmes d'esprit* to display their newly acquired wonders to other women (Falize, 1896). When talking about contemporary jewellery, Besten (2011: 210) points out that, for some collectors, «wearing such provocative pieces on their body» is a way to «be part of a certain cultural elite». Likely, this same concept inspired *fin de siècle* ladies when purchasing new items for their apparel. Be it clothes, jewellery, or other accessories, these were the perfect occasions to show them off. However, according to the art critic Fritz Minkus-Linz, Lalique's jewellery was rarely seen in public (Barten, 1977: 9). Its details required physical proximity between the wearer and the observer, which made these pieces more adequate for intimate events. Nonetheless, they were still acquired and worn by «the most distinguished and fine women» (Minkus-Linz *apud* Barten, 1977: 9). Men, although much less frequently, also wore Lalique's jewellery. Among his male clients were Robert de Monstesquiou and Calouste Gulbenkian that, apart from his well-known collection, owned some personal objects, including a tie pin[1].

This period also saw great transformations starting to take place in western society, with the rise of Feminism and women demanding what should have been their naturally given rights. They wanted to be seen and to define their image. Author Jewellery was unattainable for most women, but we shall not ignore the role of these jewels and their wearers in the redefinition of what a woman could be, especially because they were setting an example (Faxneld, 2017). In fact, similar but cheaper pieces of jewellery were affordable to middle class ladies (Faxneld, 2017). As such, following Simmel's (2008) considerations about fashion, in the same way that this kind of jewellery was a form of distinction, it could also be a way into this group of irreverent women. By deviating from traditional jewellery, these women were exerting their own taste, doing as they pleased instead of how they were told to. They were *femmes d'esprit* – intellectual, knowledgeable, and acquainted with the artistic and cultural environments of the epoch. They appreciated the beauty and recognised the literary references of Lalique's works, such as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, Wilde's *Salomé*, Shakespeare, or *La Princesse Lointaine* by Edmond Rostand. They understood the hidden mysteries and veiled symbolism of his jewels. They were artists, actresses, singers, dancers, writers, art collectors, members of royalty, aristocracy, and socialites, unafraid of provoking astonishment and opening the path for the 'New Woman'.

We may divide these women into three groups. First, the *Artists*, which comprises writers, actresses, singers,

1 Arquivos Gulbenkian, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisboa) – *Paris – Coleção Gulbenkian: Obras de René Lalique*. File MCG 00903.

Fig. 01. Sarah Bernhardt on the role of *Izeyl*, wearing a corsage ornament in the shape of a lotus flower, created by René Lalique, Paris, Théâtre de la Renaissance, 1894. (Photography: Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie) © galica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig. 02. Liane de Pougy, ca. 1890-1898. (Photography: Atelier Nadar. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie) © galica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

dancers, and visual artists. Secondly, the *Royals and Aristocrats*, including members of the royal courts and titled nobility. And lastly, the *Socialites*, mostly members of the bourgeoisie and people related to politics. In the first group, Sarah Bernhardt, the Parisian theatre star, grabs the spotlight. She had both stage and personal jewellery created by Lalique and is regarded as one of his first and most influential clients (Abdy, 1987). Pictures from the time show her using both types of pieces (**fig. 01**)[2]. We must also mention the names of Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien, both writers and acquainted with the dancer Liane de Pougy (**fig. 02**) (Brunhammer, 1998). All three were Lalique's clients and characters in a love story that found its tokens in the artist's creations, showing their function as sentimental jewellery. Among the pieces owned by these women is a silver ring offered to Natalie by Liane de Pougy, now at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs*[3] (Brunhammer, 1998). The jewel features a heart-shaped moonstone encircled by bats. Not only is it an emblem of love but also of homosexuality, symbolized by the flying creatures, which reinforces the intimate connection between the jewel and its wearer.

From the second group, *Royals and Aristocrats*, we highlight two figures: the Queen Alexandra of England, Princess of Wales, and the Comtesse of Béarn. While still a Princess, Alexandra was already recognized as a trendsetter (Mortimer, 1989). She embraced her femininity and wore daytime jewellery (Mortimer, 1989), including pieces by Lalique. The most well-known is a pendant with swans, likely a reference to Denmark, Alexandra's homeland. When in 1905 Lalique exhibited his work at Agnews, in London, this jewel was announced as part of the show and several people came with the purpose of seeing the pendant owned by the Queen (Thiébaut, 2007).

2 See BRUNHAMMER, 1998: pp. 100-101

3 For the inventory file of the ring see http://collections.madparis.fr/bague-chauve-souris.

Fig. 03. Nevarte Gulbenkian wearing the *Femmes et Serpents* brooch, created by René Lalique (1860-1945); ca. 1901-1903. © Arquivos Gulbenkian, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

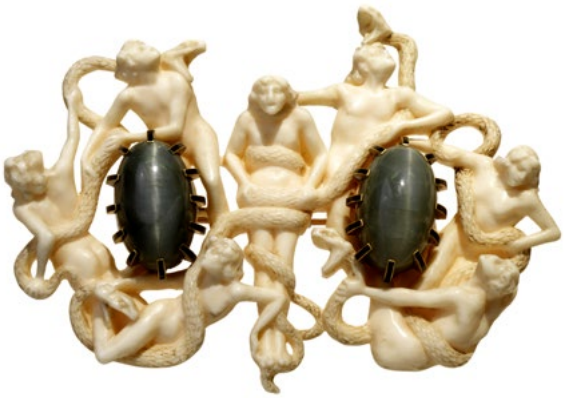

Fig. 04. *Femmes et Serpents* Brooch, ca. 1900-1901, René Lalique (1860-1945); ivory, crysoberyl, gold and enamel, 70 x 103 mm. Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisboa, inv. no. 1156. © Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa. Museu Calouste Gulbenkian – Coleção do Fundador. Photography: Carlos Azevedo.

The Comtesse of Béarn, Martine de Béhague, used her noble position in favour of the arts, becoming a patron and art collector. According to Florence Müller (1998), she was one of the few high-society ladies bold enough to wear Lalique's jewellery. The Comtesse owned one of his most exquisite headpieces, featuring a mermaid[4]. It can be seen today at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* (Brunhammer, 1998).

In the third and last group, *Socialites*, we have also chosen two distinct and important names as examples. First, Marie Waldeck-Rousseau, wife of the politician Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau, France's Prime Minister between 1899 and 1902. The couple was well-acquainted with Lalique, as we can infer from the many letters exchanged between them and the artist[5]. Among those letters, different pieces are mentioned, such as a bracelet, a comb and a pendant, some of them having been commissioned. Another relevant client of Lalique was the collector Calouste Gulbenkian, who owned a large and diversified collection of his works. However, our focus goes to his wife, Nevarte Gulbenkian. The correspondence between the collector and Lalique reveals that she owned some personal jewels made by the artist. A particular necklace was specially commissioned according to her taste. Furthermore, a picture from the beginning of the twentieth century shows Nevarte wearing one of the brooches that are now displayed at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum (**fig. 03**). The piece, *Figures and Serpents* (**fig. 04**), shows two of Lalique's most used motifs, women and serpents, both considered inappropriate for a lady's attire by the most conservative critics. Nevarte, as well as the women above-mentioned, was not afraid of breaking conventions.

The jewels created by Lalique were not for everyone, a special sensibility was needed not only to carry them but also to know how to. When working on commissions, the

4 For the inventory file of the headpiece see http://collections.madparis.fr/diademe-sirene.

5 For the letters see THIÉBAUT, 2007.

artist had in mind the complexion and style of the person for whom the jewel was destined (Barten, 1977). Each piece was to be part of a set, that set being the wearer's body and attire. For Fritz Minkus-Linz, these were not typical jewels. They were demanding and required «a certain subordination of the cut and colour of the dress, a certain subordination of the person» (*apud* Barten, 1977: 9). Some neutrality was expected from the wearer's clothing so the creations of Lalique could stand out, much like in a museum showcase (Gasc, 1991). Contrary to traditional gem-set jewellery, these pieces relied on the artistic dimension, resulting in a play of colours, shapes, motifs and figures deeply embedded with symbolism. They were supposed to be seen, not lost among the details of a dress. Lalique's jewellery was not meant to complement an outfit, but to be its axis. As such, the act of wearing was also an important step for the fulfilment of his creative purposes. The wearer was part of the artistic process, given that by carrying the jewel they were carrying the artist's message and adding to its aura. As players in the creative act, they brought these jewels to life, being part of its cosmos.

THE POWER IN JEWELLERY

Jewellery has a strong social meaning, not only as a symbol of wealth but also as a statement. It is a way to assert one's presence and self, even if simply to draw the attention of other people. As such, in the same way Barthes (1979) defined fashion, jewellery may also be regarded as a language – a system of signs. It is a way of exhibiting and communicating something, usually pieces of one's being. In the words of Umberto Eco (1989), «clothing therefore speaks», and jewels are a complement of clothing. The meaning of each symbol varies according to the public to whom it is exhibited (Barthes, 1979). We are constantly fed with the belief that these pieces are futile and meaningless, but they are not, especially for those wearing them. Jewels are intimate objects with a great psychological dimension. They play a role in the construction of one's persona, functioning as symbols of the self – an intermediary point between the inner and the outer selves. Jewellery is «an instrument in the way people relate to each other. It must be seen as an expression of the way they want to live and adorn themselves» (Unger 2011, 318).

Jewels may also work as ego enhancers, empowering the wearer by heightening their self-confidence and having a «positive effect on their attitude and mood» (Barten, 1977: 134). This aspect can be derived not only from their aesthetic aspects, but also from the protective powers some people attribute to them, or simply from the sense of status they confer. Nonetheless, as works of art, they are also relevant on their own, be it for the material aspects or the intellectual dimension they hold (Kohl, 2021: 233). In the case of Lalique's jewellery, the perception of power is mainly given by the symbols portrayed in his jewels, especially when we consider that the late nineteenth century was very prolific concerning symbolism and hidden messages. This may be the most relevant element in the relationship between the pieces created by Lalique and the women who dared to wear them. His creations were a turning point for jewellery, a disruption in tradition, that set the pace for the following generations of jewellers. In the same way, the *femmes d'esprit* looked for a way to stand out, to break tradition by exhibiting their distinctive taste. They were modern women looking for modern jewellery.

In agreement with *fin de siècle*'s aesthetic, the jewels of Lalique were charged with symbolic and mysterious overtones, granted by the depiction of magical and mythological figures, and plant and animal motifs full of meaning. A frequently represented animal was the serpent. Not the persecuted one from the bible, but the one associated with life, fertility and wisdom, that recalls womanhood and the sacred feminine. The serpent embodies female power. Wearing pieces with this symbol was a way for women to channel their inner goddess, to be empowered. As an animal commonly linked with evil, the sense of power over the observer given by these jewels was also magnified. The use of evil and demonic symbols also represented a challenge to the *status quo*, namely to moral values and constraints that defined women's lives (Faxneld, 2017). Wearing such jewels was a rebellious act perpetrated by daring women, like the ones we have mentioned, who wanted to exhibit their independence and assert their presence. Furthermore, in the same way that jewellery had a relevant influence on its wearer, the opposite also occurred, especially when dealing with women who were perceived as role models and

trendsetters (Besten, 2011). Their image being associated with Lalique's work was a contribution to its aura and an important factor for the marketing of his jewels.

As Marjan Unger (2011: 309) affirmed «the wearer can give his or her own meaning and even a certain quality to a piece, without altering it».

THE ROLE OF THE WEARER IN LALIQUE'S JEWELLERY

We may affirm that the wearer of jewellery, namely of Author Jewellery, serves as a displayer. Not in an objectifying manner, but as an element that plays its own part in the artistic act. As a matter of fact, we may not forget that jewels are made for the body. Therefore, the body is their inherent showcase, and contrary to the usual showcase, the body is alive. The wearer moves between contexts in time and space and has the ability to display the jewel in many different ways, by changing an outfit, a hairstyle, or simply its position on the body – when such is possible. In a sense, a jewel can be recreated and its meaning altered each time it is worn and paraded. The same happens when it is passed from one owner to another. Following Besten's (2011) argument, if we consider the standard communication model which applies to art, there are three elements to take into account: the creator, the message and the public. In jewellery, a fourth element must be added: the wearer. «The moment the wearer wears an ornament, they become an intermediary between the maker, the piece and the viewer» (Besten, 2011: 62).

The historian goes as far as to admit that the owner can become more relevant than the piece itself, since «it is their name that bestows a piece of jewellery with history, class and magic» (Besten, 2011: 209). Marjan Unger (2011) also suggests that the wearer can be as significant as the maker when considering the value of a jewel, namely because a piece of jewellery can float through time and have multiple owners. We recall here the above-mentioned example of Queen Alexandra, whose pendant was an attraction at one of Lalique's exhibitions, not for the jewel itself, but for its wearer. As such, we cannot help but wonder to what extent did Lalique resort to the bold wearers of his jewels as a means to publicize his work. Besides commissions, which were done with a client in mind, did he ever intentionally create certain kinds of pieces in order to attract a very selective group within his clientele, names that would take his work beyond borders in space and time? And, for us historians, to what extent are the owners of each of his jewels relevant for the study and interpretation of those same works? Considering once more the pendant of Queen Alexandra, its meaning becomes clearer when the wearer's origins are taken into account. The same happens with the bat ornamented jewels of Natalie Clifford Barney. The wearer and their context clarify the meaning of a jewel.

CLOSING REMARKS – DEMYSTIFYING WEARABILITY

Considering the question that instigated this essay – to wear or not to wear? We arrive at the conclusion that the jewels created by René Lalique were not only wearable but their artistic aura and cultural relevance were sometimes even dependable on the wearer. As such, in order to have a complete understanding of his works, namely in the field of jewellery, we shall expand our knowledge on the wearers of the pieces. In this way, we aim to develop a greater and deeper study regarding this theme, by analyzing the different names that show in his customers' list, from which we mentioned only some examples.

The importance of a study of this type lies in the uncovering of new information regarding Lalique's clientele and the social impact of his creations, as well as in the fact that it will contribute to a better insight into the artist and his work. Thus, we may affirm that in the complex system that surrounds a piece of jewellery, the wearer plays an important role in influencing the way the jewel is perceived by the public. Other than this, the wearer may also be a key to the reading of these pieces, in the sense that their persona helps define the symbolical vocabulary used in its conception, espe-

cially when dealing with commissioned works. As Liesbeth den Besten concluded, the jeweller has an «ambiguous position in the realm of art» (2011: 107), since «their story of intention mixes with those of the wearer» (2011: 107). Thus, by studying the wearers we are complementing and deepening the study of Lalique's jewellery and understanding their historical and cultural significance.

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