

ART NOUVEAU

American Style

Known for their craftsmanship and creativity, Marcus & Company designs are prized by dealers and collectors alike.

BY PHYLLIS SCHILLER

*M*ention the name “Marcus & Company” — the New York City–based firm established in 1892 — to estate jewelry dealers and the response is overwhelmingly positive. “Marcus & Company is perhaps one of my most favorite of the American makers of this period,” says Peter Shemonsky, private jeweler and jewelry historian in San Francisco, California. Adds Benjamin Macklowe of the Macklowe Gallery, New York City, “They’re great jewelers, every bit the equal of Tiffany in the period.”

“Marcus & Company jewelry is always superbly made,” points out Lee Siegelson, president and owner of Siegelson in New York City. “Their design aesthetic is artful, utilizing fine gemstones as a center point or to complement enameling. In the first decade of the twentieth century, they created innovative jewelry with pearling and techniques such as plique-à-jour enamel, as well as important gemstone designs.” Much of the artful jewelry that the company created at the turn of the century, Siegelson says, was created by George Marcus.

The eponymous firm was a family affair run by Herman Marcus and his two sons, William and George, each bringing their individual experience and expertise. Herman, who immigrated to America in 1850, had been associated with the Dresden court jeweler in his native Germany and Tiffany & Co. in the U.S. He also established a partnership with Theodore Starr — Starr & Marcus — that lasted for 13 years. William originally partnered with George Jacques to form Jacques and Marcus, which Herman later joined. After Jacques retired, the company was reborn as Marcus & Company. Herman continued working there with his sons until his death in 1899. Marcus & Company merged with Black, Starr and Frost in 1962, but for all intents and purposes, says Shemonsky, “by WWII, the creative output of Marcus & Company pretty much ended.”

DEALER'S CHOICE

According to Jeff Russak, Lawrence Jeffrey Estate Jewelers, Litchfield, Connecticut, “the firm did a lot of things that were au courant, not in terms of what was the fashion in jewelry, but what was going on in the art world — Art Nouveau, Arts & Crafts, but with their own take...amazing things that really had a high aesthetic.” He cites as an example a Marcus & Company moonstone and silver necklace that “Georg Jensen would have been proud to design — very Renaissance Revival meets Arts & Crafts.”

Agrees Kimberley Thompson, vintage and estate buyer, JB Hudson Jewelers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, “Marcus & Company were leaders in the field of American Arts & Crafts. They brought such great strength and beauty. And I absolutely adore their pieces; they’re well thought out, they’re balanced. They tend to have an edge of excitement to them.”

ART NOUVEAU APPEAL

“When I think about what Marcus & Company epitomizes,” says Shemonsky, “it really is the American version of Art Nouveau, organic gold and enamel jewelry.” Their approach, he says, was a naturalistic rather than a literal interpretation. One recognizable theme, he points out, is a “curvilinear organic whiplash motif, many times with a transparent green enamel and a delicate combination of pastel colors in various gemstones. They loved to use soft-colored sapphires, spinels and zircons. Because of their organic, naturalistic motifs, the designs of Marcus & Company have a very feminine side and are very wearable.”

Opposite: Marcus & Company gold and plique-à-jour enamel Morning Glory pendant/brooch, circa 1900. Photo courtesy Siegelson, New York.

Although one of many companies that embraced Art Nouveau, says Macklowe, “Marcus & Company had their own design aesthetic. A piece of their jewelry can be recognized from across the room by their use of green enamel and asymmetrical forms.”

“Whereas other American jewelers used plique-à-jour enameling on flat surfaces,” points out Siegelson, “Marcus is the only one that employed it on rounded surfaces, such as petals and leaves, much like what was done in France.” The result of this more exacting process, he notes, is a three-dimensional effect.

MATERIAL MATTERS

Along with a variety of gemstones, Marcus & Company used “a lot of natural pearls — American freshwater pearls and blister pearls,” Shemonsky says.

“You’ll see diamonds and precious stones used merely as accents in Marcus & Company’s Art Nouveau pieces, to complete an artistic picture,” says Macklowe. “Diamonds and other ‘precious gems’ take center stage in their Art Deco jewelry, which is beautiful and very finely wrought.”

“Marcus explored every aesthetic avenue during the Art Nouveau period,” continues Macklowe. “Following Lalique, their goal was to make each piece of jewelry a work of art, not just an impressive assembly of gemstones. In this pursuit, they drew inspiration from sources as diverse as Islamic and Persian design. I own pieces by Marcus & Company that are allegorical. You’ll often see designs with enameled sections and little raised nail heads that recall some of the metalwork of the Middle Ages. In contrast to Art Nouveau jewelry by Louis Comfort Tiffany, they didn’t shy away from large-scale pieces.”

Marcus & Company pieces also utilize 18-karat gold, Shemonsky says, “and often it was colored gold, like a green gold — which fit very well with the green enamel, amethyst and colored stone combinations found in the pieces.”



It isn’t necessarily the big three colored stones that you’ll see, says Russak, “but beautiful examples of lesser stones readily available at that time. They definitely used a lot of moonstones. They tended to use stones of the same hue, mixing pastel green tourmaline with peridot and then putting opals with it that had a lot of green fire.” Thompson also cites their use of moonstones, and blister pearls. “They also were using carved stones. It was such a refreshing departure from a staid and more formal time period.”

For the most part, says Siegelson, “Marcus & Company designs are distinctive from other jewelry, especially during the Art Nouveau period. The gold work has a ‘soft look’ and gemstones are set within the composition as an accent to the design.”

IN THE MARKETPLACE

According to Shemonsky, Marcus & Company pieces are available, but most of the time through auction. “I see a lot of the small brooches, necklaces, long chains, rings and a few bracelets. The more iconic and larger the piece, the more money it brings. I’ve seen pieces sell for a few thousand dollars into the many thousands, from \$30,000 all the way up to \$70,000.”

“Marcus & Company jewelry is desirable in today’s marketplace,” says Siegelson, “with superb examples sought after from the Art Nouveau and Art Deco periods and even into the mid-1930s. Both dealers and collectors look for the finest examples. For that reason, when an important piece is offered at auction, it usually sells above the high estimate.”

“We come by a couple of Marcus & Company pieces a year,” says Macklowe, “but not as many as we would like. The value is recognized by dealers and privates alike. Marcus & Company Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts jewelry is very collectible.” ♦