

Adornment, Identity, and Authenticity: Ancient Jewelry In and Out of Context

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MASTERPIECES OF ANCIENT JEWELRY: EXQUISITE OBJECTS FROM THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION, THE FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, CHICAGO, 13 FEBRUARY–5 JULY 2009, curated by Judith Price.

While ancient jewelry is a feast for the eyes, it presents significant challenges to scholarly interpretation. Personal adornment has long been marginalized in the study of ancient culture, perhaps because it resists the types of inquiry that illuminate monumental architecture and works of art. Its “context of original intention”—usually on the body of the living person for whom it was made—eludes archaeologists.¹ A portable form of wealth, jewelry is easily transferred among families, passed down for generations, squirreled away in hoards, and moved across long distances. It is too valuable to be left behind when a site is abandoned and is an asset that can be literally liquidated in times of crisis. It is, however, frequently included in burials and occasionally offered to the gods in foundation deposits. Unless the jewelry is specifically designed for funerary use, however, the burial setting (the typical archaeological context for its discovery) may be quite far removed in time and place from its maker and intended wearer. The contextual information uncovered and preserved through controlled excavations provides clues about intercultural connections, the history of technology, the use of jewelry as talismans, and the

role of jewelry in the construction of gendered, religious, social, and cultural identity.

Very little of the ancient jewelry in museum collections came to light through controlled excavations because of the manner in which most 19th- and early 20th-century collections were formed. While most of these objects entered collections legally, and may in fact be genuine, without archaeological documentation it is simply not possible to confirm their authenticity beyond a doubt. This lack of contextual information and assurance of authenticity does not eliminate, but does curtail, the interpretive potential of these pieces.² Regardless of one’s position on the scholarly value of unexcavated pieces, their presence in museum collections is a reality and a challenge that curators ought to confront with the utmost honesty and integrity, practicing full disclosure about both excavated and unexcavated objects. By helping visitors understand precisely what is and is not known about both the contexts of original intention and discovery of ancient jewelry, museums can engage visitors more actively in the interpretation of these precious objects. In the absence of such mediation, visitors admiring ancient jewelry in museums can only respond to its aesthetic qualities and to the allure of valuable materials and technical virtuosity—the very attributes that attract shoppers in jewelry stores.

While this review focuses on the second venue of *Masterpieces of Ancient Jewelry*, at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, a different version of this exhibition, also curated

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¹Rudolph (1996) identifies three types of contexts

for ancient jewelry: its present situation; the physical setting in which it was recovered; and most important, the world of the maker and intended wearer, which he refers to as “original intent.”

²Simpson 1999.

by Judith Price of the National Jewelry Institute, appeared earlier at the Forbes Galleries in New York City with objects assembled from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre Museum, the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, the Princeton Art Museum, the Israel Museum, the antiquities dealership Phoenix Ancient Art, and private collections. The publication that accompanied the New York show lists the “Vice Chairmen of the International Council for the exhibition,”³ whose names include—in addition to couture jewelers, philanthropists, and socialites—Jonathan Rosen, a well-known antiquities collector who was a partner of the embattled Robert Hecht in Atlantis Antiquities,⁴ and the Aboutaam family, who own Phoenix Ancient Art and have been linked to objects of questionable origin.⁵

Given the composition of this council, it is no wonder that the New York exhibition eschewed issues of origin and authenticity, making no distinction between objects found in controlled excavations and those acquired on the antiquities market. The accompanying publication reflects an exhibition that was descriptive, unscholarly, and rife with misinterpretations of historical information⁶ and strange associations between the iconography of the jewelry and the Old Testament.⁷ The publication and the exhibition celebrate the beauty and craftsmanship of ancient Near Eastern, Byzantine, and Islamic jewelry and the valuable materials used in its production. The evident lack of consideration of contextual issues turns these “exquisite objects” into nothing more than a treasure trove of spectacularly wrought goodies for the covetous eyes of the public, including collectors.

The Field Museum, by contrast, is a venerable institution whose mission focuses on both scholarly research and the responsible education of visitors. Between 1923 and 1933, the museum conducted excavations in conjunction

with the University of Oxford at the important Mesopotamian site of Kish (ca. 3200 B.C.E.–800 C.E.), in central Iraq. As was the practice at the time, the Field Museum, along with the Ashmolean Museum and the Iraq Museum, acquired a portion of the excavated objects. A final site report for Kish has never been published, a situation that the Field Museum is rectifying through the Kish Project, an international scholarly effort under the direction of Karen Wilson to bring together and analyze the dispersed objects and haphazard records of the Kish excavations.⁸ Through this project and the creation of wonderful, innovative exhibitions of ancient material such as *Inside Ancient Egypt*, the Field Museum has earned a substantial archaeological pedigree. The museum’s choice to accept part of the National Jewelry Institute’s exhibition is therefore puzzling, and it must have posed considerable challenges to their curators and researchers. Although official curatorial credit is given only to Price, Field Museum curators James Phillips and Karen Wilson managed to raise the intellectual and informational level of the exhibition considerably and should be lauded for doing so. Nevertheless, as is detailed below, the exhibition and its audience would have benefited from a more drastic overhaul.

This transformation of *Masterpieces of Ancient Jewelry* in its second venue has been wrought through changes to both the checklist and the messages communicated through text and design. Many of the most dubious objects and collections featured in the original exhibition are absent in Chicago, where the exhibition is supplemented with jewelry from the Field Museum’s own collections, particularly the fruits of the Kish excavations, as well as Egyptian objects. In the wall panels and case labels, odd Old Testament references have been replaced with straightforward text that emphasizes materials, methods, and iconog-

³Price 2008, 7. Price (2008) is not a traditional catalogue but a companion volume with a descriptive narrative of the history of Near Eastern jewelry.

⁴Rosen has not, to this reviewer’s knowledge, ever been accused of any illegality.

⁵E.g., an Etruscan architectural relief (inv. no. 1995-129) that the Aboutaam brothers gave as a gift to the Princeton University Art Museum in 1995 has since been returned to the Republic of Italy (Princeton University Art Museum 1997, 61–2).

⁶These include incorrect statements such as “In

2300 B.C. the northern ruler, Sargon the Great, conquered Sumer and renamed it Babylonia” (Price 2008, 37).

⁷E.g., Price (2008, 65), in discussing a “Phoenician brooch with Spanish influence,” comments, “The theme of life and the Garden of Eden . . . is typical of the Phoenicians.”

⁸For a complete bibliography, see the Field Museum of Natural History’s Web site on the Kish Collection (<http://www.fieldmuseum.org/kish/index.html>).

raphy. The Chicago exhibition, however, does not distinguish—particularly in the object labels—between what is excavated and unexcavated, what is known and not known, and thus ultimately fails to facilitate a more meaningful dialogue between the visitors and the objects.

The exhibition is beautifully designed (fig. 1). The objects are in six groups, each occupying a separate case. Five of these groups are cultural or regional: Mesopotamian, Levantine, Persian, Egyptian, and Islamic. Pride of place in the center of the gallery goes to the sixth case and video kiosk that focus on the Field Museum's excavations of Kish. The regional groups are arranged in a clockwise progression, beginning with Mesopotamia and wrapping around the gallery in a loose chronological order to the Islamic group. Within each grouping, designers used well-made mounts, color to highlight selected objects, careful lighting to illuminate details without casting shadows, and installed magnifiers for close inspection of tiny objects.

The Mesopotamia case is both a highlight of the exhibition and a disappointment. Visitors are not aware that this case primarily features jewelry from the excavations of the third-millennium B.C.E. cemeteries at Kish, because the case and object labels here do not mention the site of Kish, nor do they specify which objects come from excavations. They merely characterize the jewelry as coming from Iraq. The omission of documented contextual information in this display case is regrettable, for it eliminates a valuable opportunity to discuss the role of these objects as grave goods and the role of jewelry in establishing the identities of the deceased and their families.

In the absence of detailed contextual information, the primary focus of the case labels is the use of materials such as gold, silver, lapis lazuli, carnelian, shell, and agate. As the exhibition text indicates, none of these materials was available locally, suggesting that they were valued not just for their beauty but because they were difficult to obtain. Gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian were imported as raw materials: gold from Anatolia, Iran, and Egypt; carnelian from Iran and the Indus Valley; and lapis from

the Badakhshan region of what is now Afghanistan. Two types of carnelian beads, those etched with alkali and long, biconical tubes, were likely crafted at Indus Valley sites.⁹ One wishes that this case included a map showing the origins of these materials and their probable trade routes, which would illustrate for exhibition visitors the great distances involved.

Much of this jewelry was fashioned of beads strung on now-missing organic materials, and their original arrangements have largely been lost. Excavators have often published finds of beads as reconstructed “necklaces” without articulating any rationale for the reconstructions, and these hypothetical reconstructions are perpetuated by scholars and museum displays. One such “necklace” is highlighted in the Mesopotamia case; it is a symmetrical grouping of beads typical of the late Early Dynastic period/Akkadian era and consisting of gold tubes, lapis lazuli in biconical and globular forms, long biconical carnelian tubes, etched and plain carnelian barrels, and carnelian lentoids etched with a white ring (fig. 2).¹⁰ Despite the persistent necklace reconstruction, parallels from Mohenjo Daro and possibly Ur suggest that these weighty carnelian tubes were used for hip and waist girdles rather than necklaces.¹¹

The next case features jewelry from the Levant, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This region served as a nexus of international trade and travel. None of these items came to light through controlled excavations, although a number of the objects are well documented as originating in the cemetery at Deir el-Balah on the Gaza Strip (ancient Canaan).¹² Much of the jewelry in this group has been dated to the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E. (Late Bronze Age), an era of particularly intense intercultural relations among polities in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, and the Aegean, as evidenced through archaeology, the visual arts, and documents such as the Amarna archive—a collection of cuneiform tablets found in Egypt that feature diplomatic correspondence.¹³

Case labels describe the Deir el-Balah jewelry as exemplifying Canaanite appropriation

⁹Aruz et al. 2003, 239–50.

¹⁰From Kish, Mound A, Burial A51; Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 225833 (Mackay 1929, fig. 8, pl. 43).

¹¹See Aruz et al. (2003, 392, cat. no. 279) for a belt. A possible parallel from Ur is found in Aruz et al.

2003, 132, cat. no. 80.

¹²For the attribution of these objects to the Deir el-Balah cemetery, see Dothan 1979, 1–4; Ben-Tor 1992, pl. 32.

¹³On this remarkable period, see Aruz 2008.



Fig. 1. Installation view of the exhibition in the Booker Gallery (© The Field Museum of Natural History).

of Egyptian subject matter, but in reality the situation in this age of intercultural contact is far more complex and fraught with ambiguity. An opportunity to explore this complexity is provided by two necklaces from Deir el-Balah.¹⁴ Both feature carnelian beads in round and pendant “pod” shapes—a short stem, rounded body, and a floral or flared tip. Identical carnelian pod pendants appear in controlled excavations at Deir el-Balah, at many Late Bronze Age sites in the southern Levant, and at Mari in Syria; similar beads come from Egypt and Assur.¹⁵ Finally, this pod shape occurs as finials for tiny ivory and bronze rods found at Late Bronze Age sites in the Levant and Aegean.¹⁶

The scholarly disagreement about the identification and origin of this distinctive shape

is symptomatic of larger challenges to understanding the art of this milieu. Those whose scholarly orientation is toward Egypt and the Levant identify this shape as representing a lotus seed or cornflower.¹⁷ To those based in Mesopotamia or the Aegean, it represents a pomegranate, with the projection indicating the calyx.¹⁸ Pulak identifies a pod-shaped ivory finial discovered in the Uluburun shipwreck excavation as the capsule of an opium poppy, raising a fascinating possibility for the beads.¹⁹ Botanical evidence for all three plant species—lotus, pomegranate, and opium poppy—has been identified archaeologically throughout this region, and these plants appear in ancient texts as well.²⁰ This ambiguous artifact type—ambiguous with respect to its interpretation and point of origin²¹—emerges

¹⁴ Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, inv. nos. IMJ 90.87.426, 71.60.222.

¹⁵ Levantine examples come from Tomb 116 at Deir el-Balah (Dothan 1979, 43, figs. 99–102, 107–8), Tombs 236 and 119 (Middle Assyrian) at Mari, Syria (Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. nos. AO 19037, 19080; Parrot 1937, 84, pl. 15).

¹⁶ See Ward (2003, 533–34, table 1) for similar artifacts excavated at Late Bronze Age sites in Syria, Israel, and Cyprus.

¹⁷ Lotus seed: Dothan 1979, 43; Andrews 1990, fig. 93; Musche 2009, 188. Cornflower: Andrews 1990, fig.

27.

¹⁸ Parrot 1937, 84; Immerwahr 1989; Ward 2003; Caubet and Yon 2006, 41.

¹⁹ Pulak 1994, 12–13. Caubet and Yon (2006, 142) also raise this possibility with respect to the beads from Tombs 119 and 236 at Mari.

²⁰ Merrillees 1962, 287–92; Harer 1985; Merlin 2003; Ward 2003.

²¹ This bead type, while most common in the Levant, is characterized as having Egyptian origins. Caubet and Yon (1996), however, propose that it is a bead type imported from the Indus region.

and proliferates at the precise moment of intensive diplomatic and economic exchange in the region. The point is not to engage museum visitors in the scholarly debate over the nature of artistic interaction in this era²² but to enhance the exhibition by allowing visitors to explore the richness and complexity of a single motif and the intriguing possibility of its association with the role of psychoactive plants in Late Bronze Age society.

The next major group is the slimmest: a few examples of unexcavated jewelry ascribed to ancient Iran. Most of these are dated, probably on the basis of style, to the Achaemenid Persian empire, the Iranian territorial state that ruled the ancient Near East from the late sixth century B.C.E. until its conquest by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C.E. The court of the Achaemenid Persians was notoriously luxurious and cosmopolitan; the case text includes the Greek historian Herodotus' (7.83) comment that King Xerxes' troops "were adorned with the greatest magnificence . . . they glittered all over with gold, vast quantities of which they wore about their persons." Fabulous wealth excavated in the Persian capitals at Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae amply supports Herodotus' observations,²³ and the two golden appliques in the form of lions' heads illustrate this "glitter."²⁴ While numerous examples of identical appliques are found in collections around the world, none appears to have come from a controlled excavation.²⁵ Also in this group is a pair of large, bronze disk-headed pins labeled specifically as coming from the western Iranian province of Luristan, a region famous for metalwork and infamous for modern forgeries.²⁶

The Egyptian jewelry is drawn from the Field Museum's own collections, and much of it was acquired on the market in preparation for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. This case continues the focus on materials and iconography. Many of the objects displayed here are made of composite, vitreous materials such as faience; and in their variety, they illustrate the astonishing flexibility of this medium,

²²Feldman 2006; Harmansah 2008.

²³See Curtis and Tallis 2005.

²⁴Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum, inv. no. 2003.379–80.

²⁵E.g., Maxwell-Hyslop 1971, 211, pls. 173 (Tehran, Iran Bastan Museum), 174 (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts); Musche 2009, 281, pl. 110, no. 5



Fig. 2. Mesopotamian carnelian, lapis lazuli, and gold beads, restored as a necklace, lgth. 14.3 cm, mid third millennium B.C.E., from Iraq, Kish, Mound A, Burial A51. Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, inv. no. 228533 (© The Field Museum of Natural History).

both in its ability to be shaped and in the range of possible colors, which allowed it to serve as an inexpensive substitute for precious stones. The objects include a group of beads representing different plant forms: for example, deep blue grape bunches and bright green palm fronds (fig. 3). While these vegetal pendants are strung together as a simple necklace, they almost certainly were elements in openwork, multirowed collars of a type known in the later 18th Dynasty, particularly during the Amarna period.²⁷

Because of the nature of Egyptian mortuary practices, it is likely that most of these unexcavated objects derived from funerary contexts. The notion that adornment of the body played a significant role in ensuring the safe transition of the deceased to the next life is not addressed explicitly in the exhibition text, but it plays a role in the case design. A blue faience broad collar from the Third Intermediate period (1069–664 B.C.E.) and a heart scarab from the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.) are juxtaposed with an excavation photograph of

("Aufnahschmuck") (Chicago, Oriental Institute).

²⁶Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, inv. nos. 5742.9.53, 2026.66. Muscarella (2000, 15–16) refers to the Hamadan source as an example of the "creation of archaeological sites" that were never, in reality, excavated.

²⁷See, e.g., Frankfort 1929, 148, pl. 27.2.



Fig. 3. Egyptian faience beads in the shape of grape clusters and palm leaves, restored as a necklace, lgth. 19 cm, New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.E.). Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, inv. no. 31261 (© The Field Museum of Natural History).

the body of Tutankhamun in situ with these objects.²⁸ The photograph and the accompanying text connect the objects more tangibly to the people with whom they were buried and their beliefs. An interesting item in this case is a gold finger ring with the cartouche of “Merneptah,” a Middle Kingdom ruler of 1236–1223 B.C.E.; the label clearly indicates that it is an early 20th-century forgery.²⁹ An explanatory text detailing the problem of forgeries among many collections of antique jewelry would have enriched this inclusion immeasurably.

The most dazzling and technologically sophisticated objects in the exhibition are found in the case dedicated to the Islamic world. The objects date, according to the case labels, to the eighth to 16th centuries and are attributed to the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Iran. A small gold figurine of a goat provides a lovely example of the Islamic dialogue between natural forms, three-dimensional volume, and surface patterning (fig. 4).³⁰ The animal’s naturalistically formed body is encrusted with a reticulated pattern created by the application to the surface of loops of twisted wire in the shape of overlapping “scales” and the use of twisted wire and

rows of granules to define contours. Embedded in the design of the filigree on the animal’s flank are silhouettes of three horned animals, which are outlined in twisted gold wire and filled with delicate granulation. While it is not clear whether the figurine can stand on its own four hooves, and there is no visible attachment point or loop for suspension, it may have been an element in a precious sculptural group such as the one presented to the ninth-century C.E. Caliph al-Mutawakkil, according to the medieval Islamic writer Ibn al-Zubayr.³¹

As is true throughout the other parts of the exhibition, the case and label texts do not address explicitly the social, cultural, talismanic, and religious function of Islamic jewelry. An example of such a lost opportunity is provided by an enormous silver anklet, with several pendants or bells, which appears to be very heavy and potentially quite noisy when the wearer is in motion. It immediately brings to mind one of the few passages in the Qur’an (24:31) that pertain to the adornment of women: “Tell the female believers that they restrain their eyes . . . and not display of their adornment except for what is apparent. . . . *And that they not stamp*

²⁸ Collar: Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 31261. Heart scarab: Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 238009.

²⁹ Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 239002; according to the label, it comes from Old Bethpage,

New York, in the early 20th century.

³⁰ Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, inv. no. 97.95.28.

³¹ Ibn al-Zubayr *Kitab al-Dhukha’ir* 29–30, ch. 33 (quoted in Shalem 2002).

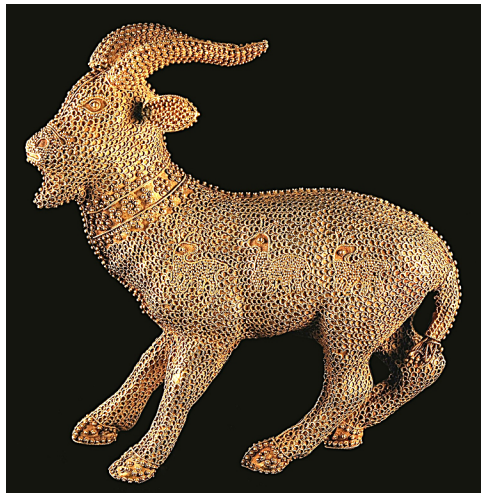


Fig. 4. Islamic gold figurine of a goat decorated with filigree and granulation, ht. 10.6 cm, dated by style to the 12th–13th centuries C.E. Jerusalem, the Israel Museum, inv. no. 97.95.28 (© The Israel Museum).



Fig. 5. Sasanian-style stucco architectural relief depicting a king, ht. 52 cm, seventh–eighth centuries C.E., from Iraq, Kish. Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, inv. no. 236400 (© The Field Museum of Natural History).

*their feet to give knowledge of the adornment which they hide.*³² This statement, in concert with objects such as the anklet, reminds us that while modern jewelry is designed primarily for the eyes, in the past, jewelry’s potential for drawing attention to the body of the wearer was realized through sound as well as vision.

The last group in the exhibition, placed in the center of the gallery, consists of a two-sided case and a small video kiosk highlighting the Field Museum’s Kish excavations. On display here is a magnificent stucco architectural relief from a first-millennium C.E. building at Kish, which is created in the style of the Sasanian empire, an Iranian empire that controlled much of the ancient Near East from the third to seventh centuries C.E. It depicts the bust of a male ruler wearing a metal crown, pendant earrings, and two double-rowed beaded necklaces (fig. 5). This is the only object in the exhibition that features an artistic depiction of jewelry; however, the fact that the relief has been heavily restored detracts from the historical value of the items depicted.³³

On the reverse side of this case is a cleverly designed installation focusing on the Field Mu-

seum’s excavation of the mid third-millennium B.C.E. cemeteries at Kish. An enlarged documentary photograph of the Y sounding at Kish taken during the 1930 season forms the backdrop to objects that, unlike those in the Mesopotamian case, are labeled explicitly as having been excavated in the A and Y cemeteries. This display includes a detailed drawing of Grave Y463, illustrating the skeletal remains as well as the arrangement of grave goods and highlighting in color the findspots of the jewelry—around the neck and hips of the deceased. A “necklace” on display nearby, which is quite similar to the one highlighted in the drawing, is made up of beads in lapis lazuli, carnelian, and silver.³⁴ Immediately behind this case is a small video kiosk showing a brief loop from the 1928 excavations, which has been well selected to show the range of archaeological techniques of that era, from the large work crews moving earth away from the site to the careful exposure of tiny objects.

These few objects in the Kish excavations case are the only ones in the exhibition accompanied by detailed information about their origin and function, and the resulting display

³²Quoted in Stowasser 1994, 92 (emphasis added).

³³Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 236400. While many features of this bust are consistent with Sasanian royal images, Kawami (pers. comm. 2009) has recently suggested that the sculpture and the

building belong to the Lakhmids, a Christian Arab polity in central Iraq during the Ummayyad Dynasty (seventh–eighth centuries C.E.).

³⁴From Kish, Cemetery A, Grave A93; Chicago, the Field Museum, inv. no. 230026.

is richer and more nuanced than the rest of the exhibition materials combined. While only a formal summative evaluation could conclusively determine which approach—decontextualizing the objects or providing contextual information—is more successful, casual observation in this space revealed that visitors stopped far longer at this case, looked more closely at the objects, and discussed what they saw.

As the exhibition's subtitle suggests, ancient jewelry is exquisite indeed but in most cases, by means of the nature of its presentation to museum visitors, it can be more—more evocative, more informative, more authentic—even if it does not come from a controlled excavation. At the very least, object labels should distinguish how much is known about an object's origin and context. It should be made crystal clear that some objects were discovered in controlled excavations (the Kish materials), that some were not but do have documented points of origin (Deir el-Balah), and that others are merely attributed to a particular region or culture on the basis of style (all the Iranian and Egyptian materials but particularly the supposed Luristan bronzes) or anecdotal information (“said to be from”) provided by dealers.

A second contextual issue is raised by the grouping of objects into discrete geographical or cultural entities without explication of artistic, political, cultural, and economic interactions among them. Connections could be drawn more clearly between the objects in different groups that provide evidence for interaction. Segregation without supplemental information about intercultural connections can reinforce the misapprehension of the isolation of ancient cultures and of an amorphous notion of artistic “influence.”

Finally, one must consider the role of personal adornment as an element in the construction of identity—its human context. Just as modern jewelry communicates the wealth, gender, marital status, religious beliefs, or “taste” of the owner, so did ancient jewelry. The amuletic or magical function of these objects and the materials from which they are created have largely remained unexplored, as has the role of jewelry as a gendered artifact. A more nuanced discussion of jewelry in documented mortuary contexts, for example, provides an excellent opportunity to lead visitors through the intellectual processes by which this human dimension is interpreted. The elucidation of the ways one differentiates jewelry worn

in daily life, adornment created specifically for burial, and ritual deposits of jewelry in graves depends on clear presentation of what is known, what cannot be known, what is assumed, and how conclusions are drawn. Although dealing with unexcavated objects is trickier, it is even more critical to engage visitors in a discussion of the epistemological issues they entail.

It is tempting, given the sophisticated and rich treatment of the Kish-specific displays, to attribute the shortcomings of *Masterpieces of Ancient Jewelry* at the Field Museum to its New York iteration. The Field Museum, however, accepted this flawed exhibition and devoted some time and resources to rewriting the exhibition texts and introducing new objects. It is a bit disappointing that this institution and its staff, who have demonstrated elsewhere that they are capable of communicating complex content to the public, did not take further steps to do so throughout this exhibition. The exemplary Kish installation demonstrates that when museum displays put objects in context—the context of original intention, of discovery, and the modern context as objects in a museum—they open windows into the past through media alive in the present. A major exhibition dedicated to the Kish material is said to be in the works at the Field Museum, and we look forward to seeing how this important excavated material will be presented to the public.

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