

Mythological characters and emblems in the American costume jewelry of the Thirties and of the Forties

by Giordana Forti Cavallini (Annie Goldenthal)¹

Trifari

One of the largest and most well-known costume jewelry houses in America is Trifari, a company that is still prominent in its field today.

Trifari's story begins when Gustavo Trifari Sr., the son of an Italian goldsmith, and Leo F. Krussman amalgamated to form the company "Trifari & Krussman".

Previously, Krussman had worked for an American accessory company, Rice & Hochster, and Trifari ran his own company manufacturing hair ornaments made out of tortoise shell and rhinestone. They joined together, with Trifari acting as designer and Krussman as salesman.

In 1925 they took another partner, Carl Fischel, who has worked in France. Their earliest trademark was T.F.K., which afterwards was changed into Trifari.

In 1930 Alfred Philippe, an European designer who had studied at the École Boulle in Paris, joined the Trifari company. Philippe, who had previously designed real gems for Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels, arrived from Paris to become Trifari's chief designer.

According to one of his fellow workers, who is currently employed by Trifari as head stylist, Philippe was one of the most talented designers he had ever worked with. His works with multi-coloured crystals, which were imported from Swarovski (Austria) were so outstandingly beautiful that Philippe's creations established Trifari as a major force in costume jewelry all over the world. During the war years Trifari used sterling silver to make R.A.F. emblems, donating the proceeds to the war effort. Between 1942 and 1945 all Trifari jewelry was made of sterling silver, because the American government had banned the use of white metal.

At that time, paste stones were in short supply, and Alfred Philippe invented for Trifari the original collection of animals and flowers that came to be called "Clear Bellies" (or, as they are called nowadays, "Jelly Bellies"), so named because of the large gem-cut pieces of lucite that formed the center ("belly") of the figure. He was able to produce in this style an amazing range of creatures (fishes, spiders, turtles, snails, storks, penguins, frogs, crabs, lizards, cats, swans etc.) and a charming series of flowers, each piece embellished with coloured and white pastes on strategic spots.

In 1953, and later in 1957, the First Lady, Mme Eisenhower, wore Trifari jewels at her inaugural ball. Both sets were parures of pearls artistically designed by Alfred Philippe.

In 1955, in a landmark federal copyright case, Trifari was awarded a judgement that established fashion jewelry design as a work of art, and therefore worthy of copyright.

Some Trifari creations are inspired by classical mythology. As instance, the *Cornucopia*, or "horn of plenty", is a symbol of abundance and nourishment: originally, it is associated with the birth and nurturance of Zeus in Crete, where the baby god was cared for by some divine creatures, and especially by the goat Amalthea who supplied him with her milk. According with this version, the "Cornucopia" is supposed to be a horn of Amalthea, which, thanks to Zeus, is destined to provide unending nourishment and wealth.

Coro

The Coro company (Cohn & Rosenberger) started doing business about 1900. It was the largest of all costume jewelry manufactures, and marked the jewelry in many different names. The list would be probably too long to be published here, but the top of their line was Coro Craft with Coro in script and with the Pegasus emblem in block or outside of block. Later, the top of the line would

¹ The content of this article (2012) is mostly drawn from manuscript drafts by Giordana Forti Cavallini (d. 2005), a pupil of Roberto Longhi who spent the last ten years of her life studying and collecting pieces of American fashion costume jewelry. Annie Goldenthal is the pseudonym that Giordana Forti Cavallini used in her correspondence with other collectors. Some materials also derive from Annie's amateurish website, that is still visible in the web (<http://utenti.multimania.it/glycera/spille.html>). All the photos that appear on the Mythimedia website refer to Giordana Forti Cavallini's private collections. All rights reserved.

become "Vendome", and they could compete with some of the most famous manufactures of the costume jewelry. Katz was the famous designer for tremblers and crowns for this company and was head of the company in the Forties.

Among Coro's creations, the "Coro-Duette", a particular type of brooch made with a couple of twin clips, became extremely popular and largely imitated.

Eisenberg

The name Eisenberg is synonymous with all that glitters, as the firm used only the best quality Austrian crystals available. The glitter was for real and was quite expensive considering that it was fake. A pin in the Forties would cost as much or more than an average worker could earn in one week. But Eisenberg quality was absolutely outstanding: the best plating and metals of the time went into the piece.

It has become so popular that even the fake is being copied with the intent to deceive. So, if you want to get an Eisenberg collection, you should be sure of your dealer and educate yourself to look for the fake Eisenberg.

The first jewelry made by the company was as accessories to the garments they made and it was not signed but was marked "Sterling" and came on the garment and in a blue velvet box inscribed "Eisenberg & Sons Originals".

Around the mid 1930s, the jewelry was signed just Eisenberg and then "Eisenberg Original"©. Then just a monogram "E" in the early Forties was used either alone or with Eisenberg marks. "Eisenberg Ice" was used from 1950 on except for a period of about ten years starting in 1975 when no mark was used.

Nowadays, an authentic Eisenberg piece is quite rare and expensive.

Hobé

The Hobé story started in Paris 1887.

Robert Hobé's grandfather, Jacques Hobé, believed that costume jewelry could be manufactured in much the same manner as fine jewelry without sacrificing quality, and that the pleasure of wearing such pieces did not need to be confined to the upper echelon of French society. With new manufacturing techniques, he turned his belief into a viable concept, one that his son, William, brought to New York some years later.

A master craftsman in his own right, William Hobé quickly established an outstanding reputation in the United States, founded on the same principles his father adhered to in Europe.

His talents were immediately recognized and the dazzling results of these unique abilities were soon in demand by a widely divergent audience, including Hollywood stars and producers for whom he created not only jewelry but costume designs as well.

Hobé's deep interest in historical costuming and settings was a source of inspiration for his own design, in which he emulated the various styles of the past. The result was a complex intricacy of designs with the look of rare museum pieces.

Each was handmade, frequently involving hundreds of separate parts. Little wonder that Hobé soon became "Jewelry of Legendary Splendour", for they not only encompassed the historical legends William Hobé studied so assiduously, but they were the epitome of splendour as well.

The Hobé legend has continued through the generations. William's sons, Robert and Donald, maintained the family "jewelry dynasty", Bob Hobé in design and manufacture, and Don in sales.

Their three sons are also actively involved in the business.

There are over 1200 styles in the present Hobé's line, a mind-boggling accomplishment for every group. But, above all, the whole line is characterized by a permanent standard of outstanding quality and elegance, not very easy to find in costume jewelry production.

Miriam Haskell

Miriam Haskell's work is the subject of Deanna Farneti Cera's monography *I gioielli di Miriam*

Haskell (Milano, Idea Books 1997). It is an ambitious undertaking for various reasons.

Miriam Haskell, one of the icons of American costume jewelry, could perhaps be likened to the illustrious Mademoiselle Coco Chanel in France, as they both came from similar backgrounds. Self-taught, coming from humble beginnings, Ms. Haskell carved her career early, in the toughest decades possible, the 1920s through the 1940s, in New York City.

Miriam Haskell's jewelry was entirely hand-assembled, from beads and findings. Ms. Haskell often traveled to Europe to buy. Her talent for finding the best designers and crafters was legendary, and her workshop in New York City employed between fifteen to sixty people, at the height of the American Depression.

But why was writing about Ms. Haskell's life and production more challenging than all the other jewelry?

As Ms. Cera puts it: for one, Ms. Haskell was a very private person, and not much was known or written about her during her lifetime. Two, Ms. Haskell never advertised in the fashion magazines as so many of her designer and manufacturer competitors did. Her jewelry, at times, accessorized clothing fashions for well-known designers, so some photos and sketches were found. A complete pictorial and descriptive library of her designs was, however, very difficult to compile.

Further, Ms. Haskell, in her early career, sold her jewelry in her own store only: at first, a hotel lobby shop, and later, a prominent boutique area in the Saks Fifth Avenue department store. Her work was self-advertising, by word of mouth.

Ms. Haskell thus had little need to spend money on print; her customers were her best advertising, wearing her jewels at New York and international society events. The commercially manufactured jewelry with the Miriam Haskell label came much later, after Ms. Haskell had personally retired.

Figure 1: *Cornucopia*, Trifari

Figure 2: *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Coro Craft.

Figure 3: *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Coro.

Figure 4: The Pegasus emblem, Coro Craft.

Figure 5: *Neptune*, Ramer Jewelry.