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Editor in Chief: Giampaolo Pioli

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English Editor: Grace Russo Bullaro

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“Cartier and Myths” Exhibit at Rome’s Capitoline Museums

The exhibit features jewelry inspired by several ancient gods, heroes and monsters



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan

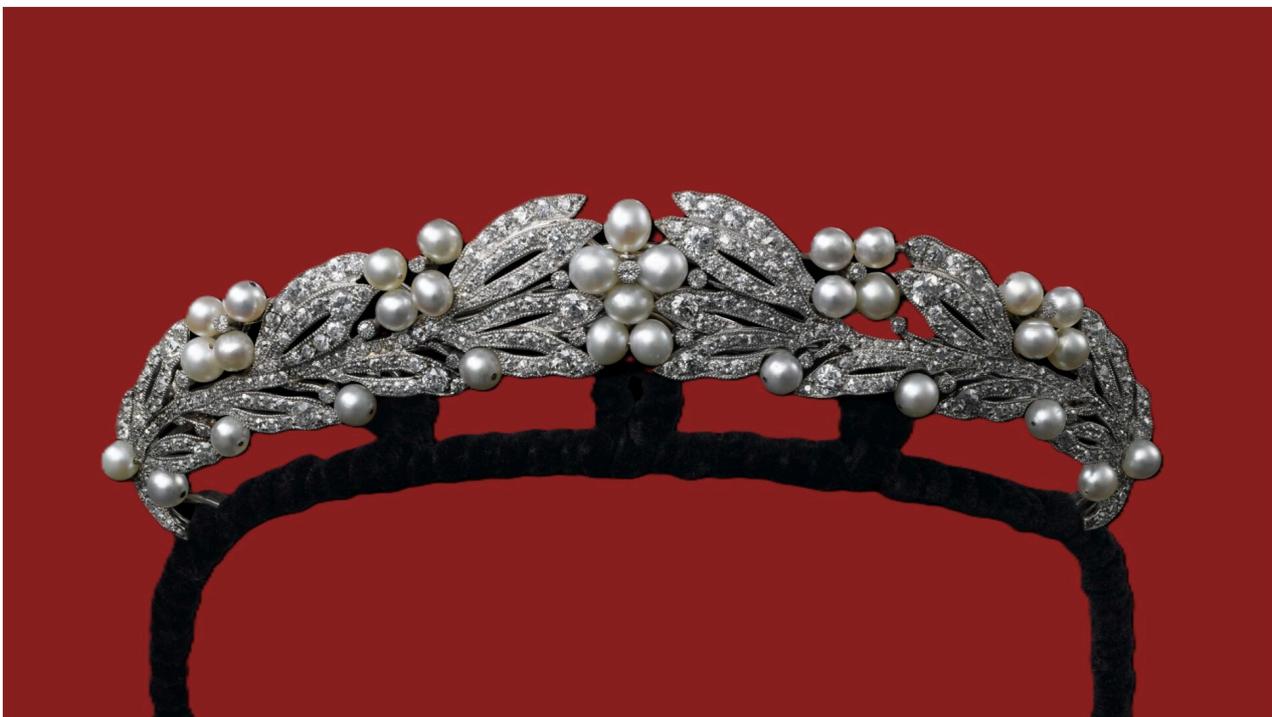


A Stomacher Brooch (1907), a large ornate piece of jewelry worn in the center of a woman's bodice from the neckline to the waist, was popular in the 19th century as a symbol of wealth and status. Courtesy of the Cartier Collection

Gestisci consenso

The exhibition "Cartier & Myths" will be at the Renaissance *Palazzo Nuovo* of Rome's Capitoline Museums through March 15. It's the French maison's 45th temporary exhibition, but it's the first held in Rome and the first one to display Cartier creations alongside artifacts of a museum's permanent collection. Not to mention that it's also the first temporary exhibition ever held in this, the world's oldest museum. The Capitoline Museums trace their origin to 1471, when Pope Sixtus IV donated ancient bronzes to the people of Rome, creating what is widely regarded as the first public museum in history. It was then opened to the public in 1733 by Pope Clement XII after he'd acquired Cardinal Alessandro Albani's marble sculpture collection.

Since its foundation in 1847, the Maison Cartier has drawn inspiration for its jewellery from ancient Greek and Roman art. "Cartier & Myths" traces this inspiration: from the pastiches of the 19th century's great collectors and goldsmiths—the Castellani family in Rome—to the neoclassical scrolling garland style inspired by ancient Greek vases and Piranesi engravings during the Belle Epoque, to the modern reinterpretations of ancient forms in the early 20th century, to the return of yellow gold in the 1940s, to works inspired by Jean Cocteau in the post-war period and to the playful revisitation of myths in the 1970s, each phase being its contemporary approach to antiquity.



Tiara created on commission. Cartier, Paris, 1907

Divided into two sections, the displays in the first are in chronological order; the second is of jewelry inspired by several ancient gods, heroes and monsters: Demeter, Eros, Hephaestus, Hercules, Jason, Medusa, Mercury, Orpheus, Persephone, Venus, and Zeus—their myths and their symbols—using specific representative gemstones. Examples of these are pearls for Venus, gold for Jason, Zeus and Hephaestus, and coral for Medusa.

In the first section we learn that in the mid-19th century European taste was captivated by the neo-archaeological style of the Castellani family. This style's success in France is linked to Napoleon III's acquisition of Giovanni Pietro Campana's extraordinary collection of antique jewels for the Louvre in 1861. Then, a generation later, in 1898, with the arrival of Louis Cartier (1875-1942) at the helm—alongside his father Louis-François—the Maison's designers were encouraged to consult the books in Louis's library and copy ancient works of art, decorations, and architecture to transform them into contemporary jewelry.

Among the star pieces in this first section are several tiaras; they were originally inspired by the earliest depiction of a crown of wheat ears, the headdress of the bust of the Empress Livia Drusilla (58 BC-29 AD), the wife of the Emperor Augustus, which opens the exhibition. Tiaras set in platinum and diamonds persisted into the early 20th century among a new elite



A necklace with pearls (1911), the symbol of Venus and love. Courtesy of the Cartier Collection

“Pliny’s doves”, so named because of a description written by Pliny the Elder in *Naturalis Historia* (77 AD) of a mosaic dating to the 2nd century BC. Already famous in antiquity and frequently copied, the ancient copy exhibited here was found in Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli and entered the Capitoline collections in 1764.

Among the stars of the exhibition’s second section are necklaces and bracelets in the shape of flexible snakes on display next to Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Bust of Medusa* (1648), since 1731 on display in the *Palazzo dei Conservatori*, the earliest building of the Capitoline Museums across the square geometrically designed by Michelangelo, the inspiration of another star here, the 1927 Cartier watch.

Most of the approximately 200 pieces of jewelry on display belong to the Cartier Historical Collection founded in 1983. These date from as early as the 1860s to the present and today number approximately 3,500 pieces. The Collection’s first exhibition was held in 1989 at the Petit Palais in Paris. “Cartier and Myths” is the second monographic exhibition dedicated to Cartier in Italy. The first, “Cartier Design Viewed by Ettore Sottsass” was held at the *Palazzo Reale* in Milan in 2002.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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The Borso d'Este Bible on Exhibit at the Library of the Italian Senate in Rome

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