

The Tiara - Elegance Abandoned

by Geoffrey Munn F.S.A.

THE ORIGINS OF THE TIARA ARE VERY REMOTE INDEED. In antiquity the brows of the victorious and the newly wed were bound with flowers and leaves, and when circumstances allowed, these garlands and wreaths were of the finest beaten gold. Those that have survived were almost always the crowning glories of the dead and were buried with them in anticipation of a majestic afterlife. We know from ancient records that from the 7th Century BC garlands of fine gold were a typical offering to the Gods and that temple authorities displayed them as evidence of the wealth and power of their sanctuaries. However, owing to their intrinsic value, next to none of these are intact and we must rely on funerary jewellery to give us an idea of their spectacular beauty and craftsmanship. Minute observation of nature is characteristic of the best Greek examples when the realism of flowers, buds, thorns and fruit is heightened by pollinating flies, bees and cicadas.

The plants themselves had special meanings which have come down to us today: laurel was for victory, ivy for tenacity, and myrtle for love. Together with these naturalistic wreaths there are two other forms of head ornament in antiquity which were, in modern times, the inspiration for tiaras. One is based on the shape of a warrior's helm and circles the head as a decorated bandeau rising to a pinnacle in the front and is called a diadem. The other is a stiffened upright band rather like a halo which is found as early as the 7th Century BC in Scythia which is now the Ukraine. It evolved to become part of traditional Russian costume and is called a kokoshnik, meaning cocks comb.

Like the jewels themselves the word tiara is of Greek origin and means literally to "pass partly through it". This is a reference to the way the jewel is held like a garland of flowers in the hair. Perversely in modern times it is said that only those head ornaments which are closed at the back are true tiaras.



Figure 1. A gold and enamel tiara from *The Devonshire Parure*, the central lapis lazuli intaglio representing *The Emperor Commodus*.
Their Graces The Duke and Duchess of Devonshire.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word "tiara" has been in use since 1715 but the history of this particular type of jewellery is a curious aesthetic hiatus.

Owing to their popularity in the ancient world these uniquely imposing and flattering ornaments were very much part of the repertoire of the Renaissance artist and they are often worn by goddesses in paintings and sculpture.

However, they are not worn by mortals until the turn of the 18th Century, possibly because patrons were more inclined to demonstrate

their Christian piety than their admiration of a Pagan past.

It appears that the stage may have been the catalyst for a change in prevailing attitudes towards dress. A new and sometimes near hysterical appreciation of the antique was a theoretical reaction to the excesses of the Baroque and the Rococo. Actors and actresses were encouraged to wear appropriate costume. The portrait of Elizabeth Hartley painted by Angelica Kauffmann, which can now be seen in The Garrick Club in London, shows the actress as Hermione in "The Winter's Tale". She wears a jewelled diadem and belt of classical inspiration. A fine collection of 18th Century theatre jewellery can be seen in the Museum of London and at the Theatre Museum including several tiaras belonging to the famous actresses Mrs. Siddons and Madame Vestris.

However, the wearing of tiaras in society does not seem to have taken hold until the turn of the 18th Century. Throughout Europe the new wave of neo-classicism, well established by 1804 was given impetus by the coronation of Napoleon. Lacking the ancestral authority of his predecessors the Emperor turned to the Imperial past of Rome for a new style which would endorse his authority. At the coronation ceremony in 1804 the Empress and the majority of her attendants wore tiaras. Some were set with antique cameos which emphasised not only the classical origins of



Figure 2 (Above and right). A tiara in the Gothic taste set with kite and cushion shaped sapphires and diamonds, the sapphires set in gold, the diamonds in silver. Provenance: made for Queen Victoria from Prince Albert's design. The Earl and Countess of Harewood.

their jewellery but also their sumptuous costumes. The fashion for wearing tiaras was still sufficiently new that a number of ladies resorted to wearing older necklaces and brooches in their hair to create the same effect.

One might reasonably ask why the traditional prejudices against the wearing of wreaths and diadems were overcome at the turn of the 18th Century and apparently not before. Perhaps this new wave of neo-classicism was so overwhelming that it eclipsed the pagan associations which were unsettling to previous generations. Surprisingly some of these prejudices survive even to the present day. Tiaras are only worn by brides and married women because they still imply the loss of innocence to love.

As a sign of purity Queen Victoria wore a tiara of porcelain orange blossoms in her hair when she married Albert in the Chapel Royal in St. James' Palace in 1840. No one could have relished her new status more than the young Queen. She wrote to her uncle King Leopold of the Belgians the day after the wedding: "Really I do not think it is possible for anybody in the world to be happier or as happy as I am. He is an Angel...to look into those dear eyes and that dear sunny face is enough to make me adore him". During this blissful early married life Albert was consulted on every issue of design and arranged several gem set tiaras for his wife. One of Gothic form, set with sapphires and diamonds, cost £415 in 1842 (fig.2) and another, set with emeralds, by a firm called Kitching, cost £1,150 in 1845. The Queen once wrote "Albert has such taste and arranges everything for me about my jewels". The sapphire tiara seems to have been inspired by a small crown worn by



Queen Henrietta Maria in a portrait after Van Dyck now in the National Portrait Gallery, London, but Queen Victoria wears it in her portrait by Winterhalter of 1842 (fig.4). Of

Figure 3. Queen Victoria (1842), by Franz Xavier Winterhalter. Photograph by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen.





Figure 5. A gold tiara decorated with cloisonné and dipped enamels, set with brown agates and white glass beads, by Castellani, circa 1867.

the emerald tiara the Queen wrote on 25 April 1845 “I was “coiffée” before dinner with a lovely diadem of diamonds and emeralds, designed by my beloved Albert...”. After her husband’s premature death on 14th September 1861 the Queen went into perpetual mourning and she hardly ever wore coloured stones again. She gave away her turquoise tiara to her third daughter, Helena, on 4th July 1866.

Although the Queen never abandoned her widow’s habit, the taste for formal receptions and balls continued nonetheless. The enthusiasm of the Prince of Wales for entertaining and formal dress was second only to his passion for shooting and racing. Very often a stay in the country involved all three, and it most certainly did at his Norfolk home, Sandringham House. He and the Princess of Wales were sticklers for detail and a casual approach to dress would invariably bring a stinging rebuke. At a dinner in their honour the American heiress, Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough wore a diamond crescent in her hair because the bank in which she kept her tiara was closed when she arrived in London. The Prince, frowning at the jewel said “The Princess has taken the trouble to wear a tiara, why have you not done so?”.

The tiaras made for King Edward VII’s friends, known as the Marlborough House set, were made of precious stones

by the grandest retail jewellers including Garrards, Cartier and Fabergé. However, tiaras of varying degrees of intrinsic value were worn by every woman from the middle classes and above. Ladies thought their head ornaments of no greater importance than their necklaces and brooches. Furthermore these jewels were no less a tiara if they were made simply of gold, or enamel, rock crystal, jet, coral, horn and sometimes even steel – polished and cut or blackened like gun metal. Those that shunned an extravagant display of gemstones could invest in art and craftsmanship instead. Bearing in mind the ancient origins of the tiara there could be no more appropriate a maker for beautiful wreaths, diadems, and filets for the hair than the internationally famous firm of Castellani in Rome and its pupil Carlo Giuliano.

Pastiches of the most elegant yet complicated Greek and Etruscan jewels were made for the wives of Princes, Dukes, poets, amateurs, and archaeologists whose passion for the past exceeded even that of our own time. The English “milord” on Grand Tour often attempted to bring back some of the sunny warmth of Italy to a smoggy London in the form of the rich yellow gold jewellery which Castellani sold at his shop at the Piazza Fontana De Trevi (fig.5). These archaeological gold wreaths were grafted like mistletoe onto London Society to the extent that the style was lampooned by Punch in 1859 and again in 1880. There could have been no better circumstances for Carlo Giuliano to establish



Figure 6. A neo-Egyptian gold tiara in the form of an amuletic winged globe set centrally with a star ruby flanked with translucent green enamel and diamond set wings, by Giuliano, circa 1900.

his first workshop in Soho in 1860 and this was followed in 1874 by the opening of retail premises at 115 Piccadilly. Here he made tiaras in the Greek and Roman taste but in time turned his attention to the jewellery of the Renaissance

Figure 7. A gold tiara supporting a stylised wreath of banded agate leaves and pearl berries, the front of the jewel in the form of a rosette of similarly carved petals centring a single pearl, by Carlo Giuliano.



as a source of inspiration, focussing attention on the enamel work which characterises the best of it. Popular amongst the artistic community who recognised his aims Giuliano was patronised by various members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. It was they who would have particularly admired the tiara of enamelled green wings set with a star ruby (fig.6) or perhaps the small wreath which appears to be made of porcupine quills but is carved from black and white agate (fig.7).

Across the Channel in Paris René Lalique placed the same emphasis on the value of art and design as did Castellani

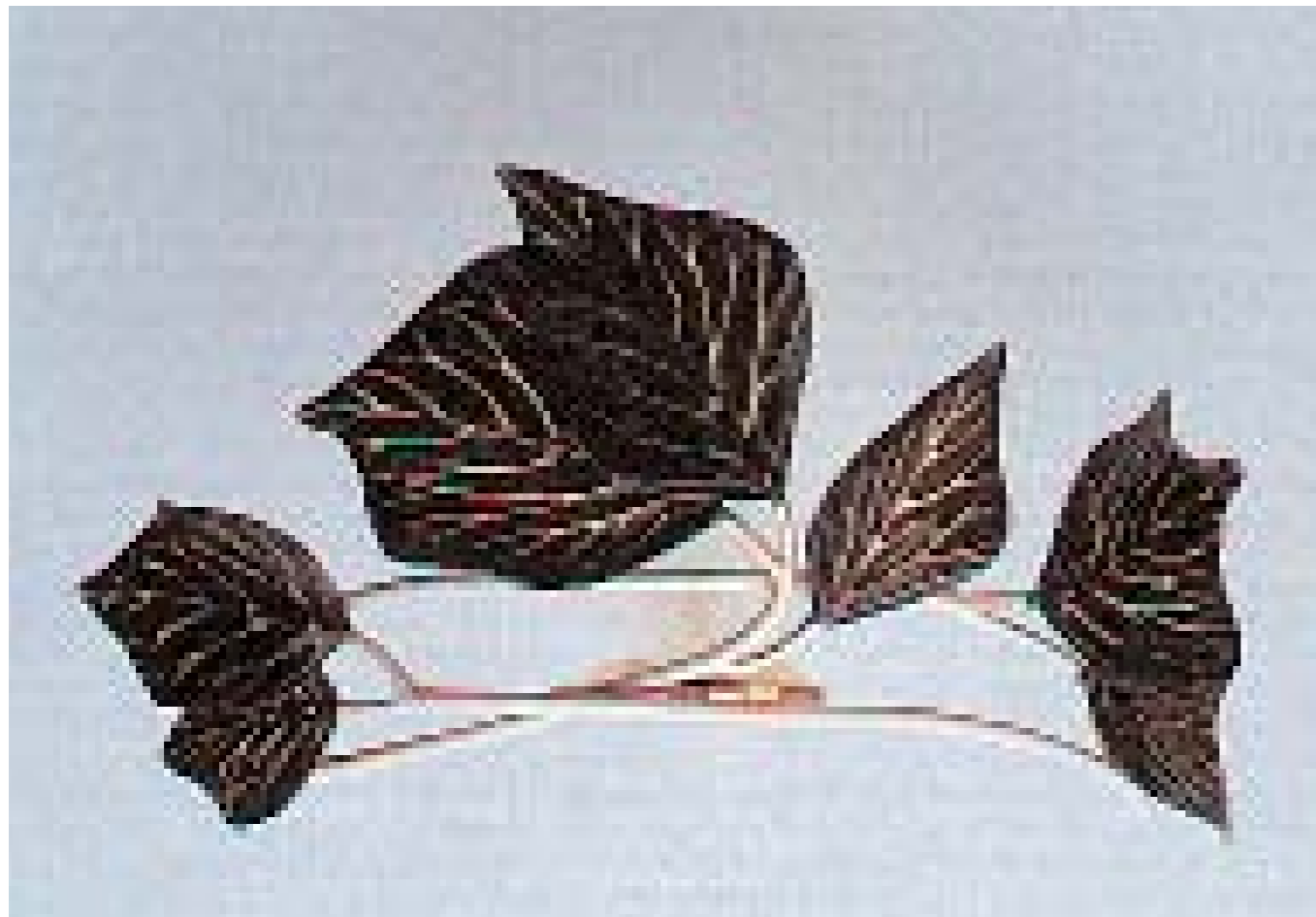


Figure 8. An enameled gold and cow's horn tiara, in the form of the stems and leaves of the Hornbeam, by Lalique, circa 1900.

and Giuliano but his intentions were not only different from the revivalist jewellers but might well be seen as a reaction against them. The opening of the Japanese ports to trade in 1851 had brought a dazzling array of objects to the West and with them an entirely new way of seeing nature which was quite different from the stylised view of the ancients and that of their Victorian successors. Lalique and his followers in the Art Nouveau movement learnt from the Japanese to observe nature meticulously (fig.8) and to find beauty not only in fresh leaves and flowers but all of nature, including corruption and decay. In the Gulbenkian Institute there are tiaras of cherry blossom carved from tinted horn which contrast with the brown leaves of autumn bracken and diadems of knotted vipers guarding trails of eggs cleverly suggested by enormous pearls.

Although René Lalique is certainly pre-eminent amongst contemporary jewellers, and arguably amongst the Art Nouveau movement as a whole, there are various craftsmen working at the same time who deserve special mention. They are George Fouquet, Frederic Boucheron (fig.9), Lucien Falize and Joseph Chaumet.

Today there is a common misconception that the wearing of tiaras implies nobility. In the 19th Century they were considered of no greater importance than any other piece of jewellery and apart from the proviso that the wearer should be married they would be worn by the majority of the

ladies at any formal reception. Regrettably things are different today and they are very rarely seen in the United Kingdom except at the State opening of Parliament and the Lord Mayor of London's annual banquet. A few invitations to private parties stipulate that they should be worn and Maureen, the late Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava's 90th birthday party at Claridges last year was just such an occasion. The reason why the wearing of tiaras is now mistakenly considered the preserve of court and courtiers alone is that strict adherence to tradition in every aspect of life is the very cornerstone of Royalty. The regular display of sumptuousness and a strict protocol are crucial to the maintenance of the mystery and fine jewellery is quite simply part of a wider scheme. In America at the turn of the century tiaras were often worn, but by the 1960's the custom was already in serious decline. Perhaps this is because in a country whose constitution is based on equality a degree of extravagance is allowed, but the implication of nobility is now no longer tolerated. Amongst those American women who enjoyed wearing tiaras in the early years of this century were Mrs. Evalyn Walsh McLean, Mrs. W.K. Vanderbilt, Mrs. J. Pierpont Morgan, Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, Mrs. Blumenthal, Mrs. Gould, Mrs. Stotesbury, and Mrs. William Astor.

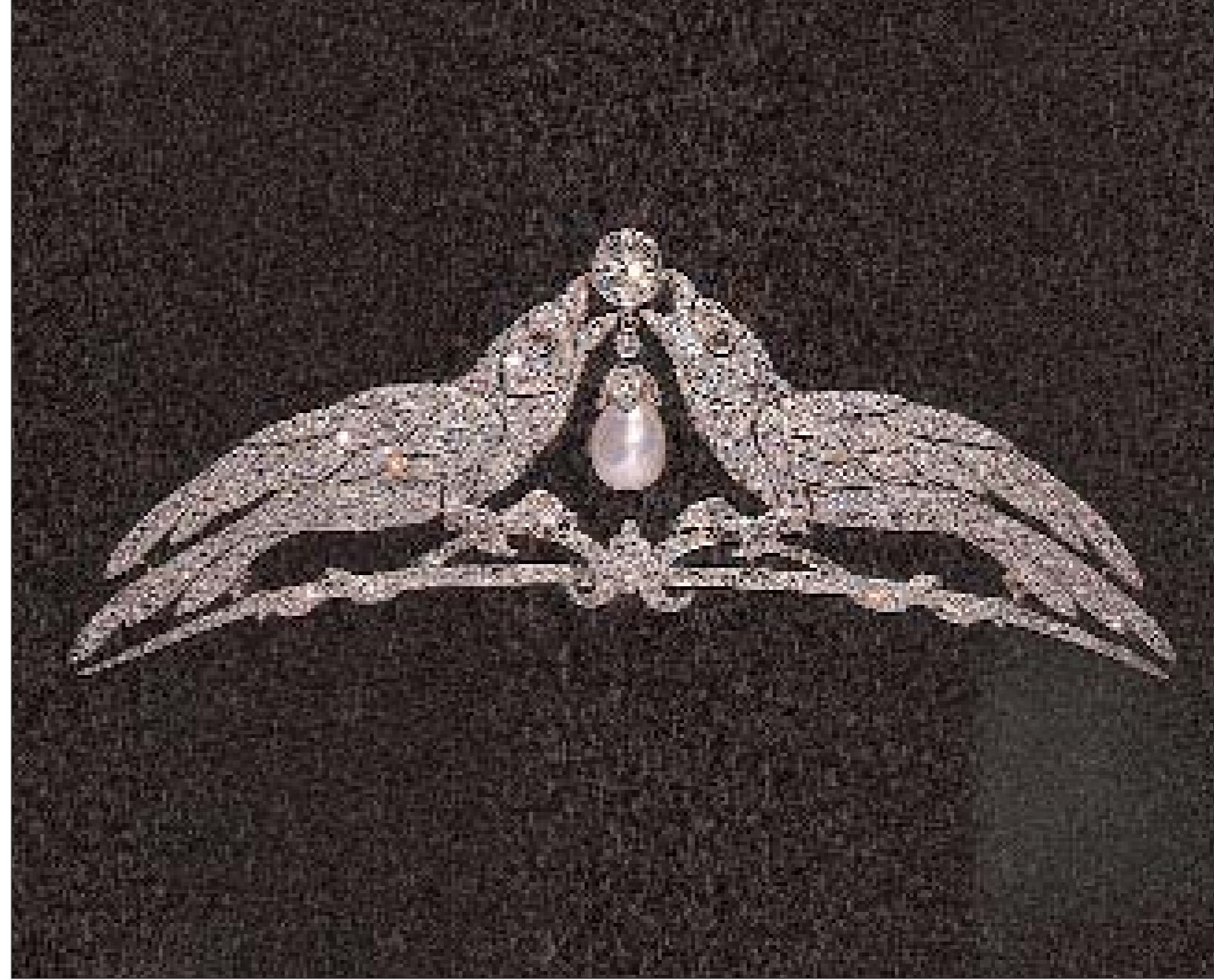


Figure 9. A gold tiara set with diamonds in the form of birds confronting each other for possession of a brilliant diamond and pearl ornament, by Boucheron, circa 1915.

Despite the fact that Countess Haugwitz Reventlow (Barbara Hutton) ordered a tiara from Cartier as late as 1938 few others were inclined to do so. As a result those of a conspicuously Art Deco style are rarer than most. Like the majority of their predecessors in the 19th century they were made to dismantle to make the best use of the precious materials from which they were made. Tiaras are usually contained in specially fitted leather or velvet boxes the bases of which lift out to reveal a bewildering variety of alternative attachments, secured with winged screws each separately numbered to avoid the confusion of the dresser or lady's maid. In a matter of minutes hair pins, brooches, dress ornaments, bracelets and double clips can be assembled, and furthermore most can easily be slipped off their frames and

when reversed make completely flexible necklaces.

Since the almost universal levelling of society and the consequent decline in the wearing of tiaras their fate has been perilous. Those which have a high intrinsic value but do not dismantle in the way described above are invariably broken up when offered for sale. The most pitiful example was the splendid ruby and diamond jewel by Bolin given by Tsar Alexander III to his daughter which was sold at auction some years ago. The temptation to remove the very valuable rubies was too much for the jewellery trade and the carcass of the tiara was later to be seen aimlessly drifting through the open market plugged with ugly pale amethysts. Others are destroyed completely, their memory perpetuated only in archives of their makers and in society photographs of the owners.

By some strange miracle the very valuable emerald and diamond tiara made by Bapst for the French Crown jewels in 1820 (Fig.10) has survived because it was bought by an



Figure 10. A gold tiara set with emeralds and diamonds in silver, from the French Crown jewels, by Everard and Frederic Bapst, circa 1820. Provenance: Duchesse d' Angoulême.

English noble family which intended it for use. The majority of those tiaras which remain intact today are either still with the descendants of their original owners, or their artistic value is greater than the raw materials from which they are made. Thus a tiara carved from horn decorated with moonstones is more likely to remain unmolested than any of its more elaborate cousins. (Fig.11).

However there is the faintest hope that the fashion for wearing what is certainly the crowning glory of all jewellery is returning. In the world of haute couture Galliano and Vivienne Westwood are making new tiaras, and recently Versace designed an elaborate diamond set diadem which was subsequently worn by Madonna.

In the meantime this small exhibition at The International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show is a rare opportunity to see a splendid group of tiaras before they return to the velvet darkness of the safe deposit box there to glint unseen, waiting patiently to decorate the brows of a succession of brides, as yet unborn.



Figure 11. A carved and tinted horn tiara in the form of elderberries to which moonstone dew drops cling, by Frederick James Partridge, for Liberty & Co., circa 1900.

Acknowledgment

All Photographs courtesy of Wartski, London, except for figure 3