

All That Glitters

For more than two decades, collector and dealer Ronna Lee Aikins has sought out the sparkle and glamour of rhinestone jewelry, an exuberant and affordable mid-twentieth-century art form. By Cathleen McCarthy



Vintage floral brooches and rhinestone circle pins festooned with handset aurora borealis rhinestones and imitation diamonds, peridots, and aquamarines, were worn on sweaters, dresses, and even coats in the late '40s and early '50s. Stones can be of several varieties, including marquise, round, teardrop, and pear-shaped. Examples pictured here range from \$50 to \$150.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW McCAUL. STYLED BY GINA PROVENZANO. FOR RESOURCES, SEE ADDRESS INDEX.



In the '50s, necklaces like these were popular gifts for proms, graduations, and weddings. Today they sell for (top to bottom) about \$60, \$80, and \$130. "These necklaces were so beautifully set, they could be imposters for diamonds," says Ronna.

One day in the early 1980s, Ronna Lee Aikins came across a striking rhinestone bracelet with multiple layers of teardrop-shaped imitation topaz and intricate filigree. "The bug bit me!" she recalls. "I knew then I would buy jewelry forever." Ronna has since amassed about 4,000 pieces of rhinestone jewelry, mostly made in the United States between 1930 and 1960. She has written two books on her collection and now she's selling it—well, some of it. Ronna owns a boutique in Indiana, Pa., about 50 miles east of Pittsburgh, where she sells a select fraction of her jewelry. "My collection is out of hand," she admits. "I appreciate everything from the simplest, delicate floral spray to the loud, glitzy, and gaudy. I can't wear every piece or even display it all."

Ronna has no plans to stop collecting. "There is nothing like finding new pieces," she says. "The first thing I do is shine it up. That's a wonderful moment." **CL**

a mother-and-daughter collecting team



"If you don't know what you're after, buy what you like until you learn," advises Ronna Lee Aikins (far left, with fellow jewelry collector, daughter Katie). "Old mill towns are often treasure troves of costume jewelry," says Ronna. "Women had the income and they could go to local department stores for jewelry." For more information, log on to ronnalees.com.

Ronna sees young women pinning rhinestone brooches to jeans and denim jackets



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: An Italian gold-plated enamel bracelet (with a matching compact) was owned by Ronna's mother. Flexible diamanté earrings from the '50s (\$55–\$75). A lizard brooch (\$105–\$135) measures 3½ inches. A floral spray of rhinestones and enameling (\$110).

PHOTOGRAPH (TOP RIGHT) BY DAVID CHAEK