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MARRIED to the JOB

The appeal of arts and crafts jewellery is timeless, none more so than the pioneering designs of Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, writes Anthony Bernbaum

Above A silver gilt, pearl, amethyst and green chrysoberyl necklace by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin c. 1908. As is typical of much of the Gaskin's jewellery it is unmarked

Right The piece in a 1908 article in *The Studio* reveals the pendant was designed and executed by Georgie Gaskin

I have been a collector, and now dealer, in arts and crafts silver for more than 15 years but until recently had never fully embraced the magic of Arthur and Georgie Gaskin. It was only in 2018 that I made their introduction when I was lucky enough to receive an email from a major arts and crafts collector who had a passion for their work. A few poor-quality snaps followed that piqued my interest in this famous married couple's jewellery. I acquired the 1984 exhibition catalogue of the Gaskins produced by the Fine Art Society, which remains the seminal publication on their lives and work. With every paragraph my admiration for their contribution to the Birmingham School and arts and craft grew stronger. In particular Georgie Gaskin, the driving force behind the partnership. As early as 1903 *The Magazine of Art* acknowledged both her design and craftsmanship: "The demand is such that strenuous effort is needed for Mrs Gaskin, who has a gift for divining the individual wants of her clients, to maintain in every case that touch of personality which contributes no little to the attractiveness of her work..... Mrs Gaskin's achievements ought to show what can be done by anyone possessed of the above qualifications."

THE STUDIO

In June of 2019 I met the collector who showed me a large part of his Gaskin jewellery collection. One piece alone was enough to ensure I was smitten for life. A silver gilt pendant set with tourmalines, pearls and peridot. Possibly a deliberate choice of suffragette colours, the pendant had full provenance from the family of the Manchester architect and designer James Henry Sellers who commissioned it as a gift for his wife in 1908. The necklace appeared in *The Studio* magazine when it was being exhibited at the New Gallery. The cherry on top was *The Studio's* description that it was designed and made by Georgie. Like so many women of the period she worked in the shadow of her husband and yet here was a piece exemplifying her unique contribution. The pendant had aesthetic brilliance and provenance required for a great piece of jewellery. A healthy avarice overtook me and I was lucky enough to leave my meeting with this piece and several others acquired. It seems, I too, was now a Gaskin collector and dealer.



'Like so many women of the period Georgie worked in the shadow of her husband and yet here was a piece exemplifying her unique contribution'

BIRMINGHAM AND THE GASKINS

Arthur and Georgie Gaskin (née France) were a married couple who most famously designed and made jewellery in the arts and crafts Birmingham School tradition from c. 1900 to 1924.

Arthur (1862-1928) was born in Birmingham, while Georgie (1866-1934) hailed from Shrewsbury. Both came from middle-class backgrounds, though Georgie's was much more affluent, initially causing objections to the relationship. The couple met at the Birmingham School of Art where Arthur was a teacher and Georgie a student. Despite her family's reservations, they married in 1894 and for most of their lives they lived in or around Birmingham and, like many artists and designers from the area moved to the Cotswolds in later life. They moved to Chipping Campden in 1924 where they lived until Arthur's death in 1928.

At the time they lived there, Birmingham was a city of contrasts. On the one hand it was highly industrialised; the jewellery industry alone employed up to 30,000 people working in some 700 workshops in the heart of the city. On the other hand it had the good fortune to have an enlightened and cultured public administration. In the 1870s, a group of local merchant families, mainly non-conformist Quakers and Unitarians began to take an active role in the political life of the city. Under the mayorship of Joseph Chamberlain, families such as the Cadburys became patrons of the arts to such an extent Birmingham in the 1880s has been compared to Florence in the time of the Medicis.

ILLUSTRATORS AND ARTISTS

The Gaskins' reputation was founded not simply on jewellery. At Birmingham's Municipal School of Art, Arthur fell under the influence of visiting lecturers, including William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and William Luthaby. His work took on the medieval

Right Georgie and Arthur Gaskin 'bird' brooch, silver, opal doublet, faux emerald and pink tourmaline

Below The back of the pendant is beautifully worked and includes the mark 'G'



Bottom left A silver amethyst choker by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, c. 1915

Below right Arthur Gaskin (1862-1928), *Kilhwych, The King's Son*

Below far right Arthur Gaskin (1862-1928) *But One of Them, the Youngest, Remained Behind*, 1892

Bottom right Georgie Gaskin (1866-1934), *ABC An Alphabet*, 1895, which she wrote and illustrated



Recognising Gaskins' work

Gaskins' work is most readily identifiable by their use of delicate interconnected leaves set with semi-precious stones. Subtle differences emerge over time,

but the similarity of the pieces is more striking than their differences. As ever with jewellery a close examination of the backs and clasps also helps distinguish the maker. The Gaskins tended to make their own distinctive (but not unique) types of clasps. The construction of their jewellery also varied but normally involved a core structure of flattened wires on which to attach the decorative elements. Stones were not normally backed and were held in place with high silver mounts, not clasps. They almost never used emeralds or diamonds but green paste and rock crystal.

undertones that became the trademark of many illustrators of the period. In 1900 their careers turned towards jewellery design, a move which was given a boost in 1903. The Vittoria Street School for Jewellers and Silversmiths had been set up as a trade school as part of the Municipal School of Art in the heart of city's jewellery quarter. When the headmaster Robert Catterson-Smith took up the position of head at the Municipal School of Art, his position at the Vittoria Street School went to Arthur. Apart from financial security, the position gave the Gaskins ready access to a skilled pool of assistants among the staff and pupils.





A silver, moonstone and chrysoprase necklace by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, c. 1909. The design features in the Gaskins' drawing book held at the V&A. As with many of their designs, the pair gave this piece a name which appears faintly on the drawing as 'Estelle'

WHY ARE THEY REVERED?

They were revered in their day, and subsequently for three main reasons. Firstly, they were early innovators. The nascent arts and crafts movement never quite reconciled its socialist and design ideals with such a luxurious item as jewellery, which was largely overlooked by William Morris and his acolytes.



Jewellery also required skill in manufacturing and the movement shunned these traditional guilds and trades. Hence, prior to 1900, there was very little arts and crafts jewellery. While Charles Ashbee and his Guild of Handicraft were undoubtedly the first innovators around 1893, the Gaskins, even as late as 1900, joined a small elite group of artisan jewellers who were innovators of the period.

Secondly, their work was highly distinctive and arguably much more delicate and feminine than the Guild of Handicraft's jewellery. *The Studio* magazine (Vol XVIII) wrote of the Gaskins' early jewellery, exhibited at the all-important 1899 Arts and Crafts Society Exhibition: "Perhaps the chief interest attaches to the jewellery, the joint work of Mr

GASKINS' STYLE

After experimenting in fairly classic arts and crafts styles from c. 1899-1902, the couple found their unique and fairly consistent style that involved the delicate interlacing of leaves, flowers and birds with semi-precious stones. Their work was exhibited widely to great acclaim. Georgie showed some painted decorative work mounted by the Bromsgrove Guild in the Paris Exposition of 1900 and the couple's jewellery was next exhibited at the Glasgow International Exhibition in 1900. A reviewer from *The Studio* 1908, referring to work shown in the New Gallery London, stated: "Mrs Gaskin was one of the first lady jewellers to realise the absolute necessity of good technique. Good design and colour may serve to attract the casual and ignorant observer but without good craftsmanship an art object can never be perfect."

Their work became synonymous with the Birmingham School. It is now widely held that Georgie did all the designs for their jewellery (sold under the brand 'Mr & Mrs Arthur Gaskin'), with each sharing the manufacturing together with any number of apprentices and employees, invariably students from the Vittoria School. It is said that Arthur did all the enamelling which was a feature of some of their work.

"Their work became synonymous with the Birmingham School. It is now widely held that Georgie did all the designs for their jewellery, with each sharing the manufacturing"

Above right The Gaskins' designs featured in many magazines

Right A large silver, tourmaline and green paste brooch (or pendant) made by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin for a Mrs Heaton in March 1911



and Mrs Gaskin. The motive for undertaking this branch of art was that, living as they do in Birmingham, a principal centre of the manufacture of jewellery, they have always the painful evidences of the need for reform of that industry...although they can only spare time in the evenings to devote to their common undertaking, the success attained is most encouraging.”

Finally, the Gaskin’s reputation was enhanced by their role as great teachers. Arthur was renowned as such while at the Vittoria School of Art and, as a couple, they employed and trained many of their students, most notably Kate Eadie and Effie Ward, who each became successful jewellers in their own right.

Anthony Bernbaum is the founder of The Peartree Collection which specialises in arts and crafts and art nouveau silver and jewellery, for more details visit www.thepeartreecollection.com. He is also one of the exhibitors at this month’s The Open Art Fair, from March 18-24. For our preview of the event turn to page 55.

Below left A silver, pearl and moonstone pendant by Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, c. 1905-1910, unmarked

Below right Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, c. 1909, gem-set pendant sold for \$58,425 in 2016, image courtesy of Skinner



EXPECT TO PAY

Prices can range from under £1,000 for small brooches or attributed pieces, to more than £10,000 for major pieces. The record, I believe, was \$58,425 paid at Skinner auctioneers, Boston, in 2016 for a major gold necklace (below). Various factors affect price. Grand pieces in gold, set with opals and precious stones will increase the value. Whereas modifying brooches or pendants, generally detracts from value. Is a piece marked? As far as I know, the Gaskins did not assay their jewellery but did sometimes mark it with a small ‘G’. Anything with rarely seen birds is very desirable, as are the more wearable pendants and necklaces. The quality of their work can vary, probably reflecting the expense and nature of the commission and also who worked on it. Some pieces have relatively poor settings of stones under magnification.

Finally, provenance can add value. Some of the Gaskins’ drawings, sketches and workbooks have survived and are held within the V&A print rooms and Birmingham Museum. Pieces that can be tracked back to these sources often carry an additional premium.



Discover more

The Gaskins’ work can be seen in many museums including the Birmingham School of Art Gallery at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum in Cheltenham, www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk. To acquire Gaskin jewellery outside auctions you would typically need to go to a specialist gallery such as The Peartree Collection, Van den Bosch (www.vandenbosch.com) or the Tadema Gallery (www.tademagallery.com). See also Elyse Zorn Karlin’s book, *Jewelry and Metalwork in the Arts and Crafts Tradition*, and *Arthur and Georgie Gaskin*, a catalogue by Cheltenham Museum to accompany its exhibition in 1981.

