

# OSCAR HEYMAN & BROTHERS

“THE JEWELER’S JEWELER”®



Oscar

Figure 1

Nathan

The long-time subscribers to Antiquorum’s VOX, who have read my articles, will know that my area of expertise is in the field of gemology and art deco jewelry. Therefore, unless I am explaining some gem species, I am probably describing

some grand jeweler of the past, often dead and forgotten by most. In last spring’s article, for example, I wrote about the “obscure” French house of Verger Frères, who were master jewelers that designed and produced fabulous jewels, from start to finish, all under one roof, selling

to most all of the famous French retailers (see VOX, Summer, 2005, pp.9-13). Their importance culminated in the art deco period, but alas, they no longer exist. I am delighted to find myself describing the American equivalent of such a house in this article, but with one huge difference—they are still producing masterpieces for retailers today. My hope is to enlighten you, even if I am only scratching the surface in the next few pages, about the American Master Jeweler – **Oscar Heyman & Brothers, Inc.** It is such a pleasure for me, since they manifest all that I love about my trade, and a whole lot more!

Not only do they use fine and often rare gemstones, but they have an incredibly rich history, complete with archives dating back to the beginning of the 1900’s.

This firm must be one of the most “complete” fine jewelry firms in existence today. They have a



department for everything - machines to make machines and special tools (for special die- striking, metal pulling, etc.) designers, renderers to accurately sketch the artistic designers' thought, platinum- and gold-smiths, stone cutters, or lapidaries to cut all gems (except diamonds), stone sorters, stone setters, stone buyers, engravers, polishers, researchers and archivists, all the way down to the marketing... and all under one big roof on New York's Madison Avenue. Incredibly, the firm is still owned and operated by members of the original family - all the way to the third generation of Heymans.

Theirs is an inspiring story. Imagine Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. As was often the practice, two young boys were sent off to "learn a trade", or apprenticeship, leaving their hometown in what is now Latvia, for a far away, strange land, in what is now the Ukraine. They were Oscar and Nathan Heyman, the eldest of nine children, ages 13 and 16 years old (see figure #1). One can be sure that this was not an easy life for the two adolescents. Their apprenticeship was for five years, and they worked and slept at the workshop, never having had the luxury of a visit home during the

whole five years. Apparently, this workshop, in Kharkov, was owned by an uncle, who produced masterpieces for the Fabergé workshops, so one might deduce that the boys learned their trade well. Whether it was the growing, persistent anti-Semitism in Russia, or because of the economic boom in the "new world", Oscar and Nathan Heyman decided to depart for America almost immediately upon their return home. The two boys arrived in New York in 1906 (Oscar arrived a few months after Nathan) at the ages of 18 and 21. They arrived penniless and did not speak a word of English. However, the five years away from home had prepared them and given them expertise that would change the lives of their entire families for generations to come.

Oscar started to work immediately as a jeweler for a small manufacturing firm, and Nathan honed his skills as a toolmaker for Western Electric. In 1907, their brother, Harry, joined them. New York was enjoying an economic boom, and many companies started opening their doors in the

chic city. Cartier opened their New York branch in 1909, and rumor has it that Oscar, just three or four years after his arrival in the USA, was the first non-French jeweler to work for the firm. One might assume that Oscar brought



Figure 6 Modern "Pansy" Brooches in various gemstones, still in production from the 1930's

Figure 3 Art Decò Ruby and Diamond clips with copy of original rendering



Figure 7 Modern "Gardenia" Brooch and original rendering from the 1930's



with him the meticulous expertise required to produce the “Russian Style” jewelry, particularly the “Garland” style jewelry that was so fashionable, and closely ties Cartier and Fabergé at the beginning of the 20th century.

By 1911, the entire immediate Heyman family had emigrated to New York, and by 1912, “Oscar Heyman & Bros., Inc.” was established (the original firm created by Oscar, Nathan, and Harry), located at 49 Maiden Lane (the “jewelry district” of the time). There was even an announcement of their opening in the October 1912 trade magazine *Jeweler’s Circular* (today’s JCK). Their brothers Louis and William were next to join the company, learning to make jewelry from their siblings. Their brother George joined them and specialized as a diamond setter and diamond sorter and finally their sisters Lena and Frances joined in the company’s administration. The company moved to different locations throughout New York in the ensuing years, but their clientele remained with them.

As I mentioned earlier, Oscar Heyman Brothers, Inc. were known and marketed for many years, as “The

Jeweler’s Jeweler”. They earned this designation because they made pieces for the famous retail jewelry firms, like Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels (who were their major accounts), Tiffany, Black, Star & Frost, Neiman Marcus, Shreve, Crump & Low, and many others, but without the recognition from the general public that goes

with having your name on a retail storefront. However, for those in the trade, the name Oscar Heyman & Bros. is synonymous with any of the famous jewelry houses that the serious collector or appassionato might frequent. There is always added value for any piece signed OHB.

There are so many areas in which this firm excelled and excels. Perhaps because Russia was practically the sole supplier of platinum (up until WWI), the two brothers’ apprenticeship prepared them for the difficult task of working this precious metal which had just recently become the metal of choice and which was not an easy skill for the jeweler (only at the end of the 19th century

had a torch been invented that would reach the temperatures high enough to melt/work platinum, so it was not a “traditional” jeweler’s skill). Platinum was the “only” metal in vogue. It allowed gemstones to be mounted with minimal metal, allowing creativity and designs



Figure 4 Modern “Orchid Brooch” still in production from the 1930’s

Figure 8 Modern “Double Rose” Brooch and original rendering from the 1930’s

Figure 5 Today’s “Lilly-of-the-valley” Brooch and original rendering from the 1930’s



which had previously never been possible to realize, like *chiaro-scuro*, or geometric imagery, or delicate floral motifs where the stones are suspended on a “thread”; the metal was hardly noticed in these new fashions, but it was extremely hard to work and fashion with a light hand and very few jewelers at the time had acquired this skill. The jewels produced by the Heymans reflect their bravura in working with platinum, and it is particularly exciting when one is fortunate enough to find one of these early pieces.

From the beginning (at least since 1920), OHB had the foresight to establish archives – not something that most jewelers or jewelry houses did, or kept. They have always engraved a reference number in their jewelry, in the gold or platinum; this serves to identify it in the archives. All jewels made today, and many of the vintage pieces, also have their maker’s mark in it (*see figure #2*), and today each item is even accompanied by a certificate of authenticity. For those of you who have never seen jewelry archives, this might include an original rendering (which is really art and usually beautiful enough to be framed), perhaps exact weights and the costs of the materials at the time of production, to whom it was sold, and any other pertinent information on the piece. Tom Heyman (a third generation Heyman) just recently allowed me to glimpse through some of the archives, and I probably scared anyone working nearby with all of my “oooooing” and “ahhhhhing” – what a treat, especially for someone like me.

Of course, as I have already mentioned, I love the historical pieces, and OHB has plenty of history. Times were not always rewarding, though. Oscar Heyman & Brothers was one of the few jewelers that did not close their doors during the Depression. They dwindled down to only a handful of workers from a workshop of roughly 120, and apparently made charms and small pieces in order to survive, but they never shut down.

Nathan was the toolmaker, and it was probably because of his “inventions” that the firm earned seven patents between 1916 and 1942 for jewelry designs and

processes! One of these reflects an ingenious way to link sections together, for bracelets in particular. It involves a very complex die-striking procedure in platinum (for which they have another patent). A flat piece of platinum is die-struck to form a 3-dimensional box. One piece is formed as the “female”, having along one edge, two hollow tunnel-like extensions, while the other is formed as the “male”, having a similar section in the middle; these fit together and are perfectly held together by a pin inserted through the hollow spaces. This type of joining is referred to as “chenier”, becoming their signature characteristic. Bracelets, and indeed the wearing of multiple bracelets were quite the fashion in the first part of the 1900’s. Another one of the Heyman’s patents, perfecting the bracelet, is for securing the clasp, by incorporating the portion of the clasp into the last links of the bracelet. Up to this point, the clasp would have been soldered on, creating a possible weak point under stress, but now the clasp would be an integral part of the actual link, hence no weak points! I have in my inventory a beautiful art deco brooch, which converts to a pair of clips, made by OHB, and I did not know until I start-



Figure 2 The famous “HB” within “O” Oscar Heyman Bros’s maker’s mark



ed researching this article that these exhibit another patented feature by the firm – an added “safety” for clips. Each clip hides a pair of retractable pins which extend into the frame of the larger brooch fitting (since the two clips can be worn together as one larger brooch, as was quite the fashion of the day) to anchor the pieces in, making it impossible to lose them, creating a tight and precise fit (*see figure #3*).

There are some really fabulous and entertaining descriptions of patents by the Heyman brothers, so for those of you who would like to delve further into this area, a woman by the name of Margaret Steward Campbell wrote her doctoral thesis on Oscar Heyman & Brothers, Inc. and a copy can be found at Bard College (April, 2003, entitled “Patented Linked Box Bracelets: Oscar Heyman & Bros., Inc’s Contribution to the Manufacture of Gem-Set Platinum Jewelry”). There are other patents that demonstrate the ingenuity and contributions of this firm, but too lengthy for this article.

I have highlighted some of the genius exhibited by the Heyman family, but in fact, the jewels that they produce speak louder than the intellect behind them.

A wonderful example of linking the past and the present are their famous flower brooches. First created in the 1930’s, these rarities are highly sought after and fetch extremely strong prices when found.

They were first publicly exhibited at the 1939 World’s Fair, in the Marcus & Co. display, but made by Oscar Heyman Brothers. There were five brooches, and they took first prize –the orchid, the lily-of-the-valley, the pansy, the gardenia, and the double rose. I am delighted to say that OHB produces the same flower brooches today – in a variety of gemstones (*see figures #4 through #8*). Another example of their extraordinary jewels is their INVISIBLY SET jewelry, another labor-intensive challenge. For you jewelry connoisseurs, I am sure that you know that the art deco invisible-set jewelry by Van Cleef & Arpels is the most sought after and expensive invisibly-set jewelry out there. Invisibly-set jewelry is just that, in that one cannot see any metal holding the stones in place. The pavilion of each gemstone is specially cut and “threaded”, or mounted on a metal “track”, so that the eye cannot see any mounting at all, neither from the top nor the sides; the stones must line up equally and fit tightly side by side. Much of the gem material breaks in the procedure, and the whole process is quite labor intensive. In fact, nearly *all* the VC&A invisibly-set jewelry made in the USA was made by Oscar Heyman & Brothers, Inc.

And they continued to make all the invisibly-set jewels in the US for Van Cleef & Arpels until the Arpels family



Figure 13 Tayltor-Burton diamond weighing 69,42 carats.



Figure 12  
Fancy Colored Sapphire & Diamond Suit

sold the company just a few years ago. Today, OHB continues to make magnificent invisibly-set jewels for other fine jewelry houses. Once again, it takes months to produce a single piece (see Figure #9).

For a truly remarkable feat of labor, one should see the production of their “birds-in-flight” bracelet. The original was a fine Art Deco bracelet that was made in 1925 (see figure #10); it re-surfaced and was recently sold at auction for a small fortune (see Figure #10A).

Oscar Heyman & Brothers is in the process of reproducing it, from their original rendering from 1925, and they have been working on it for over one and a half years. Each colored gemstone is cut on the premises to precisely fit one point in the design; the diamond background does not require any unusual diamond cuts, so they can be picked and sorted accordingly (see Figure # 11). I tried on the unfinished product, and even with most of the stones still missing, it lay on my wrist like a piece of silk.

Not only are they masters of highly labor-intensive pieces, but their use of

fine gemstones and color combinations in today’s production is impressive. I am particularly impressed with their fancy-colored sapphire suites, (see Figure # 12) and entire suites of the rare cat’s eye chrysoberyls, to mention but a couple of OHB’s unusual repertoire. Of course they also create lovely classic jewels – rings, necklaces, bracelets, earrings in diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and a whole host of interesting gem species. They also make “special order” pieces – jewelry that is custom made to the buyer’s specifications; that in itself is not particularly unusual, since most jewelry shops offer custom pieces, but they also take on highly challenging jewelry pieces that many jewelers today could not afford to spend the time, or have the skill, to fashion.

In 1969, Cartier commissioned Oscar Heyman & Brothers (see Figure # 13) to “design and create Elizabeth Taylor’s diamond necklace to showcase the Taylor-Burton diamond” (the most famous and important diamond of the day, weighing 69,42 carats). They have had many such commissioned pieces, including their custom designed pieces that have



Figure 9  
Invisibly-set Ruby & Diamond Bracelet



Figure 10 Original rendering in OHB's archives and original 1925 OHB bracelet, sold by Sotheby's.



even landed on the moon (the 1972 Apollo lunar landing). They have been honored many times with various awards, including a first place and best of show for gem cutting excellence, by the American Gem Trade Association, in 2001.

In conclusion, I cannot say enough about this fine, innovative jewelry firm whose name is hardly known to the general public. They have contributed greatly to the jewelry trade at large, and have stayed in business, without closing their doors, for almost 100 years. I am sorry to say that George Heyman passed away only a couple of years ago – he was the last of the original brothers and I regret that I had never met him. However, Oscar Heyman & Brothers future is most assuredly secure with Adam (George's son) and Marvin (Harry's son), and the third generation of Heymans, Tom and Lewis, who are passionate and completely committed to the company as well. This fine jeweler's history, the creativity and inventions, the organization and diligence, the contributions,

and the skill, places it among the greatest jewelers of the world. So the next time you are examining jewels at some auction house, see if you can find, perhaps under another famous house's signature, the OHB hallmark.

Or maybe, and just maybe, if you contact one of the family members and tell them that you have just read my article, they might commission a very special Oscar Heyman Brothers jewel just for YOU –of course, through one of the fine shops who retail their jewels.

As Tom Heyman so simply states their philosophy: *We want to sell jewelry the grandchildren fight over to keep, not pieces that heirs fight over to sell*". That's an updated version of Mr. Oscar Heyman's: *Jewelry should never be a candidate for redesign but should transcend time like a fine painting, never losing its appeal*. I wish them all another 100 years of continued success.

*I would like to thank Tom Heyman, in particular, for all of his help and generous attitude.*



Figure 11 Today's "Birds-in-flight" bracelet in production, currently unfinished