



JEWEL



Main: The 18th-century diamond piece up for auction at Sotheby's. Above: Taffin 202.31-carat emerald-cut aquamarine, zircon, red ceramic and yellow gold bracelet. Left: Angelina Jolie wears a Cartier panther brooch at the Venice Film Festival.

GEM OF A STORY

Covering the jewellery beat for 30 years, teasing out the stories behind the world's most stunning jewels, historian and author Carol Woolton has glittering tales to tell.

STORY BY EUGENIE KELLY

SHOULD CAROL WOOLTON SUDDENLY WIN THE lottery, she plans to splurge her winnings on Lot 1175 at Sotheby's Royal & Noble Jewels auction, scheduled to take place four days after our Zoom call.

"It's three rows of collet-set cushion-shaped and circular-cut diamonds – so 300 carats; hinged to emulate movement so it can be worn as a necklace, a *négligée*, over the shoulder as an epaulette or *ras-de-cou* [choker] to adorn the décolletage," she marvels. "Fashion is the number one destroyer of jewellery with pieces being dismantled and gems repurposed into new styles. So the fact this 18th-century Georgian piece has survived is incredible."

A cornerstone of the aristocratic Paget family's collection worn by the marquesses of Anglesey, the piece Woolton is after recently emerged from an important private Asian collection. Not only is it a stunning specimen, it has a killer backstory. "Some of its Golconda diamonds are rumoured to have come from the necklace connected to the 'affair of the necklace', where Marie Antoinette was accused of renegeing on payment for a piece made by the Crown jewellers, tarnishing her reputation and leading to the French Revolution."

For Woolton, these diamond tassels encapsulate the mystery and history jewellery can hold. It's a topic

the historian, seven-time author, long-serving *British Vogue* jewellery editor and podcast host exhaustively explores in her latest book, *If Jewels Could Talk*.

"[The book] defines why we wear jewellery and the meaning we attach to adorning ourselves," she explains, adding that, in an era of pandemics, climate change and political unrest, more than ever we're gravitating towards things that possess a deeper meaning.

The numbers don't lie. After a record year, the jewellery sector is thriving, bucking luxury's downturn – especially in the medium-priced segment where prices sit from \$10,000 to \$150,000. (Case in point: the 6 per cent revenue growth across Richemont's jewellery maisons to €14.24 billion, or \$23 billion, in fiscal 2024.) "Jewellery is a way to identify, both to ourselves and others, and communicate," she muses. "Through our jewellery choices we can be noticed, seen and heard." Yes, she says, jewellery was once used for talismanic purposes, but even though we have more scientific means of ensuring good health and fortune these days, jewels can still offer comfort, peace and protection.

Woolton cites a recent incident at a party, where she made a chance

comment about a ring *Games of Thrones* actress Laura Pradelska was wearing. "It led to a long emotional conversation about her Jewish family history during the Holocaust. Many of her family perished, but the stone in the ring survived to tell the tale of their resilience and determination to survive. All embodied in a diamond her fiance had set for her."

Back in the late '90s, when glossy magazines ruled and jewellery was relegated to fashion-accessory status (i.e. not considered worthy of its own section, like style or beauty), Woolton convinced UK title *Tatler* to appoint her as its first jewellery editor, moving on five years later to cover the topic for British and American *Vogue* for more than two decades. "I fought religiously with the magazine editors to get pages away from fashion," she says. "Now, jewellery dominates publications."



Oscar winner Cillian Murphy wears a bespoke Sovereign HS14 gem brooch inspired by his role in *Oppenheimer*. Above: Tiffany & Co. Bone cuff by Elsa Peretti.

