What is a Poison Ring?

The History of This Type of Compartment Jewelry

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Poison rings were used for centuries to conceal lethal substances and for other purposes, and some historical figures were known to have used them.

The term to describe a ring that has a compartment which is used to carry small amounts of toxic substances is “poison ring.” Sometimes, instead of inside a compartment, the poison was put beneath a cabochon or faceted gemstone in the bezel of the ring and could be accessed by breaking out the stone.

Rings like this have been used throughout history to carry perfume, locks of hair, devotional relics, messages and other keepsakes, so they have also been known by other names. Artists would paint tiny portraits of loved ones, to be carried in what was called a “locket ring,” which was popular during the Renaissance. By the 17th century, jewelers were creating locket rings in the shape of caskets which served as mementos for mourners. These were called “funeral rings.” Rings with compartments are also called “box” rings or “socket” rings.

The Origin of Poison Rings

According to Marcy Waldie, who wrote about poison rings in the October 2001 article “A Ring to Die For: Poison Rings Hold Centuries of Secrets,” from Antiques & Collecting Magazine, this type of jewelry originated in ancient days of the Far East and India. It replaced the practice of wearing keepsakes and other items in pouches around the neck. The wearing of vessel rings was so practical that it spread to other parts of Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean before reaching Western Europe in the Middle Ages. By then, the rings were part of the “holy relic trade.”

Some argue that poison rings were seldom used to actually kill people because potent poisons that could successfully cause death were not easy to manufacture. At most, the poisons would sicken. Others claim that vegetable poisons, known in ancient times, could be lethal enough to cause death. There are historical cases of successful suicides and murders by use of poison rings.

Famous Deaths by Poison Ring

The ancient Greek orator Demosthenes committed suicide in 322 BC after escaping capture and reaching sanctuary on the island of Calauria. While there are claims he had poison concealed in a pen or drank “liquid gold” from a vial hidden in a cloth the Greek mathematician and astronomer Eratosthenes, claimed that Demosthenes “kept the poison in a hollow ring, which he wore about his arm,” according to writings in Plutarch’s Lives. Demosthenes died so swiftly that nearby guards were astonished.
When the Roman politician Marcus Licinius Crassus seized Gallic gold from the Capitoline Temple, the guardian killed himself by breaking the stone of his ring between his teeth and taking poison from the bezel, from which he immediately died.

And it has been told through time that Carthaginian general Hannibal committed suicide in the second century by taking poison from a ring that he had always carried, after fleeing to Libyssa upon orders to surrender.

Using Poison Rings for Political Gain

Unscrupulous reputations have followed the brother and sister Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia of a Spanish-Italian noble family of the Renaissance period for their roles in deaths of political rivals. Stories circulate of their knowledge of plant and mineral poisons, including la canterella, a tasteless white powder that could be added to food and remain undetected. Cesare allegedly wore a lion ring with twin heads, which provided an invisible dose of poison through a prick on the skin when he offered a firm handshake.

Tales abound of Lucrezia being the perfect accomplice by secretly adding poison from her ring to the goblets of her dinner guests. While it is established that Cesare was quite unprincipled and cruel, and likely behind the assassination of his own brother, among other rivals who fell in his company, historians have concluded that Lucrezia was simply guilty by association.

Today, contemporary poison rings are popular as part of the Goth culture and have found a resurgence among collectors looking for both modern and antique styles. While today’s wearers have no need to use vessel rings to carry poison or keepsakes like locks of hair, fashion will dictate what the next popular use will be.

Sources: