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## JEWELRY CONNOISSEUR

TRENDS

### River of Dreams

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The timeless rivière necklace, long a hit with royals and antique lovers, is staying current in the hands of today's designers.

From 18th-century royalty to 20th-century celebrities such as *Vogue* editor and fashion arbiter Anna Wintour, the rivière necklace has been the go-to style for international women of different eras, cultures and demographics. Rivière necklaces defy time and style; they are a statement and a staple piece in one. And today, the antique and vintage versions are beloved classics for dealers and collectors alike.



Fred Leighton antique gemstone rivièrè necklaces. Photo: Fred Leighton.

“Rivièrè” is French for “river” — in this case, a river of gems. These necklaces first became popular in the 1700s and have been redesigned and updated over the years. The handmade Georgian versions are the most collectible due to their craftsmanship, their old-world techniques, and the cuts and colors of their gemstones. The diamond styles give off a soft glow in candlelight thanks to the use of old mine- and cushion-cut stones. “These are our favorite pieces to find, and will sell quickly,” says Jennifer Shapiro of [The Spare Room Antiques](#). “A proper Georgian rivièrè is truly an item of beauty, each gemstone hand-carved, set and polished, and each had to be made to a certain size so there was a gradual increase culminating at the center stone, which would have been the largest. From that point on, the gems would have been symmetrically placed opposite another of the same size. The clasp was also brilliantly set in a stone and effectively hidden. That such beautiful necklaces can still be found intact is nothing short of a miracle. For this reason, when we happen upon a rivièrè with a proper clasp and with all of its stones complete and in good condition, we pounce on it. And it usually sells swiftly.”



Jessica McCormack's Button Back necklace with 45 graduating heart-shaped emeralds in a Georgian cut-down setting. Photo: Jessica McCormack.

#### Evolution of a classic

Rivières almost always contained the same variety of gems, with the exception of the rare, multi-hued harlequin styles of the mid-18th century. The original necklaces featured silver-foil-backed collet settings, but at some point around the 1770s, the trend changed to silver-topped gold. Gems such as pink topaz, citrine, amethyst, aquamarine and garnet turned up in the Georgian — and later the Victorian — versions, most alluringly in old mine, oval or rectangular antique cuts. Paste and rock crystal were affordable alternatives to precious stones and have become as desirable among antique enthusiasts as the gemstone equivalents. “During the Victorian era, as manufacturing techniques developed, the style of the rivière necklace evolved,” explains Greg Kwiatt, CEO of antique and vintage jeweler Fred Leighton. The settings were redesigned to be open at the back, allowing light to hit the stones and give the piece a more delicate feel. Foil was no longer necessary to enhance the gemstones.

At the turn of the 20th century, platinum became the favored metal among jewelers. Its lightness and durability allowed for more delicate settings in diamond necklaces so the stones could be the stars of the show. “Today, the rivière necklace remains one of the most popular and enduring designs,” Kwiatt says. “Women love the classic



history and the style to cater to collectors and royalty alike.



**Jacquie Aiche** Claudia necklace with diamonds, in 14-karat yellow gold. Photo: Jacquie Aiche.

### From queens to silver screens

Rivières have been part of royal and imperial jewel collections and often appear in portraits of queens or empresses, relates Peter Schaffer of antique shop [A La Vieille Russie](#). There were several in the lineage of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II alone, according to the book *The Queen's Diamonds* by Hugh Roberts. Her grandmother Queen Mary owned eight collet-set rivière necklaces, leaving two of those to the current queen and one totaling 100 carats to Princess Margaret. One rivière belonging to Queen Elizabeth, the queen mother, was a gift from her husband King George VI in 1937 to celebrate their coronation; it consisted of 40 old-cut diamonds. Both the duchess of Cornwall and the duchess of Cambridge have worn Elizabeth II's rivières. Hollywood royalty, too, has often worn rivières — or eternity necklaces, as they began to be known in the 20th century. Such stars include Rita Hayworth in the 1946 film *Gilda*, Katharine Hepburn in 1938's *Holiday* — where she sported a three-strand version that Fulco di Verdura designed for Flato — and more recently, Gwyneth Paltrow in 1998's *A Perfect Murder*. "Rivière necklaces are wonderful investments, and are rare and in high demand," says Kwiat. "Their timeless style guarantees that they will always be desirable in the future. Schaffer agrees. "The popularity of the antique and vintage styles has not waned. We have always considered them among the most salable pieces of jewelry." However, he dismisses the notion of buying these necklaces purely for investment purposes. "If they are



...put away in a bank."



The Spare Room Victorian open back amethyst rivièrè necklace, circa 1860. Photo: The Spare Room.

### Fresh takes

Today's designers are drawing on 18th- and 19th-century styles, as well as the platinum and white gold eternity looks from the 20th century (the later styles were also called tennis necklaces). The modern versions may or may not be graduated, and with fancy-cut diamonds back in fashion, many contemporary jewelers are combining multiple cuts. Actress Sarah Jessica Parker wore rivières in several scenes of *And Just Like That*, the recent reboot of TV series *Sex and the City*, where she reprised her role as Carrie Bradshaw. Among them were Fred Leighton antique pieces layered with styles from [Nak Armstrong's](#) Nakard collection. "Rivièrè necklaces have been part of the foundation of my brand since our launch, when we debuted our signature Tile necklace," says Armstrong. "The style is an excellent blank slate that I use to experiment with unique stone cuts — including tapered tanzanite baguettes or irregular trapezoid-shaped moonstones — to imitate forms like the ruching and pleating of fabric, all while maintaining and respecting the original silhouette."



**Nakard** sterling silver and black rhodium Small Dot necklace, with white zircon.  
Photo: Nak Armstrong.

Designer **Emily P. Wheeler** also prefers to shake things up in her takes on this necklace. "Rivière necklaces are a traditional style usually reserved for more formal looks. But today's modern women are wearing them layered on with everyday fashion, even T-shirts and jeans. My versions incorporate unexpected color combinations and shapes like trillions and hearts in both diamonds and different gemstones to bring new life to more conventional cuts." **Jacquie Aiche** finds the rivière inspiring as well. "It is the piece of fine jewelry that everyone dreams of wearing," remarks the designer. "A river of diamonds that wraps fully around is elegant, timeless and ever-evolving. I love playing with the setting and graduation of the diamonds." **Jessica McCormack's** versions are in keeping with the antique look, but bear her own touches. "I really care about creating pieces that will stand the test of time, and no other piece of jewelry comes close to rivières," she says. "We have created them in heart shapes, and on both our **Signature Button Back rivière** and our **Moonshine rivière**, the diamonds are set in blackened white gold, which gives them a more modern, edgy vibe." Whether layering old and new like Parker's Bradshaw, stacking antique versions like *Vogue's* Wintour, wearing modern versions like actresses Jennifer Lawrence, Zoe Kravitz and Dakota Johnson have on the red carpet, or adding a longer chain with a symbolic pendant or talisman, one can't go wrong with a rivière.



**Jessica McCormack** Moonshine Diamond necklace in 18-karat gold and blackened white gold with 47 half-moon-cut diamonds. Photo: Jessica McCormack.

*Main image: Katharine Hepburn in Holiday, 1938. Photo: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo*



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