



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2025

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 December 2025

Date of Publication: 31 December 2025

Citation: Lea Felicitas Döding, 'The Peculiar Case of the Jewelled Tortoise, or: Thoughts Towards a Jewellery of the Decadent Woman', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.2 (2025), pp. 171-191.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Goldsmiths
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The Peculiar Case of the Jewelled Tortoise, or: Thoughts Towards a Jewellery of the Decadent Woman

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He therefore decided to glaze the shell of the tortoise with gold.

The tortoise, just returned by the lapidary, shone brilliantly, softening the tones of the rug and casting on it a gorgeous reflection which resembled the irradiations from the scales of a barbaric Visigoth shield.

At first Des Esseintes was enchanted with this effect. Then he reflected that this gigantic jewel was only in outline, that it would not really be complete until it had been incrustated with rare stones.

From a Japanese collection he chose a design representing a cluster of flowers emanating spindle-like, from a slender stalk. Taking it to a jeweller, he sketched a border to enclose this bouquet in an oval frame, and informed the amazed lapidary that every petal and every leaf was to be designed with jewels and mounted on the scales of the tortoise.

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours*¹

A hunger for refinement, originality, and the will to bend nature to the artistic imagination: the transformation of a tortoise into a living jewel, as detailed in the fifth chapter of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*, has become an iconic image of the decadent sensibility. That this living jewel became a reality, however – that life, quite literally, imitated art – is a fact barely known today; indeed, decadence itself seems to be a chapter curiously absent from jewellery history. Yet during the winter of 1897-98, tiny jewelled tortoises, harnessed in gold and glistening with precious stones, trod the corsages of daring Parisiennes and were readily recognised as a 'joaillerie décadente'.² So far, only one scholarly study of jewellery has bestowed a passing notice upon this *tortue-bijou*, classing it as 'a naturalistic device' and furthermore claiming that 'there is no record that a revolting novelty reported in Paris in 1898 ever crossed the Channel'.³ Records of the tortoises' migration to London there are, however, though hidden among the pages of ephemera. Indeed a careful enquiry into these sources, alongside a contemplation of the gendered etiquette against which this curious ornament momentarily rebelled, will help us form an idea of what rendered a fin-de-siècle woman's jewellery decadent in the eyes of her contemporaries – ephemeral though we will find the notion to be.

Paris, Winter 1897/8: The Chronicle of a Novelty

Let us travel, if you will, back in time: to the winter that spanned its snowy wings across the fading end of 1897 and the first stirrings of 1898.

Our destination is Paris, the capital of fashion.

Here, we turn into the Rue de la Paix, in whose jewellers' shops glisten diamonds purer and more plentiful than snowflakes on the street – this street which is the first, indeed the crucial address to acquire fine jewels. It is from here that foreign correspondents report of the latest creations to London, Berlin, New York. And somewhere on this street, a jeweller showcases the novelty that inspires wonder, delight, and still more outrage all over the Western world. Is he the inventor of this novelty? The British press credits him thusly, although one has foregone – scandalised, perhaps – his name.⁴

Even without a name, it is easy to make out the shop, for a curious crowd has gathered before it: 'painted women in flashy *toilettes*' loudly express their admiration; ladies of proper society dare to show but quiet surprise; gentlemen restrain their expressions if not their curiosity. Before this window, they stand side by side with 'commoners, strayed by chance into this sumptuous street'. The latter, workers on their way from the factory to the lightless rooms they call home, have 'stopped with astonishment, perhaps with anger, in front of this shop in the Rue de la Paix whose glittering display attracts and retains, day by day, a more numerous crowd'.⁵

Indeed, the crowd of spectators is so dense that we cannot reach the door. And so we make our way to the Rue Royale – close by, of similar prestige. For here, another jeweller offers the same peculiar merchandise. Unlike his colleague in the Rue de la Paix, whom history has rendered anonymous, Henri Templier of the Rue Royale is remembered by name, both in the French and German press.⁶

We slip into the shop behind a journalist of *L'Illustration* who has come to report of this arresting novelty. Before our curious eyes, the jeweller sets down 'a tray, lined with white velvet, upon which a half dozen minuscule tortoises appear to sleep'. These tortoises are not inanimate

trinkets, no – upon the table, ‘as if by magic, they begin to stir’ [fig. 1].⁷ They are living animals, infant Indian star tortoises, and they wander on delicate feet across the velvet, leashed to fine chains of gold and platinum. Their shells bear burdens of precious stones: ‘Rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls’,⁸ or even turquoises, the vogueish stone of the moment.⁹ Some of these gemstones ‘are arranged so as to exhibit a monogram’,¹⁰ others form ‘a trellis-work of rose diamonds in the Louis XV. style’ [figs. 2 and 3].¹¹ Fully bejewelled, these little creatures command upwards of 500 Francs apiece.¹²

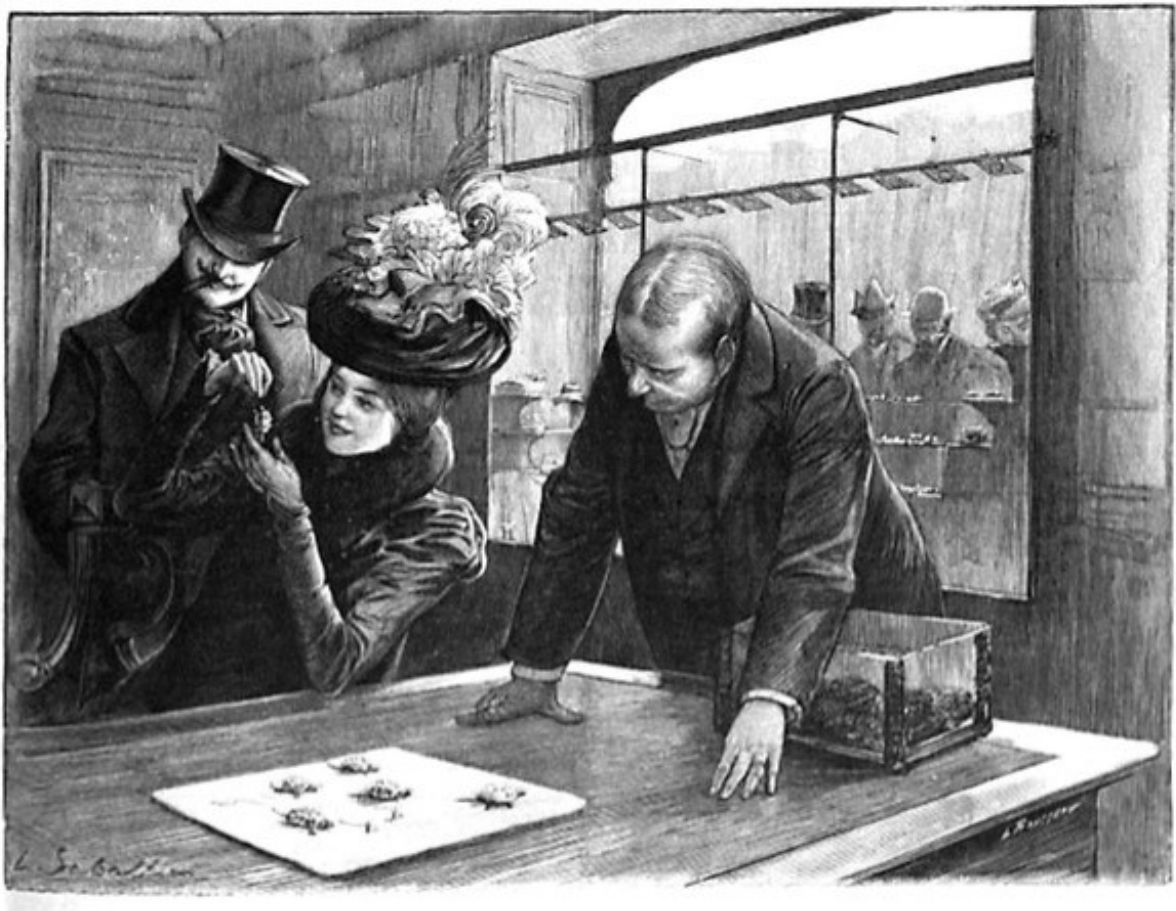


Fig. 1: *Le choix d'une tortue-bijou*. From *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.
Princeton University, digitally enhanced by author.



Fig. 2: The tortoises of the Rue Royale. From *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.
Princeton University, digitally enhanced by author.

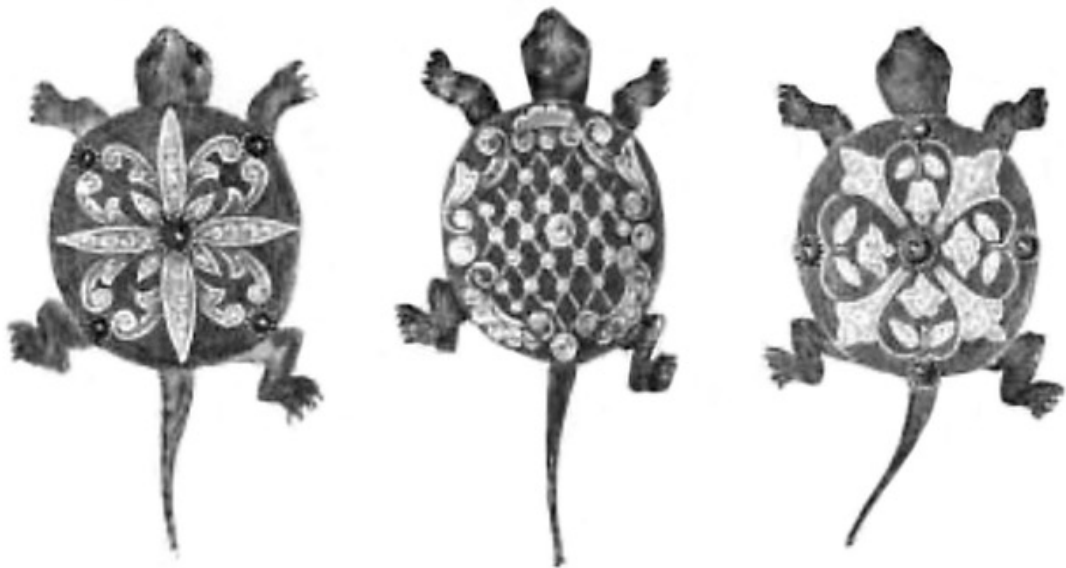


Fig. 3: Indian star tortoises bejewelled by Henri Templier, Paris. From *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 110 (1898), p. 270.
University of Chicago, background removed by author.

By way of the chains that connect to safety pins, they are to be worn as living brooches: ‘This chain is worn fastened to your right shoulder, and within its limits the tortoise can wander over your person at its own sweet will.’¹³ Other uses, too, have been reported: ‘Fashionable ladies wear Liliputian tortoises of the size of an ordinary beetle, depending from a narrow chain fixed onto a necklace, a bracelet or a brooch.’¹⁴

Is this not cruelty, one wonders? Some are moved to pity: ‘They gleam and blaze, the poor trapped creatures. They attempt to escape from the small square of velvet to which they are fastened as to a peg.’¹⁵ Indeed, the *Société protectrice des animaux* has already enquired.¹⁶ But prospective buyers are assured the animals are not being harmed – for the gold mounts to which the chains are affixed are but clasped to their shells. ‘The plate is very thin and light, and has a turned edge, which is slipped over the shell, just clasping it, but not attached to any part of the shell by piercing or riveting.’¹⁷ This same harness ‘has to be removed when the baby tortoise has its bath’; the animal then ‘resides, when off duty, in a box supplied with damp moss and small lettuce leaves’,¹⁸ or may ‘roam about in a sort of doll’s garden, with shrubs and gravel walks’.¹⁹

By late January, the sellers have been absolved from any crimes against morality. The news has reached London, where a journalist of *The Westminster Gazette* supposes that she will not see

anything of the kind in our own more sedate city. I cannot imagine a fastidious Englishwoman caring for a crawling thing on the front of her corsage; besides, the tortoise-wearing Parisienne does not belong to the class whose costume she cares to copy.²⁰

But who is this ‘tortoise-wearing Parisienne’? And to what class does she belong? The correspondent of *L’Illustration*, enquiring into this very question, has conducted an imaginary interview with one of the bedazzled creatures of the Rue Royale:

‘Many admirers?’

‘Quite a few – mostly among the *demi-monde*. The ladies of proper society are content to behold us from afar.’²¹

An ornament of the *demi-mondaine*, then – the woman who inhabited the fringes of correct society. Indeed, there is even talk of ‘a second-rate *demi-mondaine*, known in late-night restaurants by the nickname “Femme à la Tortue”’, for she never parts from her tortoise.²² But why this alliance – and what more might it tell us about a decadent jewellery? Let us return now to the present time,

from where we have a broader view of fin-de-siècle society and its culture of jewellery, which unfolds before us like a poisoned, glittering map.

A Bestiary of Sin: On the Customs and Controversies of Animal Ornaments

The first, most obvious reason why ‘proper society’ considered the *tortue-bijou* unsavoury, of course, relates to its origins in *À rebours*, and the approval of moral transgression which this association intimated. To the up-to-date Parisian, it appeared as the latest instalment in a string of extravagances worthy of Des Esseintes. As the *Revue Illustrée* noted:

We have had, in turns, debaucheries of orchids, salads of chrysanthemum, strawberries dipped in ether, opium cigarettes, the hallucinatory dreads of English mimes – all the nervousness and all the languor.

Today, the chevalier Floressas des Esseintes, who bears a fraternal resemblance to M. Robert de Montesquiou, serves as the model for our dear unbalanced souls; M. J.-K. Huysmans’s *À rebours*, whose title alone is a profession of faith, appears to have become the breviary of avant-garde salons. One will recall that Des Esseintes had the bizarre fantasy of having the shell of his favourite tortoise gilded and encrusted with precious stones, making it a living work of the goldsmith’s art which thus paraded about, studded with cabochons and glittering carbuncles. In place of the heavy, massive elephant tortoise, it is the dainty tortoise of the Indies which Fashion, that merciless plagiarist, has just made its prey.²³

Still, one might assume that not everyone was immediately familiar with the tortoise’s ties to books in yellow covers. In fact, to most members of Parisian proper society circa 1898, such an ornament would have appeared inappropriate – regardless of its literary origins. How so?

Let us take in the bigger picture. By contrast, in the 1860s – when machine production and increasing bourgeois wealth were just beginning to make the creation of novelty jewellery conceived mainly to delight, rather than to represent, viable – vogueish Londoners wore hummingbird heads mounted as jewels, without reproach.²⁴ By the early 1880s, animal ornaments had become widespread. In 1880, *Godey’s Ladies Book*, for instance, reported of ruby-eyed gold mice, and that the ‘Empress of Austria wears a little gold pig as a charm, to avert the evil eye, and now all the Parisians are thinking of sporting the pig’.²⁵ Still in 1887, a ‘miniature turtle, enameled in colors, true to nature, with diamond eyes’, was deemed ‘a pleasing novelty in brooches’.²⁶ Already during this decade, however, a shift was beginning to be felt; for in the face of increasing jewellery

consumption, appropriateness – rather than the flaunting of wealth – slowly became the primary signifier of status. A refined etiquette began to evolve across the major jewellery production centres: France, Britain, Germany, and the United States. Women were now cautioned to abstain from eccentric novelty jewellery once they reached their thirties or married, unless the piece was particularly precious.²⁷

By the mid 1890s, the case of animal jewels had shifted. An awareness of symbolist art with its bestiary of creatures suggestive of immoral instincts had entered the Western cultural mainstream, and animal ornaments were increasingly read as markers of morality. Even costliness could no longer trump content. The German *Bazar* now called pigs and ‘long-legged spiders, even if of brilliants [...] doubtlessly unaesthetic and tasteless’.²⁸ In 1895, women were warned it was ‘not good form to wear ornaments made in the form of beasts or reptiles. [...] Why should a sweet woman select pigs and lizards and toads when there are stars and hearts and true love knots and flowers ...?’²⁹ A woman might still wear the gemstone insects that implied her resemblance to a fragrant flower, but was advised to avoid unflattering associations. ‘Bugs, butterflies, flowers’ were permissible, stated one writer in 1899, but

one must beware, in imitating nature, of lapses in taste such as are manifest in the fashioning of spiders, rats, and other such disagreeable creatures. Modern art, which [...] is increasingly coming under the sway of symbolism, must be least forgetful of symbolism where personal adornment is concerned.³⁰

Stricter minds thus exiled certain creatures from the realm of respectability [fig. 4]. The bestiary of sin comprised, among others, the sly and venomous spider; the pig which Rops had cast as the symbol of base instincts in *Pornocrates*; the lizard with its links to hellfire (‘the lizard simulates idolatry’, Huysmans would write);³¹ and, with certain reservations, the snake, allied to the devil.³² Last but not least, it also contained the tortoise with its slowness of ennui and languor, its grotesque appearance: the *tortue-bijou* was deemed ‘the ugliest of all beasts, with its snake-like head and Buddha belly’.³³ One also could not overlook the fact that tortoises prefer to dwell in humid, dark environments, grounds for at least one crude joke [fig. 5]. Thus, as this peculiar jewel made the

rounds, one journalist protested ‘against this deliberate turning of lovely women into illustrations of delirium tremens’,³⁴ while another ‘professional grumbler’ was quoted as saying:

Everything has a significance, and if certain scholars are to be believed, it is truly a morbid symptom, this peculiar love of certain animals, this depraved taste [...]. Zoophilia, at a certain point, becomes a flaw. And what appears to be original is merely a kind of derangement.³⁵

Some Art Nouveau jewels deliberately emphasised these transgressive associations, transposing the creatures from a visual mode of naturalism into one of complementary stylisation that drew further attention to their symbolic power. René Lalique’s *Femme-Libellule* of 1897-98, the same production date as the *tortue-bijou*, may serve as an example: the beautiful yet alien and carnivorous dragonfly here merges with a woman [fig. 6]. ‘Our era is characterised by *analysis* in the goldsmith’s art as well as in psychology’, noted a critic on Lalique.³⁶ Calouste Gulbenkian, who purchased the *Femme-Libellule* some years later, reportedly discouraged his wife from wearing Lalique pieces,³⁷ and it may be supposed that he and others considered them impossible ornaments for the ‘respectable’ woman – separate as respectability and the assertion of feminine erotic appetites were to the contemporary imagination.

Conversely, then, some women might reach for subversive animal ornaments precisely to communicate their disregard of convention. This applies particularly to courtesans and actresses – women of significant financial means who were not reliant on sartorial expressions of virtue to secure their existence. In 1899, for instance, Liane de Pougy commissioned a bat ring for her lover Natalie Clifford Barney with Lalique, observing Natalie’s nickname ‘Moon-Beam’ and perhaps the fact that homosexuality had recently been observed in these animals.³⁸ The kinship between unconventional women and immoral animals pertained equally to naturalistic ornaments, however. A striking literary example can be found in Dolorosa’s 1904 novel *Tagebuch einer Erzieherin* [Diary of an Educator]: the protagonist, a dominatrix, hosts a hell-themed party and receives a brooch from her slave, a ‘delicately worked lizard whose body shone and glittered magnificently in the light of green stones [...], wonderfully modelled after nature’, which she will wear with a form-fitting red tricot and horned cap, dressed as the Queen of Hell.³⁹



Fig. 4: A spider and a lizard brooch of subversive potential, both c. 1890-1900.
© Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.



Fig. 5: *La chasse à la tortue-bijou* by Gil Baer. *Le Supplément*, 29 January 1898, n. p.
Gallica BnF, digitally enhanced by the author.



Fig. 6: Corsage ornament *Femme-Libellule* by René Lalique, 1897-98, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon. Image by Sailko, licensed under CC BY 3.0 Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dragonfly_broche_\(René_Lalique\)#/media/File:René_lalique,_pett_rale_libellula,_in_oro,_smalti,_crisoprazio,_calcedonio,_pietre_lunari_e_diamanti,_1897-98_ca._01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dragonfly_broche_(René_Lalique)#/media/File:René_lalique,_pett_rale_libellula,_in_oro,_smalti,_crisoprazio,_calcedonio,_pietre_lunari_e_diamanti,_1897-98_ca._01.jpg) [accessed July 2025].

And yet, no inanimate jewel, no matter whether naturalistic or stylised, could rival the subversive potential of the live creature, even more unsettling for showcasing genuine instincts. In the eyes of moralists, certain unsavoury truths rendered the *tortue-bijou* a jewel for dirty women of ‘ce goût dépravé’.⁴⁰

However small it may be, the jewelled turtle is a living being – meaning it eats, drinks, and... excretes.⁴¹ Its wearers thus invented ‘a delicate flick [...]’. They rediscovered the graceful gesture of the little abbés and beautiful lords of *l’ancienne cour*, who would shake their lace jabots with infinite grace when stained with a few grains of fragrant tobacco. [...] [B]ut nonetheless, it is all very dirty’.⁴²

It may come as no surprise that the *tortue-bijou* did not even constitute the first alliance between live animals and subversive women, as several journalists reminded their readers upon its launch. One, noting that in Paris, an ‘actress or two or an eccentric *mondaine* may occasionally like to appear at the Opera or elsewhere with living tortoises suspended by gold chains from their necks’, also recalled that Madame Musard, a professional beauty, ‘appeared at the Opera some years ago wearing as bracelets two harmless little snakes covered with diamond rings’.⁴³ Another remembered

that ‘after the performances of *Cléopâtre*, the asp, Mme Sarah Bernhardt’s famous asp, had also turned a number of heads, and it is said that for a few months [...] the small varieties of snakes were in great demand.’⁴⁴ Indeed, it was rumoured that she kept two garter snakes ‘in a jewel case on her dressing table [...] She was fond of them and often twined them around her wrists’.⁴⁵ Another fashion columnist ‘knew a lady who wore a live scarabee [*sic*] chained to her neck’, reminiscent of the Romans ‘who wore live snakes around their fair necks’.⁴⁶ Curiously, however, it was remarked more than once that it had been ‘American ladies, who also led the way with the jewelled tortoises’.⁴⁷

We must briefly consider this claim, for it will provide further illumination to our case by contrast. The practice of chaining a live animal to the corsage had its roots in the American chameleon craze of 1893-94, which in truth concerned ‘little glittering Southern lizards of the species known to naturalists as *Anolis principalis*, but commonly called [...], chameleons’ [fig. 7].⁴⁸ These creatures became ornaments by chance, due to the way they were displayed for sale:

The fashion originated at the Chicago Exhibition, where, in the Florida section, there was a stall devoted to the sale of live chameleons, with slender gold chains and fancy pins attached to collars round their necks. Visitors purchased the small reptiles by the thousand; in fact, chameleons were the rage, and no belle considered herself properly equipped unless she had at least one specimen fastened to her corsage. [...] [J]ust as the demand was at its height, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stepped in and the business was made illegal.⁴⁹

This phenomenon presents a fascinating exception to all we have just read. For they who wore lizards were no small numbers of *demi-mondaines*, but flocks of young society women: ‘Scarcely a family “in society” but one of the ladies prides herself on the possession of a tiny, lizard-like creature.’⁵⁰ Allegations of immorality arose merely from the carelessness with which the lizards were treated. It was reported that many died of neglect, for ‘thoughtless dames danced away all night with their victims three-parts dead in their bosoms’.⁵¹ One young lady made it through three, the third meeting the most gruesome end: ‘With one hand holding a gold chain, papa was dragging the remains of the chameleon from his spoon, and in suppressed rage growling at the toughness of the noodles. The missing pet was found, but oh, what a fate!’⁵²

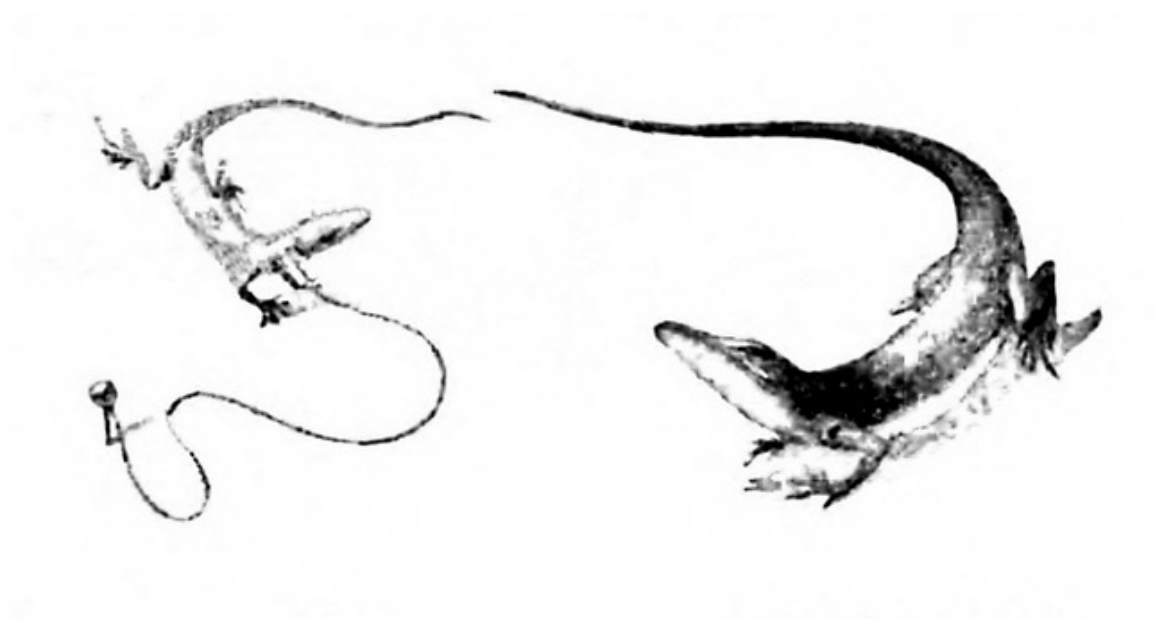


Fig. 7: Chained lizards to be worn in the hair or as brooches. *The Youth's Companion*, 21 June 1894, p. 287. Princeton University, digitally enhanced by the author.

But what rendered the wearing of a lizard more morally permissible than that of a tortoise, given the fact that American jewellery etiquette largely resembled the European? Firstly, the lizard-wearers appear to have been quite young, and thus excused for wearing eccentric novelties. Secondly, the phenomenon slightly predated the symbolist-adjacent revaluation of animal jewellery, and even so: the lizards posed as the less inflammatory chameleons. But lastly and perhaps most importantly, it was their great numbers that protected lizard-wearers from notions of impropriety, for etiquette decreed that ‘it is as well to do as others do’.⁵³

The correspondent of *L’Illustration*, in any case, was quite adamant that the tortoises were ‘entirely French, entirely Parisian. – Still another symptom of our decadence! Oh, that we might restore our sumptuary laws!’⁵⁴ And yet, it was no sumptuary law that did away with the tortoise as a decadent ornament – but its very rise into the ranks of fashion.

***À rebours!* A Decadent Counter-Culture of Jewellery**

The *tortue-bijou*, we can summarise, caused rather an outrage across the Western media when it was first sold in Paris, being associated with a decadent *demi-monde*. Already in late January of 1898, however, against all hopeful prophecies of British journalists, the tortoises were imported to

London – and henceforth worn by women of correct society. One ‘crazily fashionable’ Londoner even gave a tea party in honour of hers.⁵⁵ By June, they sold exceedingly well:

I heard last week that some of the little jewelled tortoises that Christabel wrote us about some months ago from Paris were to be seen at Elfrida’s pretty bonnet-shop in Sloane-street. The very morning I heard it I started off full of curiosity, and found that all had been sold except one. You may fancy what a demand there was for them. The one remaining had a coat of mail composed of diamonds and sapphires, and for tethering purposes a long chain of finest gold workmanship.⁵⁶

In London, accusations of decadence quieted: ‘It might be supposed that women of refinement would find it particularly loathsome to have an animal crawling and wriggling over them, but, so far from that being the case, the demand for baby tortoises at present exceeds the supply.’⁵⁷ Indeed, the up-to-date Londoner simply needed a tortoise of her own. ‘If you wish to be on the very crest of the wave of fashion, you must wear a tortoise’, she was advised: ‘An imitation one will do, but have a real one for choice.’⁵⁸ Inanimate ones were soon widely available, ‘studded with stones, after the “real things [*sic*]” jewelled coat’.⁵⁹ The *tortue-bijou* had increased the demand for inanimate tortoise brooches, cold metal further tempering the potential for scandal [fig. 8].⁶⁰

This development seems hardly surprising. After all, how subversive could it be to import a fashionable fad – in an age when following the fashion was the fashion? Reproach had already been suffered – by others. Reflecting on the fin de siècle in 1929, the historian Gertrude Aretz noted:

The *demi-monde* is, so to speak, leading in matters of elegance, even though the lady of society may not fain admit it. And yet, the *demi-mondaine* is usually the trailblazer of a new fashion. She is the first to dare to take on a new extravagance, and the others only follow once they no longer risk being stared at or appearing provocative.⁶¹

Indeed, an important jewellery periodical noted in 1908: ‘The name of an actress makes an excellent advertisement for the article.’⁶² Mary Garden’s coiffure as Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, for instance, sparked a fashion for ‘metal bandeaux crossing the brow’ in 1910, although – or precisely because – police cancelled Garden’s performance in Chicago for being indecent.⁶³



Fig. 8: Top: A tortoise bar brooch, British, c. 1900. Bottom: An unusually naturalistic tortoise stickpin, perhaps created in the wake of the *tortue-bijou* craze, Paris, c. 1890s. © Hofer Antikschmuck, Berlin.

Yet what of the discerning eccentric, once her extravagance had been appropriated by the mainstream? Asked by an interviewer what she thought of *les modes*, Sarah Bernhardt once replied: ‘Not very much. I live so completely beyond their tyranny that I never trouble myself about them.’⁶⁴ And yet, this statement was inherently one of defiance in an age in which ‘taste will dictate an observance of fashion’ to woman.⁶⁵ Paradoxically, the woman inclined to communicate her disregard of fashion – must also observe fashion, so as to distance herself. McCracken’s fashion theory, building on notions outlined by Simmel in 1905, describes fashion’s dynamics as ‘an upward “chase and flight” pattern created by a subordinate social group that “hunts” upper class status markers, and a superordinate social group that moves on in hasty flight to new ones’.⁶⁶ Yet with regard to some aspects of fin-de-siècle fashion, it is not the upper classes who are chased, for their social status depends on *following* the fashion to communicate obedience to the social order. Instead, it is the society woman who briefly becomes subordinate to the deviant and dynamic spirit of the *demi-mondaine* – and the *demi-mondaine* whose flight of fancy soon takes her elsewhere. What comes

The tiny jewelled tortoise, lately the rage in Paris, was not a very fascinating feminine ornament, but what shall be said of its latest successor, a dead spider? If any Englishwoman wants to adopt the latest Parisian *cri* she must wear five rings on her five fingers, each set with a different stone and connected by tiny gold chains with a bracelet displaying the same jewels. Clasp the chains between the rings and the bracelet is a gold medallion containing a dead spider under glass, surrounded by a border of pearls and diamonds. This medallion is arranged to come just on the back of the hand.⁶⁹

If ornaments of contemporary production were so easily absorbed by the mainstream, being readily available, it seemed only logical to turn to rarer items. And indeed, the woman who lived *à rebours* also looked to the antique or outlandish, much like Dorian Gray preferably contemplates the tales of historical jewels which he terms ‘the luxury of the dead’.⁷⁰ This tendency predated the *tortue-bijou*. Amidst the jewellery boom of the industrial age, it had begun as the Aesthetic pursuit of beauty. In 1878, Mrs Haweis included a chapter on ‘Oriental and Ancient Ornaments’ in her book *The Art of Beauty*, itself a great influence on Aesthetic dress.⁷¹ Although painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti had long bedecked their models in quaint or foreign ornaments, in which some women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle also took an interest, Haweis encouraged a wider female readership to school their gaze and seek out antique ornaments.⁷² An 1884 article titled *The Modern Woman* shows that this impulse was soon coupled with a decadent sensibility:

Luxury adds greatly to the satisfaction of these unquiet minds, longing for new sensations [...]. A woman’s jewelry has a language and a sentiment of its own, being no longer bought at random of the nearest dealer in such wares, but searched for and carefully chosen from a choice collection. She haunts bric-à-brac shops and studies the periods to which their treasures belong.⁷³

Notably, George C. Schoolfield identified ‘detailed learnedness’ as a ‘decadent trait’ *à la* Des Esseintes.⁷⁴ The same applied to unusual gemstones. Once diamonds had become more widely available in the 1880s (following the discovery of the South African diamond deposits in 1869), ‘aesthetic jewels’ began to favour less valuable but heretofore rarely used stones such as tourmalines, moonstones, or olivines, thus achieving designs which might ‘express the personality of the artist, or the person for whom the piece is meant’.⁷⁵ Huysmans had not conceived Des Esseintes’ rejection of ‘civilized and familiar’ gems in favour of ‘astonishing and bizarre stones’ in a vacuum, after all.⁷⁶

Although connoisseurship was indeed practised with regard to gemstones and Western antiques, the jewellery box of the decadent woman also included the loots of colonialism, handled with little sensitivity but a great appetite for shock value. The Aesthetic pursuit of beauty morphed, at least to an extent, into a pursuit of provocation. An 1887 article reported of a ‘rage for antique and quaint jewellery’ in defiance of ‘good taste’:

Tired of the elegant ornaments with which her dressing-case is replete, seemingly because they are all in good taste and therefore present no striking peculiarity to the eye, my lady starts in quest of something odd – something that will arrest the attention. She delights in Indian moonstones cut into hideous, leering demons’ heads, with deep-set diamond or ruby eyes. She orders opals in heavy, rude settings, as they are made by Indian smiths with no other tools than a charcoal brazier and a hammer. A heavy silver belt, fashioned generations ago by village artisans, is her special delight.⁷⁷

From this soil, there grew strange flowers indeed. In 1891, one Mrs James E. White of Chicago was said to have possessed ‘a pin of singular beauty and uniqueness’: the red-pupilled eye of a mummy from a Chilean tomb.⁷⁸ Some years later, a ‘Chicago merchant’s wife’, possibly the same woman, exhibited a necklace ‘of three rows of human eyes, in a perfect state of preservation – they were contributed by a number of Peruvian mummies – polished and mounted in gold’.⁷⁹

Perhaps surprisingly, it was in engagement rings that the race for originality found a distinct expression: from the late 1880s, they came to be seen as emblematic of the recipient’s taste and the giver’s knowledge thereof, and a counter-culture of unusual rings emerged as a reaction against conventional patterns. ‘A ring made entirely of white pearls, or of pearls and brilliants, is for first communion’, quipped a correspondent of *La Vie Parisienne* in 1889. The cluster, ‘that vulgar ring that’s available everywhere’, was just as damnable. Instead the author advised prospective grooms, not entirely tongue-in-cheek:

Does she like the eccentric...? Or perhaps the original? Does she require a ring from across the ocean, taken off the finger of an Indian chieftainess, or given by a nabob to a favourite sultana? Is she dreaming of a gold ring, the purest gold without alloys, found in a sarcophagus... and previously worn by whom? By a mummy!⁸⁰

Historical designs were revived, but one also heard of a London beauty who wore a ring carved from lion’s bone, ‘set with a large ruby that radiates true “streams of blood”’,⁸¹ or an American who was gifted a ring ‘which had been for more than a thousand years on the finger of a Hindoo

idol'.⁸² Thus when Marie Madeleine opened her debut volume of decadent poems with a prayer to Aphrodite in 1900, and sang of craving 'as much jewels, as much tinsel / as some ancient pagan idol', such literary wiles were gleaned from life.⁸³

To Max Nordau, a conglomerated attire of 'garments from all eras of history and all corners of the world' epitomised the hateful and attention-seeking spirit of the *fin de siècle* – indeed, disobedience to nature and society.⁸⁴ Yet those who adorned themselves in jewellery of historical and foreign origins may have enjoyed such displays of disobedience for their positively Nietzschean obverse: in an age in which compliance with the *bon ton* was everything, the assertion of outrageous individual taste could signal the presence of a mind not fettered by convention, courageous enough to bear scorn and criticism.

Originality and defiance, then, are the filters through which antiques, looted artefacts, and contemporary animal ornaments trickle into our jewel-box of decadence. No-one knew this better than Liane de Pougy, the most literary of all courtesans, and lover of subversive jewels. When she let the protagonist of her novel *Idylle Saphique* – who, naturally, adores Lalique – erupt into a mania for decadent self-expression, she adorned her with 'baroque sapphires' and 'byzantine necklaces', imbued her with a craving for ornaments in the likeness of 'frogs, mythical creatures, chimeras, dragons, yellow and black cats, crocodiles'.⁸⁵ In fact, it is Pougy herself who provides us with the rare sight of a *tortue-bijou* in situ: in a photograph by Nadar, adorned with all the diamonds a lowborn woman was never meant to possess, a tortoise's shell appears to be peeking out from beneath the tulle at her shoulder – the left shoulder, considered 'the orthodox place for wearing this peculiar decoration' [fig. 10].⁸⁶

Yet unlike the treasures of bygone times, or curiosities procured from distant countries, a decadent jewel of contemporary production was doomed to lose its transgressive value once the *demi-monde* had absorbed the moral shock and paved the way for a new fashion. Thus the peculiar case of the *tortue-bijou* is well-suited to illustrate the fluid nature of decadent jewellery, and moreover why it is best glimpsed through a close study of ephemera: it never solidified into a type, for to run *à rebours* was its very course.



Fig. 10: Liane de Pougy by Nadar, unknown date (after 1889). Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico, licensed under CC BY 4.0. Source: <https://bvpb.mcu.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=490536> [accessed July 2025], detail highlighting the tortoise added by author.

¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, trans. John Howard (Lieber & Lewis, 1922), p. 76.

² Tiburge, 'Causerie', *Les Veillées des Chaumières*, 12 February 1898, pp. 237-38 (p. 238).

³ Shirley Bury, *Jewellery: The International Era 1789-1910*, 2 vols (Antique Collector's Club, 1997), II, p. 751. In criticism, the *tortue-bijou* is also briefly mentioned, although with an incorrect date, by Antoine Bertrand in *Les curiosités esthétiques de Robert de Montesquieu*, Vol. I (Droz, 1996), p. 75, who in turn refers to literary criticism of Paul-Jean Toulet's 1905 novel *Mon Amie Nane* wherein a young man is at one point in charge of replacing the diamond-encrusted tortoisés of a wealthy woman once they die.

⁴ 'A jeweller in the Rue de la Paix conceived the wild idea ...'. Sybil, 'Ladies' Pages', *The Illustrated London News*, 29 January 1898, n. p.

⁵ Faverolles, 'La vie à Paris', *Revue pour les Jeunes Filles*, 1 December 1897, pp. 328-36 (pp. 335-36). For the sake of readability, quotations from the French and German in the main body of text have been translated by the author unless otherwise specified.

⁶ See [Anon.], 'Moden', *Illustrierte Zeitung*, 110 (1898), p. 270, and Edmond Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', *L'Illustration*, 15 January 1898, p. 53.

⁷ Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53. Most of this article appeared in translation in the US: [Anon.], 'Jeweled Tortoisés the Paris Fad', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 45.

⁸ [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', *The North British Daily Mail*, 11 June 1898, p. 3.

⁹ See Jules Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897* (Charpentier, 1898), p. 423, and [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', *Freeman's Journal*, 18 January 1898, p. 2.

¹⁰ [Anon.], 'Reigning Fashions in Paris', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 15.

- ¹¹ Ella de Campo Bello, 'Paris Letter', *The Queen*, 1 January 1898, p. 27.
- ¹² Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53.
- ¹³ [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Jaseur, 'Reigning Fashions in Paris', *The Jewelers' Circular*, 2 February 1898, p. 15.
- ¹⁵ Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897*, p. 423.
- ¹⁶ Several sources report of the involvement of the *Société*, for instance: [Anon.], 'Faits Divers', *L'Opinion Publique*, 11 January 1898, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Aurora, 'Ladies' Column', *The Heywood Adviser*, 1 July 1898, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', *Truth*, 2 June 1898, pp. 44-45 (p. 44).
- ¹⁹ Campo Bello, 'Paris Letter', p. 27.
- ²⁰ Madame Qui Vive, 'Concerning Dress', *The Westminster Gazette*, 20 January 1898, p. 3.
- ²¹ Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 45.
- ²² Gil, 'Échoes. La Femme à la Tortue', *Les Droits de l'Homme*, 9 June 1898, n. p.
- ²³ Camille Legrand, 'La Quinzaine Parisienne', *Revue Illustrée*, 15 December 1897, n. p.
- ²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of novelty jewellery, see Charlotte Gere/Judy Rudoe: *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria* (The British Museum Press, 2010), pp. 190-247. A hummingbird necklace has been preserved in the British Museum, museum number 1993,0205.1.
- ²⁵ [Anon.], 'Chitchat on Fashions for October', *Godey's Ladies Book*, 101 (October 1880), pp. 395-98 (p. 398).
- ²⁶ [Anon.], 'Novelties', *The Keystone*, 8 (November 1887), p. 22.
- ²⁷ See Louise Alquié de Rieusseyroux Alq, *Le Nouveau Savoir-Vivre Universel*, Vol. I, Nouvelle Édition (Bureaux des Causeries Familiales, 1883), pp. 208-09. The same advice was given in German etiquette columns.
- ²⁸ Emilie Bratzky, 'Frauens Schmuck', *Der Bazar*, 40 (29 January 1894), p. 57.
- ²⁹ [Anon.], 'Wearing Jewelry. Rules to Govern Women Who Would Study Good Form', *The Paterson Daily Press*, Evening Issue, 20 September 1895, p. 3.
- ³⁰ Anna Behnisch, 'Wie schmücken wir uns?', *Handels-Zeitung und Kunstgewerbe-Blatt für die Gold u. Silberwaren-Industrie*, 2 (15 September 1899), pp. 206-08 (p. 208). Becker, too, notes that 'debates about the motifs which should or should not be used in jewelry went so far as to suggest banning representations of human figures and animals, and only allowing subjects such as butterflies, dragonflies and swallows', however cites no source for this information. Vivienne Becker, *Art Nouveau Jewelry* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 65.
- ³¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains*, 5th edn (Librairie Plon, 1908), p. 142.
- ³² The symbolic value of snake jewellery is highly contextual, as it shifted several times throughout the nineteenth century. As to the potential of snake jewellery towards 'performing a demonic persona' during the fin de siècle, see Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism. Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014), pp. 555-64.
- ³³ Svelt, 'Élégances Parisiennes', *La Vie Parisienne*, 4 December 1897, p. 695.
- ³⁴ [Anon.], '[The latest fad...]', *The Umpire*, 9 January 1898, n. p.
- ³⁵ Claretie, *La Vie à Paris 1897*, p. 422.
- ³⁶ René Binet, 'Orfèvrerie et Bijoux', *Art et Décoration*, 1 (1897), pp. 68-71 (p. 68).
- ³⁷ Bury, *Jewellery: The International Era 1789-1910*, II, p. 749.
- ³⁸ The ring is kept in the *Musée des arts décoratifs*, Paris, Inv. 40105.
- ³⁹ Maria Eichhorn (Dolorosa), *Tagebuch einer Erzieherin* (Jean Meslier, 2017), p. 75. First published 1904.
- ⁴⁰ Robinson, 'Tortues-Bijoux', *Le Petit Moniteur*, 7 January 1898, n. p.
- ⁴¹ Simplicie, 'Causerie', *La Petite Gironde*, 7 January 1898, n. p. (p. 2).
- ⁴² Robinson, 'Tortues-Bijoux', n. p.
- ⁴³ [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', *Freeman's Journal*, 18 January 1898, p. 2.
- ⁴⁴ Faverolles, 'La vie à Paris', p. 335.
- ⁴⁵ Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Sarah Bernhardt* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 101.
- ⁴⁶ [Anon.], 'Fashion and Social Notes', *The Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald*, 22 April 1898, p. 6.
- ⁴⁷ [Anon.], 'Paris Notes', p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ Edward Milvain, '"Chameleon" Lizards', *The Youth's Companion*, 21 June 1894, pp. 287-88.
- ⁴⁹ P..., 'A Curious Ornament', *To-Day*, Vol. 3 (9 June 1894), p. 136.
- ⁵⁰ [Anon.], *Cruelty to Chameleons*, *The Argosy*, 3 March 1894, p. 386.
- ⁵¹ P..., 'A Curious Ornament', p. 136.
- ⁵² Charles Read Bacon, ed., *The Reporter's Nosegay. Brightest and Best Blossoms from the Philadelphia Record's Famous Column* (Nosegay Publishing Co., 1896), n. p.
- ⁵³ John H. Young, *Our Deportment or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (F. B. Dickerson, 1889), p. 316.
- ⁵⁴ Frank, 'La Tortue-Bijou', p. 53.
- ⁵⁵ See Sybil, 'Ladies' Pages', n. p.
- ⁵⁶ Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', *Truth*, 2 June 1898, pp. 44-45 (p. 44).
- ⁵⁷ [Anon.], 'A Chat About London Fashions', *The North British Daily Mail*, 11 June 1898, p. 3.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Sybil, 'Answers to Correspondents', *The Sketch*, Vol. 23 (5 October 1898), p. 500.

- ⁶⁰ For instance, three different diamond tortoise pins were offered in the 1901 catalogue of the Goldsmiths & Silversmiths Company, London. See Peter Hinks, ed., *Viktorianischer Schmuck* (Olms, 1996), pp. 46 and 49.
- ⁶¹ Gertrude Aretz, *Die elegante Frau* (Grethlein, 1929), pp. 368-69.
- ⁶² [Anon.], 'Stage Exploitation of Jewelry', *The Keystone*, 29 (June 1908), p. 965.
- ⁶³ Joel Feder, 'The Stage as a Sartorial Prophet', *The Ottawa Citizen*, 7 January 1910, n. p.
- ⁶⁴ [Anon.], 'Some of Fashion's Latest Fancies', *The Baltimore American*, 20 July 1902, p. 27.
- ⁶⁵ Thos. E. Hill, *The New Revised Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* (W. B. Conkey, 1897), p. 181.
- ⁶⁶ Grant McCracken, 'The Trickle-Down-Theory Rehabilitated', in Michael R. Solomon, ed., *The Psychology of Fashion* (Lexington, 1985), pp. 39-54 (p. 40). See also Georg Simmel, 'Philosophie der Mode', in *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays* (Klinkhardt, 1911), pp. 29-64. First appeared in 1905.
- ⁶⁷ Dr. Getrud Bäumer, 'Hans von Kahlenberg', *Das Literarische Echo*, 10 (1907-08), pp. 1499-506 (p. 1500).
- ⁶⁸ [Anon.], 'Echoes de Partout. Un Nouveau Bijou Parisien', *Istanbul*, 19 March 1898, n. p.
- ⁶⁹ Lady Violet Greville, 'Place aux Dames', *The Graphic*, 26 March 1898, p. 390. The same was reported by many other sources, French and English.
- ⁷⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 132.
- ⁷¹ See Mrs H. R. Haweis, *The Art of Beauty* (Harper & Brothers, 1878), pp. 107-113.
- ⁷² For a detailed discussion of Aesthetic jewellery, see Charlotte Gere & Geoffrey C. Munn, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and "Pre-Raphaelite" Fashion', in *Pre-Raphaelite to Arts & Crafts Jewellery* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1996), pp. 109-61.
- ⁷³ L. D. Ventura, 'The Modern Woman', *Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 December 1884, p. 6.
- ⁷⁴ George C. Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927* (Yale University Press, 2003), p. 8.
- ⁷⁵ Loraine Pearce Bucklin, 'Aesthetische Juwelen', *Journal der Goldschmiedekunst*, 8 (1888), pp. 21-22 (p. 21).
- ⁷⁶ Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, pp. 77-78.
- ⁷⁷ [Anon.], 'American Items', *The Watchmaker, Jeweller and Silversmith*, 1 August 1887, p. 27.
- ⁷⁸ [Anon.], 'Queer and Quaint', *The Manufacturing Jeweler*, 9 (1891), pp. 104-06 (p. 104).
- ⁷⁹ [Anon.], 'Unique Jewelry. Odd and Curious Things for Personal Adornment', *The Providence Journal*, 3 July 1899, p. 9.
- ⁸⁰ [Anon.], 'Conseils à ces Messieurs', *La Vie Parisienne*, 43 (5 March 1889), p. 139.
- ⁸¹ [Anon.], '"Fashionable" Verlobungsringe', *Deutsche Goldschmiedezeitung*, 3 (1900), p. 11.
- ⁸² [Anon.], 'Fancies in Engagement Rings', *The Carroll Herald*, 3 December 1897, n. p.
- ⁸³ Marie Madeleine, 'Eine Priesterin der Aphrodite', in *Auf Kypros*, 10th edn. (Vita, 1900), pp. 1-5, p. 2.
- ⁸⁴ See Max Nordau, *Entartung*, I (Duncker, 1892), p. 19.
- ⁸⁵ Liane de Pougy, *Idylle Saphique* (Librairie de la Plume, 1901), p. 236.
- ⁸⁶ Clare, 'Girls' Gossip', p. 44.