

COLLECTING



1 Gold, diamond and emerald button ring, c1760, £35,000, sandracronan.com.



2 Liberty silver button, 1902, sold for £460 at Bleasdales auction house.

3 Waistcoat button (one of a set), c1800, POA, evararities.com.

4 Schiaparelli silver-gilt buttons by Alberto Giacometti, 1930s, £75,000, greensofcheltenham.com.

Right: a selection of buttons by Lucie Rie from the V&A collection, photographed for HTSI in December 2025



EVA RARITIES NECKLACE MADE FROM 18TH-CENTURY BUTTONS, POA



FASHION

BUTTONS

Have you fallen for a fastener?

WORDS BY VIVIENNE BECKER



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5 Plastic button with ostrich-leather inset, 1920s-40s, £6 each, oldbuttonshop.com.

6 Chanel button from a suit worn by Princess Diana displayed at Kensington Palace.

7 Diamond cluster ring, c1890, £22,000, koopman.art.

8 Button from a Schiaparelli tailored dress.

9 Plastic star buttons, 1920s-40s, £6 each, oldbuttonshop.com.

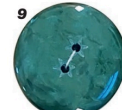
10 Silver and enamel buttons in suffragette colours, 1909, sold for £900 at Bleasdales auction house.

11 Schiaparelli acrobat button, 1938, from Schiaparelli: Fashion Becomes Art at the V&A.

12 19th-century glass tingle button, POA, oldbuttonshop.com



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A CHANEL BUTTON WITH SWALLOW MOTIF



Never a button without a buttonhole," said Coco Chanel. But while the couturier decreed that a fastening should always serve a practical purpose, she was not averse to adorning buttons with her favourite emblems – lions, camellias or interlinked Cs. Bold buttons were featured by Matthieu Blazy in his debut collection for Chanel, and are also spotted in the V&A show *Schiaparelli: Fashion Becomes Art*, where examples by artist Alberto Giacometti and jeweller Jean Schlumberger feature sculpted figures and flying acrobats. The diminutive button can make a big statement.

Collectors have long appreciated buttons as miniature works of art: part fashion, part social history, with a heritage stretching back some 4,000 years. The first examples originated in about 2,000BC in the Indus Valley Civilisation (spanning present-day Pakistan and India) and were more ornamental than functional. It wasn't until the mid-13th century that the button emerged as an efficient fastener.

During the Renaissance, they were flaunted as symbols of wealth and power. At the 1520 Field of the Cloth of Gold meeting between François I of France and Henry VIII of England, the two kings vied

to outshine each other with their lavish gold and jewelled versions, says collector and dealer Sylvia Llewelyn. Louis XIV's suites of diamond buttons inspired 18th-century dandies, who liked theirs as big and flamboyant as possible, studded with gems, paste stones or fashionable cut steel.

Vintage couture buttons are hard to find. Most are priced between £5 and £30 apiece, but certain examples fetch far more. A

THE KINGS VIED TO OUTSHINE EACH OTHER WITH GOLD, JEWELLED VERSIONS

bronze pair sculpted by Giacometti for Schiaparelli in the 1930s, for example, is currently on offer through antique jewellery dealer Greens of Cheltenham. Depicting an example of the artist's signature elongated figure with raised arms, they are currently on loan to the V&A but available to purchase for £75,000.

THERE IS A BROAD VARIETY OF options for collectors, who "tend to focus on a particular genre", says Robert Bleasdale, founding director of Bleasdales auction house, a specialist in antique sewing tools and accessories. At the top end of the market are 18th- and 19th-century jewelled buttons. Also sought-after are 18th-century ceramic versions hand-

painted in enamel – a set of nine with river scenes was auctioned on 15 June with an estimate of £600 to £1,000 – while interest in silver art nouveau and arts and crafts designs is growing fast. In March, Bleasdales sold a 1902 Liberty button for £460, while a 1905 set of five by Birmingham silversmith William Hair Haseler fetched £560.

Many pieces are repurposed as jewels. Antique jewellery dealer Sandra Cronan often wears a pair of late-18th-century diamond buttons converted into earrings, and is currently selling a c1760 ring crafted from a Colombian emerald-and-diamond button (£35,000). At Koopman Rare Art, a c1890 diamond cluster ring is made from a remodelled button (£22,000). Eva Reynolds, founder of historical jewellery specialist Eva Rarities, started collecting antique buttons, particularly Georgian paste examples, five years ago. "No one was buying them then," she says, "but a necklace of large paste buttons gives you a full diamond look at a far lower price." Her 18th- and early-19th-century examples, mainly from gentlemen's jackets

or waistcoats, range from £1,500 to £8,000.

"The market is very "niche", says Llewelyn, but its following is global, and especially strong in the US. Her personal collection features some 4,000 examples, spanning Roman artefacts and present-day finds. Her current stock is similarly eclectic: French plastic buttons from the 1920s to '40s can start from as little as 75p; "Bohemian glass buttons from the late-19th century up to the 1960s are popular, but also plentiful and inexpensive"; and tiny 19th-century "tingle" waistcoat buttons, made of foil-backed coloured glass, can fetch up to £1,000 apiece.

Look out for Lucie Rie, says Bleasdale. The feted studio potter began making buttons to make ends meet in the 1940s. By 1946 she was producing 6,000 a month, using them as a testing ground for the colours and glazes with which she made her name. While her bowls can fetch six figures at auction, her buttons tend to sell for around £200 to £800 each. Small pleasures, indeed. ■HTSI

WHERE TO BUY

Bleasdales Ltd
bleasdalesltd.co.uk
Sandra Cronan
sandracronan.com
Eva Rarities Ltd
evararities.com
Greens of Cheltenham
greensofcheltenham.com
Koopman Rare Art
koopman.art
Sylvia Llewelyn
oldbuttonshop.com
Treasure House Fair
treasurehousefair.com
Adams Antiques Fairs
adamsantiquesfairs.com

WHERE TO SEE

V&A vam.ac.uk
Waddesdon Manor
waddesdon.org.uk

WHAT TO READ

Old Buttons by Sylvia Llewelyn