

The Magnificent Period of Mauboussin

by Kathryn Bonanno Patrizzi



Kathryn Bonanno Patrizzi PG, FGA

As many of you who know me personally are already aware, I am a passionate collector and admirer of the jewels of the Art Deco period. It is a period of such creativity, richness and variety that one could not possibly tire of it. To those of you not yet initiated into this era, it was a time of great exploration and invention, spanning from roughly 1915 to 1940, give or take a few years. Not only are there the clean, geometric lines so often associated with this period, but there are the exquisite interpretations of the exotic influences of the time - influences of the Orient ("chinoiserie"), India, and the Near East, and the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 that stimulated the new revival of the Egyptian style. There were many great jewelry houses during this period, and without a doubt, the Parisian jewelers were leading the way. There were Cartier, Lacloue Freres, Boucheron, Van Cleef & Arpels, and of course Mauboussin, just to name a few. One could write a book on each of these famous houses - I have chosen to just brush the surface of one, Mauboussin, in this brief article which I hope will enlighten those of you who may not already be familiar with this great house.

Mauboussin's history begins in 1827, with Mr. Rocher, who founded a small jewelry boutique on a small Parisian street. His collaborator, Mr. Jean Baptiste Noury, took over the business in 1869, starting the family business, which continues to this day -



The brooch was made circa 1925 (for similar brooches, see Mauboussin, Editions du Regard, 1992, page 77). It is more of a painting made from precious gems, than a piece of jewelry. Note that there is no metal visible at all; the platinum is visible only from the back and is so light that it could never be mistaken for a piece made today (platinum is a very heavy metal and difficult to work, demanding great skill from the jeweler). The flowers spring delicately off the diamond-set background, brought to life with bright emerald accents. Shadowed with black enamel, the design created with these contrasting colors of gemstones are all held within a faceted, quartz crystal frame. While the design is remarkably simple, it epitomizes the exquisite workmanship of this great era. (Private Collection).

six generations later! Georges Mauboussin, Mr. Noury's nephew, worked closely with his uncle, and in 1922, the business was named "Mauboussin, Successeur de Noury", later shortened to "Mauboussin". In 1923, Georges moved the business to 3 Rue de Choiseul, a much larger location, where there was more light, more room and where he gathered many artisans under one roof—his designers, renderers, lapidaries, diamond cutters, gold- and platinum-smiths—and so on. Georges Mauboussin was a very creative man, but he was also a very lucid businessman. His firm participated in 18 expositions worldwide, in just seven years, between 1924 and 1931 - New York, Rio De Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Milan, Paris, and branches were established in most of these important cities. (Mr. Mauboussin was also made "Conseiller du Commerce Exterieur de la France" from 1929 to 1933.)

Georges Mauboussin had innovative ideas, and not long after opening the new shop, he planned three thematic exhibitions to boost interest and international clientele. The first of these took place in 1928 and was dedicated to emeralds - 280 splendid jewels celebrating the beauty of the emerald, including a large 24.88 carat emerald which Napoleon Bonaparte gave to his beloved Josephine in 1800 (which was remounted in a fashionable "Oriental" motif). The next was dedicated to rubies (to counter the negative effects of the new "synthetic" rubies on the market) in 1930: 200 special pieces of jewelry all promoting the wonder of ruby, creating a demand for this gem which far exceeded the supply! The third theme, in 1931, was that of diamonds, which was already an international monetary staple. These were innovative ideas which stimulated the market in a time of world depression.



MAUBOUSSIN
JOAILLERIE
DIAMANTS ET PIERRES PRÉCIEUSES
3 RUE DE CHOISEUL
PARIS
NEW-YORK BUENOS-AYRES RIO-DE-JANEIRO

As evidenced by the three thematic exhibitions, Mauboussin had a great love of fine gems and paid homage to them. This is important to keep in mind when discussing fine Art Deco jewelry. It is the first great era for gems. In past centuries, fine jewels were made in yellow gold or silver, the mountings playing a prominent role in relationship to the stones; most of these jewels were rather heavy and stiff, with much metal showing. The Art Nouveau period (circa 1890 – 1915) was devoted to the naturalistic approach, using “poor” materials such as horn, glass, silver, and common gem materials, and while there were beautifully crafted jewels, the whole movement was devoted to

moving away from intrinsically valuable pieces, and into the ethereal, feminine world of mystery; even the gold pieces were purposely set with common stones or other intrinsically poor materials.

Just the opposite is true of the Art Deco period, where mundane, everyday items are laden with luxurious materials, such as gem-encrusted and lavish powder compacts, mirrors, lipstick cases and handbags, or gold or platinum shirt stays, cigarette cases, and such. The turn of the century brought the expansive use of platinum, thanks to the invention of a new jeweler’s torch which reached the high temperatures necessary to melt platinum.

The tasseled sautoir is another example of the creativity and exceptional skill of Mauboussin in this exciting time. It is an unusual example of the Egyptian Revival style. It epitomizes luxury, yet is quietly understated. This necklace depicts a “lotus leaf” motif, and is luxuriously laden with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, amethysts, citrines, black enamel and platinum. As I hope you can see in the photo, each section is made up of many gems, each one specifically cut to contour the next – like fitting the pieces of a puzzle together, only the pieces are cut out of gemstones; the stone cutters had to customize the cutting of each gem. The large emerald is also beautifully fashioned to suspend and “gather” the many tassels of ruby beads. A noteworthy feature of this piece is that two portions of the neck chain detach, forming a pair of Egyptian revival bracelets, versatility being a design feature found occasionally in fine jewels of the period. Once again, the platinum is light and beautifully worked, supporting the design of the gemstones invisibly. The style of the piece suggests that it was probably made in the mid-1920’s, although it is difficult to be precise since I have seen nothing to compare to this jewel – nothing similarly constructed or of similar design! (Private Collection).





While the artisans of the Art Nouveau style make practically no use of this precious metal, the use of platinum revolutionized the world of the Art Deco jeweler, and hence, made it possible to create jewels that had never been seen before. For the first time, the "metal" fades into the background, allowing the gems themselves to form the designs, with no visible support. Very little platinum was necessary to hold even large stones! Art is created by painting with the pure color of the stones – diamonds and onyx, diamonds and emeralds, and such, creating chiaroscuro, the play of light and dark; it is design for design's sake. Fine gems are cut in new ways to enhance the design of the jewel, to fit the pieces of the puzzle; there is the invention of the baguette (circa 1911), the triangular, the half-moon, and the trapezoid-cuts, just to mention a few. Jewelers were working in all of the precious metals and utilizing the finest of gems (some of the finest mining deposits were discovered just prior to this period, such as the sapphires from Kashmir). Travels to India and the Far East, as I mentioned above, were an important factor in the creativity of the period. It is the great epoch of the Master Jeweler, utilizing all the artisans of the trade – the diamond cutters, the lapidaries, the enamellers, the renderers, the carvers, the gold- and platinum smiths, and so on, as exemplified in the "new" shop of Georges Mauboussin! Georges Mauboussin was also highly respected amongst his peers and earned quite a reputation as a gemstone connoisseur, and for knowing how to find and market them!

It is the Art Deco period in which the house of Mauboussin really excels, I think, even though their clientele included the highest of aristocracy as patrons in the early 1800's. It is interesting to note that the Art Nouveau style was never followed by Mauboussin, the great jeweler preferring to leave the "arts and crafts" to others, to create important jewelry with important materials (as did, also, the house of Cartier). During this time, the firm had many important patrons – politicians, aristocrats and royalty, such as the Maharaja of Indore and Queen Nazli of Egypt, actors and actresses, such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Paulette Godard, and many more. The many international exhibitions and success of the early 1920's paved the way for two more important figures in the house of Mauboussin – Georges' son, Pierre Mauboussin, and Marcel Goulet, another nephew of Jean Baptiste Noury.

Pierre Mauboussin (1900-1984) successfully pursued both of his passions - master jeweler and airplane designer; he was a strong creative force during this time. Just after the New York exhibition in 1924, "Mauboussin Inc." was opened at 330 Park Avenue, for which Pierre was responsible. This salon became such a success that a shop was

opened shortly thereafter on 51st Street. While running the New York operation, Pierre designed the first Mauboussin airplane, in 1928, which won 5 international records for speed. He also designed a car which bears the Mauboussin name. Due to the economic crisis "Mauboussin Inc." closed its New York doors in 1929, and Pierre focused on engineering his designs. His creativity was a driving force until about 1940.

Marcel Goulet, Noury's nephew, also had a strong influence on the business. The economic crisis took its toll on the house of Mauboussin, as it did to so many fine jewelers, causing it to close most of its foreign branches. This also took its toll on Marcel, who was 73 years old at the time. He brought in his son, Jean Goulet, in 1930, who really helped to turn the situation around. His son was the same age as the Maharaja of Indore, and the two of them got along famously, insuring the stability of the firm! (Jean even went to India for two months to evaluate and re-design the Maharaja's jewels). Jean Goulet, a man of great charisma, became the company's manager in 1934. I am mentioning all of this so that it is easy to understand why the two cousins agreed to change their names in 1962 to Goulet-Mauboussin – they each now shared the same family name.


Many of you may have encountered jewelry pieces signed Trabert and Hoeffler – Mauboussin. This refers to the "American" Mauboussin. Mauboussin had closed its New York office in 1929, but they established a partnership with the American firm, Trabert and Hoeffler in 1936, who became the exclusive representatives for Mauboussin between 1946 and 1953.

The three jewels shown here really exemplify some of the best of Mauboussin's work in the Art Deco period.

I hope these three exquisite jewels offer a taste and speak louder than my written words, of the magnificent period of Mauboussin - a period of great invention, imagination and creativity, which demanded exceptional skill on the part of the jeweler, and which made uninhibited use of rich and exotic gemstones. The house of Mauboussin became one of the grandest houses in Paris, and thus, the world, during this exciting Art Deco period. These period jewels are as magnificent today as they were then, which attests to the validity of their designs and to the greatness of the house that created them. Truly exceptional jewels withstand the test of time, and become more desirable and sought-after with each passing year – a fact that is evident, in my opinion, with the fine jewels as seen here by the house of Mauboussin.

Reference: Mauboussin, by Marguerite De Cerval, Editions du Regard, 1992





The emerald and diamond sautoir is a magnificent example of the exotic influence of India, so popular among the great jewelry houses at the time. The carved emeralds are typical of the style, and while carved leaves in gemstones of different varieties or colors are responsible for the "tutti frutti" motifs of the Deco period, Mauboussin has created an even more elegant and graceful jewel by the simplicity and contrast of colors in the use of only the emerald leaves with the diamonds and black enamel. While Mauboussin was not the only one to do this, the piece shown here is one of

the most exquisite examples of this style – the balance, harmony and elegance surpass anything I have ever seen. The carved floral vase once again exemplifies the importance of the use of fine gems to the house of Mauboussin. Rather than using an inferior quality emerald, typically used for carving, this large emerald has been carved from very fine quality, Colombian material. It may have been taken quite literally from an Indian maharaja's collection, as was sometimes the case in the Deco period. The pendant portion of the necklace is in the very popular flower vase motif, but even more specifically, it represents the "tree of life" motif of the East. Once again, there is no metal showing – the gems seem to be suspended from nothing at all, the platinum only visible from the back of the piece. It was made in 1928, undoubtedly for the first of the three thematic exhibitions celebrating and paying homage to the emerald! (Private Collection).