

## René Boivin

René Boivin (1864-1917) (fig. 1) was born into a modest family of goldsmiths in 1864 and aspired to become a doctor. However, financial circumstances pressured him into entering the family business once he graduated high school at the age of 17, and he started as a goldsmith alongside his elder brother Victor.<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, he also took drawing lessons and showed talent for making and designing jewellery. After years of training, René Boivin bought the first of several workshops in Paris, where he built up an inventory of equipment and skilled workers, eventually establishing his own brand in 1890.



Figure 1. Portrait of René Boivin.

1893 marked a radical turn in the life of this young jeweller: he moved to 38 rue de Turbigo after acquiring several established workshops and hiring highly qualified craftsmen<sup>2</sup> to manufacture fine jewellery for firms such as Boucheron. That same year, he married Jeanne Poiret (1871-1959, also known as Madame Boivin), sister of the famed couturier Paul Poiret (1879-1944) (fig. 2). Being Paul's brother-in-law, the two made a potent combination. Not only did they create bold and daring fashions of the early 1900s<sup>3</sup>, but they also rubbed shoulders with celebrities, trendsetters and intellectuals including Erik Satie (1866-1925) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)<sup>4</sup>. As such, the Maison began to produce more pieces for private clients and gradually shifted the firm's reputation from manufacturer to maker. By the early 1900s, René

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<sup>1</sup> Burns 2018, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> René Boivin 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Christie's 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Burns 2018, p. 28.

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expanded the business and moved to 27 rue des Pyramides, a larger premise to better receive his growing clientele.



Figure 2. Portrait of Paul Poiret (left) and Jeanne Poiret (right).

At the time of the Maison's expansion, Art Nouveau (c. 1890-c. 1910) flourished throughout Europe and America. Renowned jewellery houses such as Cartier and Lalique incorporated the Art Nouveau style into their designs and achieved worldwide success. Although René also drew inspiration from the Art Nouveau movement, he did not follow the trend slavishly. Instead, he was more influenced by ancient cultures and created jewellery with unconventional designs, for example a spiral ring (fig. 3) that imitates accessories from the Bronze Age (3,300BC-1,200BC) (fig. 4).



Figure 3. René Boivin's Gold Spiral Ring (designed c. 1912) in Vogue Paris<sup>5</sup>.

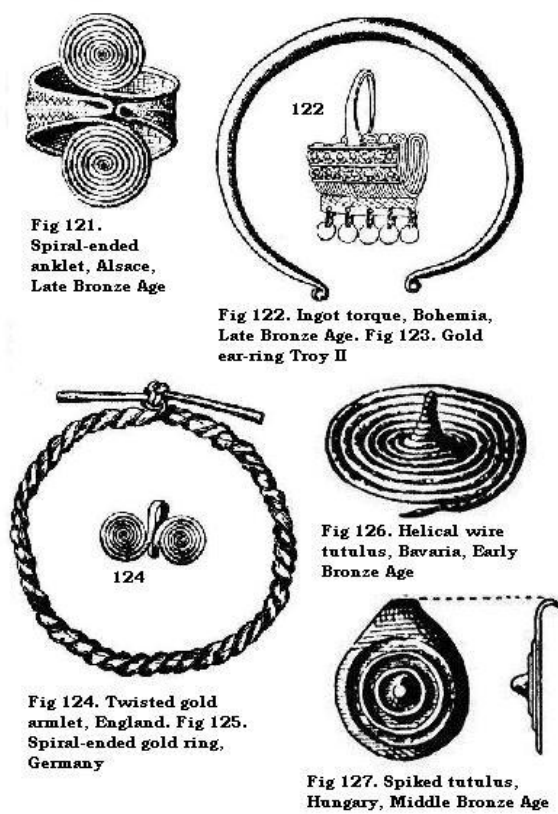


Figure 4. Spiral-ended anklet, Alsace, Late Bronze Age (top left corner)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Macklowe Gallery 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Childe 1930.

In addition, René also used the fish scale pattern, a design motif first found in the Paleolithic Age (roughly 2.5 million years ago to 10,000 BC) in the form of fish bone ornaments<sup>7</sup>, as the decorative theme of some vanity cases. This compact with a separate lipstick holder made in the 1910s from the Museum's permanent collection is one example (fig. 5). Like many of his fellow countrymen and designers, he was highly influenced by Orientalism. This concept flourished in the art world since the 19th century when many Western artists took inspiration from the Eastern world, especially Turkey, Egypt and North Africa.<sup>8</sup> The fish scale pattern is a significant motif from Turkey, as seen in Iznik ceramics of the late 16th century<sup>9</sup> (fig. 6).

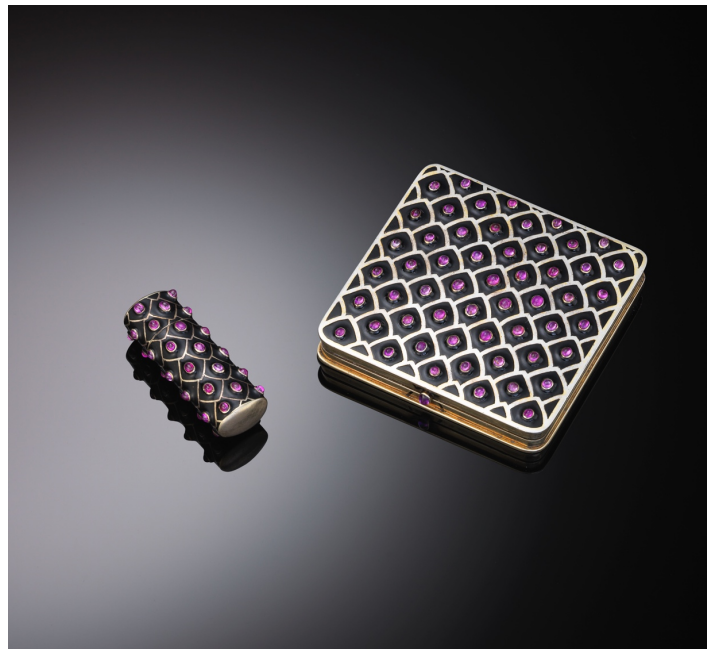


Figure 5. Compact with a Separate Lipstick, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1910, Materials: Gold, ruby and silver, Compact: Height 7.2 x Width 7.6 x Depth 1.2cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

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<sup>7</sup> Yin, Shi and Ma 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Sotheby's 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 6. Dish with Scale-Pattern Design, Turkey, Iznik c. 1575–80. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

By 1905, René transcended contemporary fashion with more original designs and an extended choice of materials<sup>10</sup>. He started to make frequent use of semi-precious stones and calibr  cut<sup>11</sup> diamonds in his works. This set of compact and lipstick holder (fig. 7) in the Liang Yi collection is one example as the diamonds are cut precisely in various shapes and sizes to fit the design of the double-headed eagle clutching an orb and a sceptre. Furthermore, he also made a bold attempt to set gemstones and precious metals into wood and it is believed that Boivin may have been ‘the original firm to use wood as a mounting for gems’<sup>12</sup>. The cover and base of this 1940s compact (fig. 8) are made of wood and inlaid with stylised three-petal flower, leaves and characters which are made of silver in the centre.

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<sup>10</sup> Antique Jewelry University.

<sup>11</sup> The calibr  cut was a very common gemstone cutting technique during the early 20th century. This cut refers to faceted gemstones that are carefully custom cut to the point that they line up perfectly together. With calibr  cut gemstones, there is virtually no space between the gemstones and their setting as they line up and fit together perfectly. This gemstone cutting style was very labor-intensive and time-consuming.

<sup>12</sup> Macklowe Gallery 2021.

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Figure 7. Compact with a Separate Lipstick, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1950, Materials: Gold and diamond, Compact: Height 1.43 x Diameter 8.1cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 8. Compact, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1940, Materials: Silver and wood, Height 1.6 x Diameter 7.7cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

René and his only son Pierre went to the front line to defend France during World War I (1914-18). Unfortunately, they died in service to their country and never returned. Because of the sudden deaths of the owner and the only male heir, the public expected that his wife, Madame Boivin, would sell or close the business as jewellery in the

1920s was a male-dominated business<sup>13</sup>. However, she decided to take over the company and continued its tradition of producing fine pieces after the death of René in 1917. Drawing on the experience of running the business with her husband for over two decades, Madame Boivin worked closely with the workshops and craftsmen that produced the high-quality jewellery the firm was known for and was, therefore, able to fulfill orders and perpetuate the designs left by René.

Not only did Madame Boivin continue to produce vanities decorated with the aforementioned fish scale patterns in the 1930s and 40s (figs. 9 & 10), she also made good use of floral designs. Producing floral themed jewellery was another tradition dating back to when René headed the establishment. As an avid gardener, he subscribed to botany magazines for inspiration<sup>14</sup>. He excelled at creating a wide range of floral patterns including daisies, wild roses, thistles, lilies and orchids<sup>15</sup>. In the Liang Yi Collection, there are two compacts from the 1950s decorated with flowers, possibly clematis (fig. 11) and forget-me-nots (fig. 12)<sup>16</sup>.

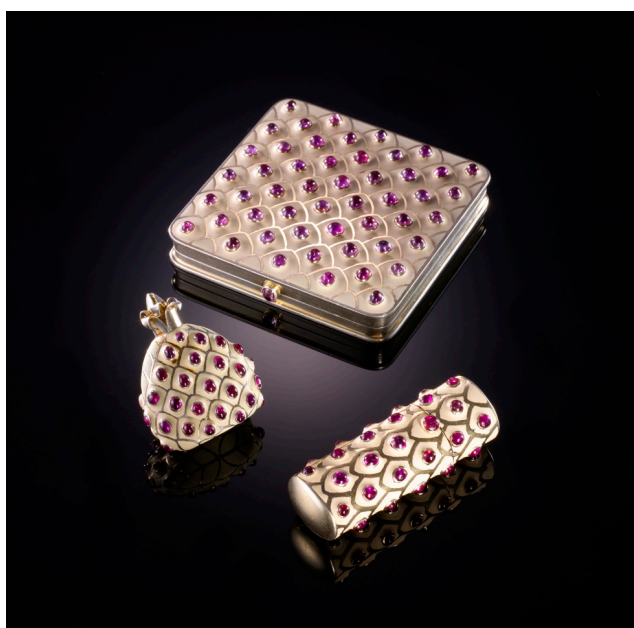


Figure 9. Compact with a Perfume Bottle and a Lipstick, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1938, Materials: Silver, enamel and ruby, Compact: Height 7 x Width 7 x Depth 1.7cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

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<sup>13</sup> Burns 2018, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Burns 2018, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Macklowe Gallery 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Symbolising remembrance, eternal love and faithfulness, forget-me-not gained popularity since the 15th to 16th century and was used as a decoration in rings to denote its message of love and remembrance. It was only until the 19th century that forget-me-not was used as a central motif to ornate rings, bracelets and brooches. When it came to the late 19th to early 20th century, the flower was used in more decorative areas of jewellery.

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Figure 10. Compact with a Separate Perfume Bottle, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1940, Materials: Silver, enamel and turquoise, Compact: Height 7.22 x Width 7.22 x Depth 1.02cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

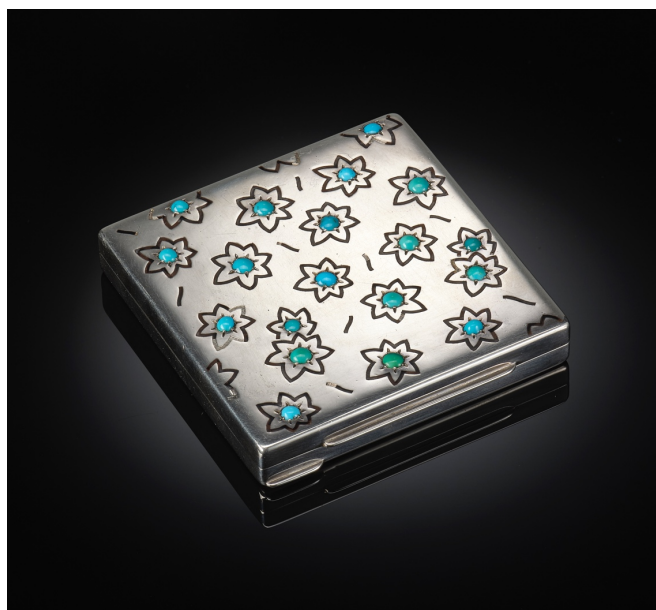


Figure 11. Compact, Maker: René Boivin, Paris 1950s, Materials: Silver, turquoise and enamel, Height 7 x Width 7.2 x Depth 1cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

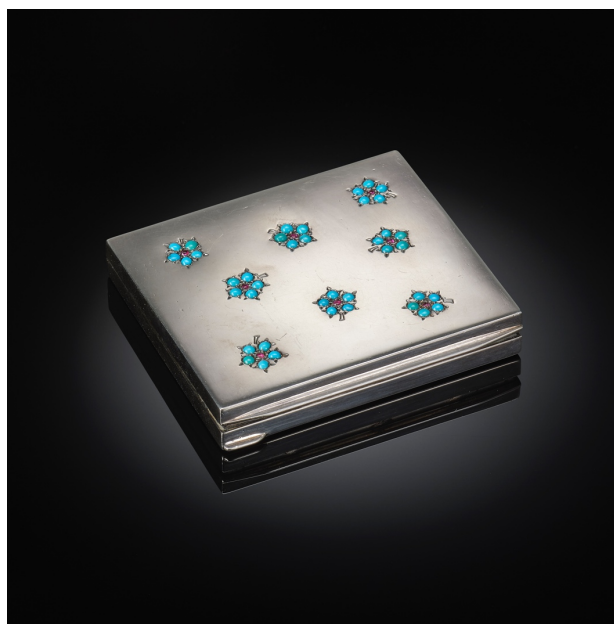


Figure 12. Compact, Maker: René Boivin, Paris 1950s, Materials: Silver, turquoise and ruby, Height 8.7 x Width 7.2 x Depth 1.2cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

In addition to honouring her husband's designs, Madame Boivin also had her own strong sense of aesthetics and she eventually 'developed an independent style which combined a lively range of coloured stones, textures, and dimensions working mostly in yellow gold'<sup>17</sup>. The following two compacts housed at the Museum are examples of Madame Boivin's style.

This compact (fig. 13) made circa 1950 is mainly of gold and inlaid with emerald to form a monkey. Another compact (fig. 14) made during the 1950s also uses gold as the body of the compact and is decorated with a dachshund in brown enamel. These compacts are a clear departure from the floral motifs of previous decades.

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<sup>17</sup> Antique Jewelry University.

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Figure 13. Compact, Maker: René Boivin, Paris c. 1950, Materials: Gold and emerald, Height 9.1 x Width 8.1 x Depth 2cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 14. Compact, Maker: René Boivin, Paris 1950s, Materials: 18ct gold and enamel, Height 10 x Width 8 x Depth 1.3cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

Madame Boivin did not work alone, she also hired Suzanne Belperron née Vuillarme (1900-83), upon her graduation from the Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Besançon. Suzanne was an up-and-coming designer who later became one of the most talented jewellery designers in the 20th century, When Suzanne worked for the Maison, she produced many innovative and revolutionary pieces. Their relationship

ended in 1932 when Suzanne left to work for Bernard Herz, a Parisian pearl and gemstone dealer<sup>18</sup>.

After the departure of Suzanne, Madame Boivin hired a new female designer in 1933, Juliette Moutard (1900-1990), who was credited with designing the iconic Boivin Starfish Brooch (fig. 15) in 1937<sup>19</sup>. The brooch was later purchased by actress Claudette Colbert (1903-96) (fig. 16). Emily Stoehrer, Rita J. Kaplan and Susan B. Kaplan, curators of jewellery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, believe that Colbert bought the brooch when she stayed in Paris in 1938<sup>20</sup>. Germaine Boivin, daughter of René and Jeanne, joined the family business in 1938 as designer and continued to run the firm after her mother's death in 1959.



Figure 15. Starfish brooch, France 1937, Designed by Juliette Moutard and retailed by René Boivin, Materials: 18ct gold, ruby and amethyst. Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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<sup>18</sup> Knowles 2014, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

<sup>20</sup> Jewelry Connoisseur 2020.



Figure 16 Claudette Colbert in Photoplay, November 1939, wearing her starfish brooch to great effect. Image from Siegelson, New York.

In 1976, when Germaine was ready to retire, a buyer put in an offer. He was Jacques Bernard, a designer who had been with the Maison since 1964 who continued to produce pieces in accordance with the company's tradition. The production of Boivin jewellery stopped after the company was sold to Asprey group in 1991.

Although Maison Boivin no longer exists, it holds a significant position in the history of jewellery. Undoubtedly, their timeless pieces, through a combination of all kinds of aesthetic concepts and the use of various materials, possess an intrinsic artistic value. More importantly, Maison Boivin can also be seen as the beginning of feminism during the early 20th century when women started to enter the workplace. Although renowned jewellery houses like Van Cleef & Arpels, Cartier and Dusausoy collaborated with female jewellers and benefited from their works in that period, the house of Boivin stands out solely as a successful women-owned company. These women formed a powerful team and worked productively together, not only building a legacy for the firm but also remaining a testament to the thriving creativity of the women who created a respectable portion of the century's most striking jewellery designs.

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