



*Jewellery from  
Southern Morocco*

IVO GRAMMET



*Pair of fibulae. Silver, enamel, glass cabochon.  
Ida Ou Semlal. Western Anti-Atlas. L. 147 cm.  
Inv. 1000-35. Barbier-Mueller Museum.*

SEVERAL MAJOR WORLD MUSEUMS possess magnificent sets of women's jewellery from villages in the Anti-Atlas mountain region of Southern Morocco.

These include pairs of impressive fibulae (clothespins) with linking chains (title pages and fig. 1), fine enamel- and niello-inlaid bracelets, necklaces richly decorated with amber and coral (fig. 4), majestic tiaras (figs 5, 6 and 7), hair ornaments, pendant earrings (fig. 8) and earrings (fig. 11). As far as men are concerned, a fine dagger has always been both a weapon and a jewel (fig. 13).

In the 1930s, Jean Besancenot, an ethno-photographer, photographed Berber women of Southern Morocco in all their finery (figs 2, 3, 9, 10, 16 and 17), covered in the silver ornaments that were the tangible testimony of their status and families' wealth.

Fig. 1. Previously unpublished pair of fibulae. Silver, enamel, glass cabochon. Ida Ou Semlal. Western Anti-Atlas. L. of each fibulae: 21 cm. Total L. 89 cm. Inv. 1000-8. Barbier-Mueller Museum.

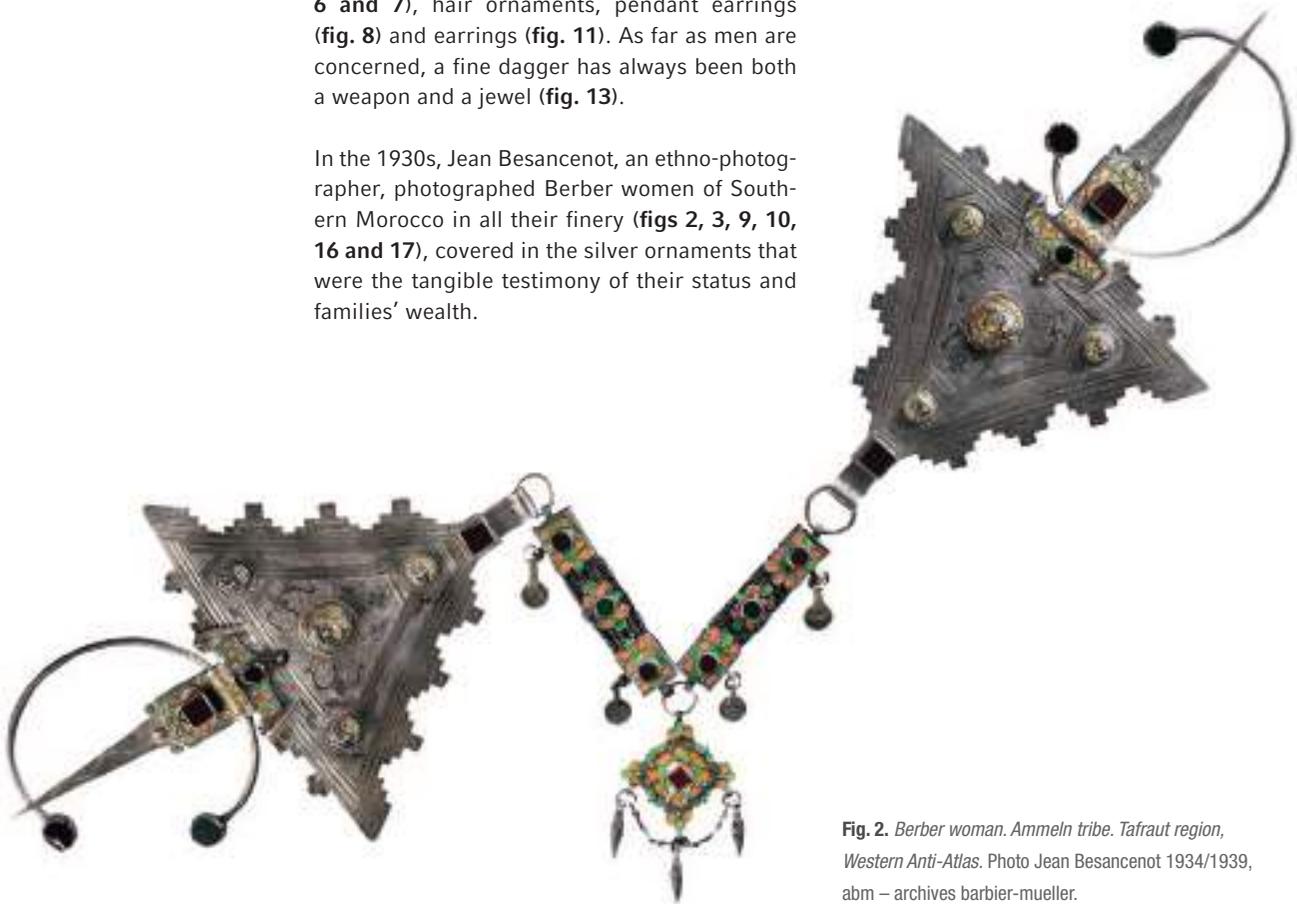


Fig. 2. Berber woman. Ammeln tribe. Tafraut region, Western Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.





Southern Morocco is populated by sedentary Berber peoples who used to live mainly from farming. During the endless discussions prior to a marriage in these communities, the future bridegroom would negotiate the dowry for the bride's father, and sometimes the bride herself. This generally consisted of a number of sheep, goats and cows, a sum of money and a certain amount of jewellery. The latter remained his wife's property and guaranteed her material security, even in case of a divorce. Other gems joined these jewels over the years as the family's financial situation improved.

Just like all farmers, the peoples living in the arid regions of Southern Morocco depended on good weather conditions for their harvest: moderate temperatures and above all enough rainfall. Unfortunately, however, in these extreme regions the hot dry winds blowing in from the desert very often brought famine. During good years, families could save and buy jewellery or quantities of amber or coral beads to make necklaces from the travelling jewellers in the souk.

**Fig. 3.** Berber woman. Smougen village. Southern Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.

**Fig. 4.** Necklace. Glass beads, coral and amber, shells, coins, balls and amulet herz in enamelled silver. Western Anti-Atlas. L. 58 cm. Inv. 1000-6. Barbier-Mueller Museum.



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and guaranteed her material security,  
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These items were sold in the marketplace at a generally accepted fixed price and were therefore always a reliable investment, as well as being easily negotiable.

Jewellers were silversmiths as well as merchants and made a living from the weekly souks where they sold their merchandise. As a rule, they had a small workshop there where they produced their jewellery and a stall to set out their wares, i.e. new handcrafted jewellery. In the sixties and seventies when we were scouring the souks of Southern Morocco for our study on antique jewellery supply and the different production areas, we managed to find some fine, genuine antique pieces and large quantities of amber and coral.

Well-mastered techniques, intricate decoration and rich materials meant that the quality of workmanship of women's jewellery was excellent. In the various rural groups, the design of the jewels, especially the fibulae, their decoration and production techniques raised them to the status of characteristic tribal ornaments. A woman's jewellery embodies the aesthetic norms and ornamental structures of the group she belongs to and with which she identifies.

The pair of fibulae is perhaps the most important ornament of all (**title pages and fig. 1**). Fibulae *tizerzai* are attached together by several wide silver chains *sisla* with a large central ball *tagmout* or Qur'anic case *herz* containing protection against the evil eye. The fibula is essentially a functional object and is used to fasten two thicknesses of material together. The rural woman's



**Fig. 5.** Forehead ornament. Leather, silver, niello, enamel, glass cabochon. *Ida Ou Nadif. Central Anti-Atlas. L. 29.5 cm; Total L. 131 cm; H. 12 cm.* Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.



traditional garment is a long piece of fabric draped around her body and over her shoulders, fastened with a pair of fibulae just above the bust, to allow her to move her arms freely. An open ring-buckle slides through the tubular base of the fibula pin. This buckle is bent forward while the pin is pressed through the two layers of fabric. It is then pushed back over the pin and turned sideways to slide behind the pin and hold in position.

The various techniques used in precious metalwork in Southern Morocco are hammering, casting, welding and stapling, engraving and chasing, enamelling and nielloing, filigree work and *vermoulage*.<sup>1</sup>

Various historical and geographical circumstances have given rise to certain purely regional techniques.

Enamelling is mainly popular in central and western areas of the Anti-Atlas range, particularly among the *Ida Ou Semlal*, but also among the *Ait Ouauzguite* more to the north.

Green and yellow glass beads from Bohemia or Murano were powdered and used as raw mate-

**Fig. 6.** Forehead ornament. Silver, enamel, glass cabochon. *Ida Ou Semlal*. Western Anti-Atlas. H. 30 cm; W. 27.5 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.

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rial to obtain green and yellow enamels. Later on, and even still today, jewellers use a vitreous flux composed of sand, minium, potassium and soda which is melted and applied to a silver base whose melting point (962°C) is just superior to the that of the flux (961°C). The metal oxide added to the flux determines the colour of the enamel: copper oxide for blue, chromium oxide for green and lead chromate for yellow.

The enamel is poured into segments formed by the fine, twisted filigree wires arranged in geometric patterns (figs 4, 5, 6, 7, 12 and 14).

In the central regions of the Anti-Atlas, Ida Ou Nadif, Ida Ou Zedoute and Tagmout, tiaras (fig. 5), earrings, fibulae (fig. 15), pendants and bracelets are decorated with floral and geometric nielloed motifs. Nielloing is a type of enamelling resembling the *champlevé* enamel technique. A shape is engraved or chased on the silver plate. Niello – a metallic alloy of silver, copper, lead and sulphur mixed with borax as a binder, fixed by heating – is applied to the entire surface of the silver. Then, in successive stages, the surface is filed down and scraped away until only the niello stands out in the carved recesses of the piece and resembles black enamel.



**Fig. 7.** Forehead ornament. Silver; enamel, glass cabochon.  
*Tahala, Ida Ou Semlal. Western Anti-Atlas. H. 36 cm; W. 46 cm.*  
Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.



Who were these jewellers – the creators of such marvels? To fully understand, we need only look more closely at the interruption in this type of craft work that occurred towards the middle of the twentieth century. This was characterized by a clear drop in the quality of workmanship and aesthetics of jewellery and silverware. It coincided with the exodus of many Jewish families who left Morocco at the dawn of independence, partly as a result of the general climate of insecurity, but mainly in response to Zionist propaganda calling Jews to join their brothers in the Promised Land. The jewellers were among them. The slump in the quality of precious metalwork in the 1950s confirms the thesis that most of the jewellers and certainly the *maâlmîn*, or master craftsmen, were of Jewish origin.

There were two distinct Jewish communities in Morocco; the rural Jews who spoke Berber or Arabic according to their region and town-dwelling Jews who spoke Spanish or Arabic and had settled mainly in the large cities in the north. The latter descended from the Jews of the Middle Ages who fled to Morocco from Spain, driven out by the Reconquista, particularly after the fall of Granada in 1492. They were known as the *meqorashim*, a Hebrew word meaning 'the chased'. Their culture was based on their heritage from the Andalusian cities and was com-

**Fig. 8.** Previously unpublished earrings. Leather, glass beads, amber and coral, shells; silver hoops and plates decorated with geometric niello motifs. Western Anti-Atlas. Total L. 77 cm; H. 24.5 cm. Inv. 1000-26. Barbier-Mueller Museum.

**Fig. 9.** Berber chief's wife. Tamanart village, Southern Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.





pletely different from that of the rural Jews. According to oral tradition, these were the descendants of Jewish merchants who, during the exodus following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the first millennium BC, fled to Morocco in the wake of Phoenician navigators or Roman armies and settled there. The discovery of an oil lamp at Volubilis decorated with Jewish iconographic patterns and dated to the fourth to fifth centuries would appear to confirm this. These rural Jews were not authorized to own or work the land and were thus obliged to make a living as tradesmen and craftsmen.

However, the rural Jewish Berbers could also have been the descendants of those rural Jewish families who had followed the Arab invaders in their conquests as they swept across the Iberian Peninsula, and subsequently emigrated to Southern Morocco where they progressively merged with the local population. Here we are referring to the Al-mohad kingdom which straddled the Strait of Gibraltar from the twelfth to the thirteenth centuries with its capital at Tinmal, a stronghold located in the southern region of the High Atlas

**Fig. 10 opposite.** Berber woman. Smougen village, Southern Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.

**Fig. 11.** Previously unpublished earrings. Silver, niello, enamel. Ida Ou Semlal. Western Anti-Atlas. H. 17.5 cm; W. 6.2 cm. Inv. 1000-7A and B. Barbier-Mueller Museum.





**Fig. 12.** *Pair of earrings. Silver, enamel, glass cabochon.*

*Tahala, Ida Ou Semlal, Western Anti-Atlas. H. of the hoops 16.3 cm; W. 9.5 cm.*

Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.

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mountains. These Jewish Berbers adopted the culture of the local Muslim Berbers (language, clothing, jewellery, etc.). They lived in symbiosis and were only distinguishable by their head-dresses – no more so however than the neighbouring Berber tribes who had also reinterpreted them in their own way.

The Arabs and the Jews who had left Spain to settle in Morocco at the end of the fifteenth century brought with them the technical skills and aesthetic canons of the Andalusian culture. Once established in Morocco, the Spanish or Sephardic Jews continued to practise their trade as jewellers, merchants or silversmiths. Their activities in Morocco attest to a strong stylistic continuity, both at the technical and decorative levels.

The presence of Jewish jewellers using very advanced techniques with more urban traditions living among the Jews in rural areas in the Anti-Atlas can be explained by migration southwards of urban Jews in search of trade with Southern Morocco and the Trans-Saharan trade route. It was in this context that the influence of the Arabo-Andalusian jewellery tradition on Southern Moroccan craftsmen came about. The rural geometric heritage with the rectangles, circles,



**Fig. 13.** *Dagger. Silver, enamel, niello, glass cabochon, minium, brass, iron, wood. Tagmout, Central Anti-Atlas. H. 41 cm. Inv. 1000-5. Barbier-Mueller Museum.*



**Fig. 14.** *Bracelet. Silver, enamel, glass cabochon. Tahala, Ida Ou Semlal, Western Anti-Atlas. H. 6.5 cm; W. 11.2 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.*

triangles, diamond shapes, crosses and zigzag patterns of the Berber tradition merged with the Hispanic-Moorish enamel and niello techniques mastered by Jewish silversmiths to produce a unique artistic form that was to survive the longest in the rural backwaters of the hilly Anti-Atlas region.

They adapted their style to satisfy demand among customers including Jews, Arabs and the Berber population. Twenty-two-carat gold jewellery or gold-plated silver pieces sometimes set with semi-precious stones were particularly popular with their urban clientele. Silver jewellery was more popular in the Berber villages. And there was no difference between the ornaments worn by Jewish or Muslim Berber women. The only exception was the specific style of fibulae worn solely by the women in the *mellah*<sup>2</sup> at Beni Sbih in the southern Dra Valley.

As they travelled down along the coast to Southern Morocco, these new Sephardic arrivals from Spain met and joined local Jewish families. Illigh (Tazerualt) and Oufrane thus became flourishing commercial hubs along the Sub-Saharan trade route where rich merchants were a godsend for the silversmiths.

We have gathered information on the jewellers in Ida Ou Semlal and Ida Ou Gersmoukt villages, located on the western slopes of the Anti-Atlas mountains. In the village of Tizi Imichioun (Ida Ou Semlal) each house had its own jewellery workshop with a forge and primitive tools. At the same time, Muslim jewellers also farmed the land and grew barley, corn crops and almonds, thus only working sporadically as silversmiths during the quieter winter months. On the other hand, jewellers living at Tahala, the largest Jew-



**Fig. 15.** *Pair of fibulae. Silver, niello, glass cabochon. Ida Ou Nadif, Central Anti-Atlas. H. 9.7 cm; W. 11.2 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Morocco.*

**Fig. 16.** *Berber woman. Isafene tribe. Tafraut region, Western Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.*





ish village, worked full time using the same techniques, shapes and ornamental designs as the farmer-jewellers in neighbouring villages. They were not entitled to own land and therefore focused on making their craftwork as lucrative as possible by selling their jewellery for miles around, far beyond the tribal frontiers. This explains why the quality of the Jewish silversmiths' work was far superior to the Muslim jewellers' (figs 7, 13 and 14).

Thus, with the departure of the Jewish jewellers in the fifties the flourishing period in the history of jewellery in Southern Morocco drew to an end. ■

#### BIOGRAPHY

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#### NOTES

1. A technique where the large silver wire frame of the fibula is filled with small hand-rolled tubes joining everything together. It is a very difficult technique since the surface might well melt. The fibula is then sawed into two equal fibulae.
2. Neighbourhood reserved for the Jewish community.

**Fig. 17.** Berber woman. Ammeln tribe. Tafraut region, Western Anti-Atlas. Photo Jean Besancenot 1934/1939, abm – archives barbier-mueller.

