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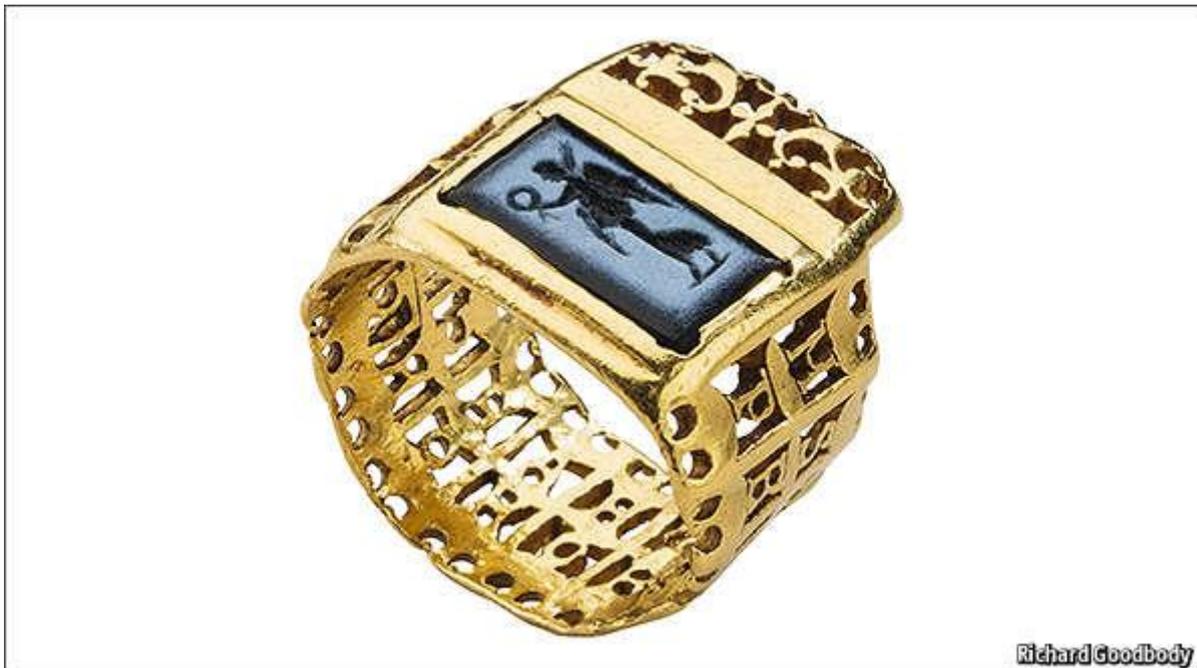
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Medieval rings in New York

Dress circles

May 29th 2015, 9:53 by P.W. | NEW YORK



Richard Goodbody

THE ring has a small gold skull with diamond eyes sitting on top of diamond-tipped crossbones. The gold was originally covered in white enamel, but only traces now remain. Lifting the skull reveals a cavity with a ruby heart nestling inside. The message of this European piece is that love rests secure even in the face of death, an idea of some relevance during the plague-ridden 17th century when it was made. It is not the most valuable of the 53 antique finger-rings that are the focus of “Treasures and Talismans” at the Cloisters Museum in New York, but it is one of the most poetic.

The many other rings on display were made for bishops and merchants, brides and mourners, flashy followers of fashion, aristocrats and courtiers. They range from classical antiquity to the 18th century, though the majority are from Byzantine, Medieval and Renaissance times. They are the cream of the considerably larger, privately owned Griffin Collection, which will be given to the museum on a long-term loan when the show closes in October.

The display is in a beautiful room with narrow arched windows overlooking a herb garden and, beyond, the wooded hills across the Hudson River. Rings and other objects fill five handsome glass cases. The first, and smallest, has four rings, the stars of the show. These include a Roman ring set with an octahedral pointed diamond, the natural form in which the gem occurs. Though gold was relatively plentiful at the time, diamonds were extremely rare, which makes this a particularly unusual and valuable piece. The objects in the other cases are organised by themes such as devotion, romance, love and marriage, and identity. The last of these includes some fine examples of engraved signet rings used to seal documents.

The exhibition provides a context for the jewels, with related paintings, objects of art and goldsmiths' tools. The most compelling of these, "A Goldsmith in his Shop", is a 15th-century oil by Petrus Christus. It shows an elaborately dressed young couple selecting a ring from its maker. The shop is filled with his wares—rings, other jewels, cups—which are very similar to the pieces displayed with the Griffin rings. At the time this painting was made, it was not uncommon for painters and sculptors to train as goldsmiths, too. Yet rings have rarely been the subject of art-museum exhibitions. Their small size means the detail and artistry can be difficult to make out and appreciate. Also, according to the art world's artificial categorisation of "high" and "low" arts, rings were decorative and therefore—as if this were synonymous with frivolous—considered less worthy of study. For this reason alone, "Treasures and Talismans" is a welcome event; that it is an often delightful and always instructive show is a bonus.

Although the Griffin Collection has been assembled over 30 years, this is its first public presentation. Sandra Hindman, a dealer in illuminated manuscripts and antique rings who helped build up the collection, has written a book, "Take this Ring", about the pieces on view. (The show has no catalogue.) When pressed earlier this year on the necessity of giving the collection an identity, the owner (who wishes to remain anonymous) settled on the griffin, a mythological beast who guards treasures. Is it fanciful to suppose that the name also echoes that of the exhibition's curator, C. Griffith Mann? Even if this is not the case, Mr Mann deserves applauding for a laudable job.

"Treasures and Talismans" is at the Cloisters Museum in New York until October 18th 2015

The picture shows a Roman ring from the late 3rd/early 4th century