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With Interest in the Precious Metal High,
Art Expert Examines Its Past

If ever gold was precious, it's now.

"Gold has remained at or near record high prices, even while the value of other commodities falls," notes art expert Terry Stanfill, author of Realms of Gold: Ritual to Romance (realmsofgoldthenovel.blogspot.com), a book that blends factual ancient art and history with modern, fictional romance.

"This past summer, we were all about the gold – our athletes' gold medals, which, by the way, had the highest value of any Olympic gold medals in history at $708."

More than two-thirds of the world's gold demand is for jewelry, she says, of which the United States is the third-largest consumer, behind India and China.

But Stanfill, who studies ancient gold artifacts and weaves them into her newest novel, says we are hardly the first to become enamored of the rare yellow metal.

"The first discoverers of gold were prehistoric, well before the civilizations of the Pharaohs of Egypt and the Sumerians," she says. But gold soon attracted the admiration of the rich and royal, and since then, kings and emperors, explorers, pirates, and thieves.

“Gold figures prominently in the art and currency of the ancient European civilizations I research. It’s one of the most enduring metals, by every definition of the word,” Stanfill says. “Because of that, the gold jewelry, shoes, vessels and other artifacts unearthed by archaeologistscontinue to tell their stories centuries later.”

Stanfill shares some other precious golden nuggets:

• Jason and the Golden Fleece, myth or reality? Roman historian, Strabo(1st century B.C.) wrote about villages by the Kuban River in the Ukraine, where gold collectors used sheepskins to trap the fine gold particles in the rivers and streams flowing from the Caucasus Mountains. The skins could then be dried and beaten to shake out the gold dust. This practice continued well into the 20th century. It’s very possible Jason and the Argonauts sailed to Colchis, a kingdom on the Black Sea, searching for gold. They most likely heard about this wondrous process from other seafarers and traders.

• Why so popular for so long? One of the reasons gold has been valued since prehistoric times is, frankly, its beauty. The gleaming yellow metal has a color and brilliance unmatched in the mineral world. Another reason is that the world has precious little of it. In all of history, just less than 364 million pounds have been mined. Only 5.5 million pounds a year are mined now.

• The stuff of classic fashion. Evidence of ancient art in contemporary architecture, sculpture and other designs is all around us. But nowhere is it as surprising to see as in modern jewelry. Choker-style necklaces made of rigid metal, so populartoday, date back to the 8th century B.C. They were a multi-cultural phenomenon, worn in some societies by men and in others by women. For the Celts, they were a symbol of strength and power, and ancient Celts were often identified by the torques they wore not only around their necks but around their waists and wrists (bracelets!)

Even as modern society hoards gold as a hedge against the volatile world economy and watches as the price per ounce rises and dips, Stanfill says the true value, for her, is in its history.

“Some of mankind’s most beautiful artwork – his very best efforts – were created from gold, and they endure today,” she says. “Without gold, we might not know the status of people found in ancient tombs, and we would not have the vast collection of centuries old artworks that we do today.

“The value of gold that never changes is in how it allows the ancients to communicate with us.”

About Terry Stanfill

Terry Stanfill holds a degree in English literature with a minor in medieval history. She is an Overseer of the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif. An enthusiastic preservationist, she was decorated by the president of Italy with the Ordine al Merito, Cavaliere della RepubblicaItaliana, and more recently as Commendatore, for her fundraising efforts for the restoration of San Pietro di Castello, the ancient cathedral of Venice. She is a former international representative for Christie’s auction house and former director of Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, Calif. Realms of Gold: Ritual to Romance is her third novel and it has received glowing praise; Kirkus Reviews described it as, “An erudite thriller that recalls Dan Brown’s Robert Langdon series—only smarter.” Stanfill is married to Dennis Stanfill, former CEO of 20th Century Fox and MGM Studios.