

Arnold Ostertag

“The jeweller often spiced up his creations with an oriental cachet, and with this bizarre but always harmonious mixture, between Scandinavian art and that of [the] Far East, is born a production like no other¹,” wrote Jules de Saint-Hilaire, commenting on Ostertag’s jewels for the *Reveu du Vrai et du Beau* in 1929. Throughout his career, Melchior Siegfried Arnold Ostertag (1883-1940) created iconic pieces of high jewellery with Oriental influences that were highly sought-after by American and European clients alike, and remains widely admired by collectors today.



Figure 1. A photographic portrait of Arnold Ostertag by Ruben Sobol².

Biography

Arnold Ostertag was born in 1883 in Lucerne, Switzerland to Martin Xaver Ostertag (b. 1837) and Fransiska Hess (b. 1844)³. He first arrived in America at Ellis Island, New York in 1906 and studied dentistry in Chicago; The Ellis Island Passenger database shows that Ostertag travelled frequently, arriving in America from different departure points, such as Le Havre, Liverpool and Naples⁴. On the 5th May 1912, an article in the newspaper *The San Francisco Call* (fig. 2), notes that Ostertag used to practice dentistry on Avenue Macmahon, Paris before eloping with the married Mrs. Gladys Crocker Ashe Gouraud Hooper (1884-1947), the daughter of American heiress Aimée Crocker (1863-1941)⁵, to Egypt and Paris⁶. Other articles at the time show that Ostertag was ‘penniless’ and was acquainted with the Crockers through his

¹ de Saint-Hilaire, Jules (1929)

“Le joaillier pimente souvent ses créations du cachet oriental, et de ce mélange bizarre mais toujours harmonieux, entre l'art scandinave et celui d'extrême orient naît une production à nulle autre pareille”
[Original Text]

² Richard, Jean-Jacques (2016)

³ Richard, Jean-Jacques (2016)

⁴ Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation (2022)

⁵ Aimée Crocker, dubbed “Queen of Bohemia”, was an American heiress known for spending the bulk of her inherited fortune from her father, Edwin B. Crocker () the railroad tycoon and art collector, on travelling all over the world. She stayed in Hawaii, India, Japan and China for the longest duration.

⁶ The San Francisco Call (1912), p. 57

employment as a 'jester' at some of Aimée Crocker's Bohemian parties⁷. Records show that Arnold Ostertag and Gladys Crocker Ashe returned to the United States together in 1914 on the ship SS Patria. During this period of time, Ostertag travelled widely thanks to the wealth of his partner. His travels and acquaintance with the Crockers subsequently influenced his Oriental-centred designs .



Figure 2. An excerpt from 'The San Francisco Call', on the 5th May 1912, page 57. Library of Congress.

In 1915, patent records show that he had successfully patented a method to install one or more images or advertisements on watch faces to change at regular intervals⁸. At the time, Ostertag had a watch shop on 8 Rue du Colonel Moll in the 17th arrondissement of Paris⁹. It is not known when this shop closed but later sources show that he eventually began his career in jewellery, and soon opened his first boutique at 16 Place Vendôme in August 1922¹⁰. In the following year, Ostertag registered his first hallmark. Throughout his career, he frequently placed advertisements in popular magazines such as *Femina*¹¹ and *Vogue* to establish a reputation of high-quality jewellery and artworks¹².

⁷ The Hawaiian Star (1912), p. 9

⁸ Ostertag, A. (1916)

⁹ La Fédération Horlogère Suisse (1916), p. 406

¹⁰ Le Journal (1924), p. 1

¹¹ A French magazine created 1st February, 1901 and disappeared in 1945.

¹² Hancocks, (2022).

Arnold Ostertag



Figure 3. A magazine advertisement by Ostertag in 1934



Figure 4. An advertisement in Vogue magazine in 1930 by Ostertag.



Figure 5. A magazine page from 1938 showing hair clips and brooches from various jewellery houses, such as Ostertag, Cartier, Boucheron, Van, Cleef & Arples and LaCloche.

His designs were particularly inspired by his travel in India and a series of jewellery in the 'Tutti Frutti'¹³ style created during the Art Deco¹⁴ period, characterised by a rich use of fruits and berry patterns with a rich colour palette of gemstones interspersed with diamonds. Ostertag also created a wide variety of Orientalist jewellery during the 1920s and 1930s.

In the Collection

In addition to jewellery, Ostertag produced an extensive range of vanities, compacts and cigarette cases, highlighted with decorative hardstones such as agate, coral, jasper and jade. His works were showcased in the 1929 exhibition *Les Arts de la Bijouterie, Joaillerie et Orfèvrerie* held at the Musée Galliera along with established brands such as Boucheron and Van Cleef & Arpels, of which are well-known for their Asian and Indian-inspired designs. One of the Ostertag compacts in the Liang Yi collection is an excellent example showcasing the influence of Asian motifs and the use of rare hardstones. A carved coral panel of peacock surrounded with flowers is set on a blue enamel background; while both ends are decorated with carved jasper with floral patterns. Brightly coloured gemstones were often used during the Art Deco period, and the combination of both red and blue creates a sharp and direct contrast to give the compact a modern look.

¹³ 'Tutti Frutti' was a kind of Indian-style jewellery, immensely popular during the period in the 1920s and 1930s in Britain. The first *Tutti Frutti* styled jewellery was commissioned by Queen Alexandra for matching a selection of three gowns gifted by the Vicereine of India in 1901. Pierre Cartier was the jeweller who created *Tutti Frutti* style with bright coloured gem stones (usually in red, green and blue colours) and diamonds, and brought the beginnings of the style in Britain.

¹⁴ Art Deco (Art Decoratifs) was a style of arts, architecture and design started from the World War I (1914). It combined with several art styles, such as Cubism, Fauvism, Asian art.

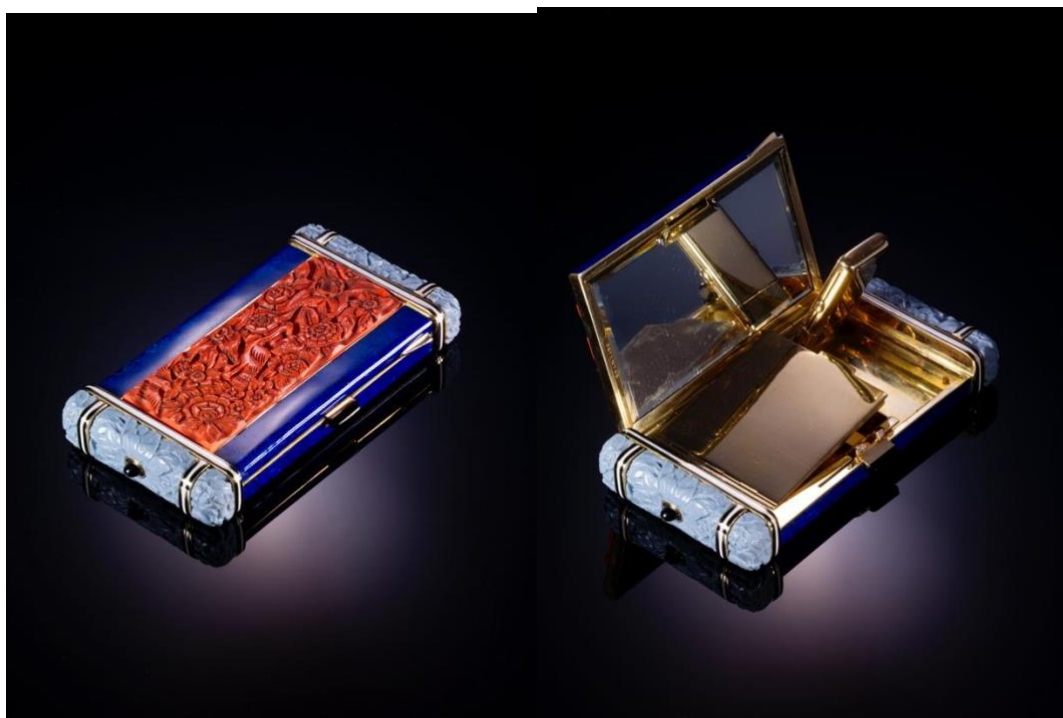


Figure 6. Compact, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1925, Gold, enamel, coral and jasper, Height 1.5 x Width 5 x Length 9.8cm, Liang Yi Museum



Figure 7. Close up of the compact

The First World War (1914-1918) changed the lifestyles of many drastically. Women joined the work force and factories to fill up the vacancies of men who fought on the front lines. Such a change in lifestyle also changed the style of womenswear – bulky dresses and long hairstyles were replaced by neat clothes and short haircuts, and is further reflected on the designs of jewellery and vanity cases. The following examples are three *nécessaires* in the Museum collection created by Arnold Ostertag, influenced by both the Art Deco style and the war. These *nécessaires* are of geometrical forms with the use of straight lines, each decorated with Art Deco motifs at the centre of the case. These cases are well-designed with a woman's daily needs taken into consideration – watch, comb, lipstick, lighter and powder compact are all fitted in one vanity. It should be noted that the idea of combining watch and compact (or other accessories) was a rare occurrence that emerged in the 1920s. Since compacts were an

Arnold Ostertag

essential item for women in this period, this design would have made it more convenient for the women at work. Although there was no signature marked on the watches of this series, many of the timepieces in Ostertag's works were provided by Baume et Mercier, Audemars Piguet, Vacheron Constantin¹⁶, as well as Verger-Frères, one of the two companies that created the "Mystery Clocks" (Cartier was the other company)¹⁷.



Figure 8. Nécessaire, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1930, Gold, ruby and diamond, Height 1.7 x Width 8.5 x Length 7cm, Liang Yi Museum

¹⁶ Wilson's Estate Jewelry, (2022)

¹⁷ Christie's, (2013)

Arnold Ostertag



Figure 9. Nécessaire, Maker: Arnold Ostertag, c. 1940, Gold, silver, sapphire and beryl, Height 1.8 x Width 8.1 x Length 7cm, Liang Yi Museum



Figure 10. Nécessaire, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1940, Gold, diamond and yellow sapphire, Height 1.7 x Width 7.1 x Length 8cm, Liang Yi Museum

Floral motifs were used frequently in his works (fig. 9 and fig. 10). In addition, huge gemstones set in three-dimensional forms create a visually eye-catching effect, which makes his works stand out from his contemporaries (fig. 11 and fig. 12). Ostertag's creations played around with several art styles; one of the *nécessaires* (fig.8) showcases *tutti frutti* style with the combination of carved emerald, ruby, sapphire and diamond¹⁸. Different geometric motifs that characterised cubism can also be seen throughout his works, in line with the Art Deco style. His designs are bold and innovative, which made him stand out from many other brands successfully.

¹⁸ Hancocks, (2022)

Arnold Ostertag

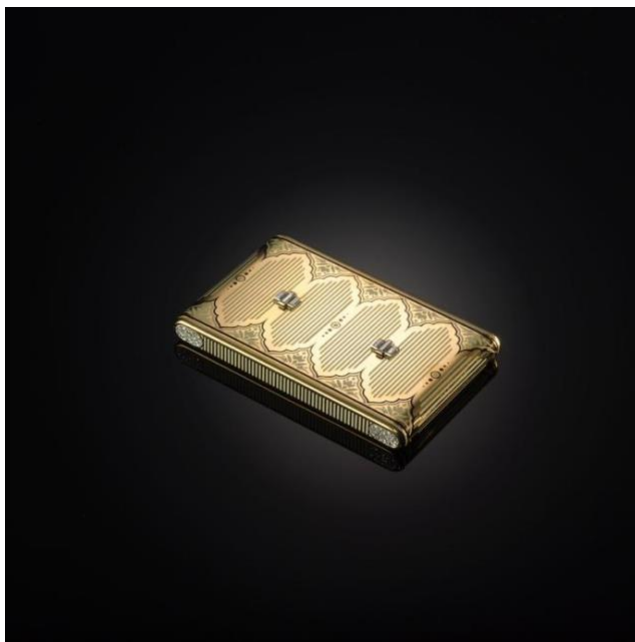


Fig. 11. Compact, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1925, Gold, diamond and enamel, Height 0.9 x Width 5.1 x Length 8.1cm, Liang Yi Museum

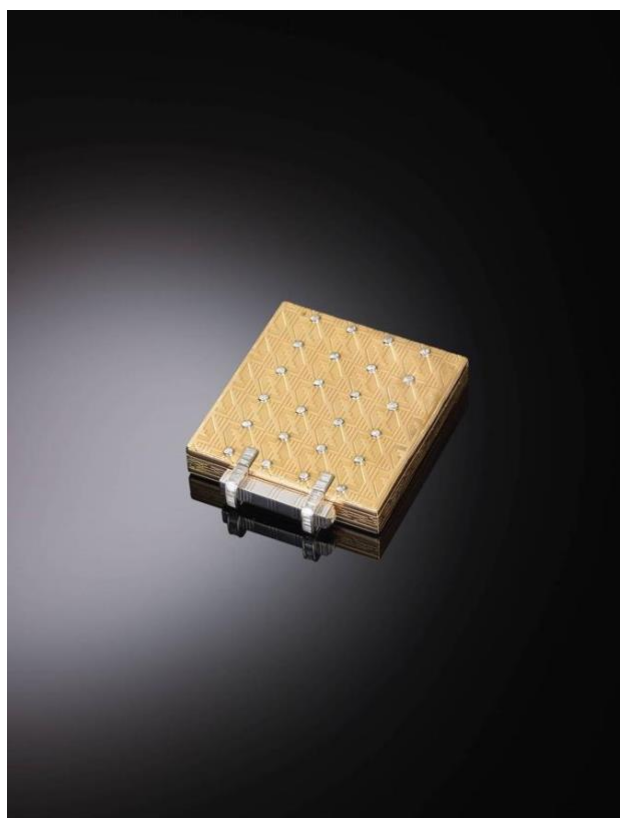


Fig. 12. Compact, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1930, Gold and diamond, Height 0.9 x Width 6.2 x Length 7.5cm, Liang Yi Museum

Arnold Ostertag

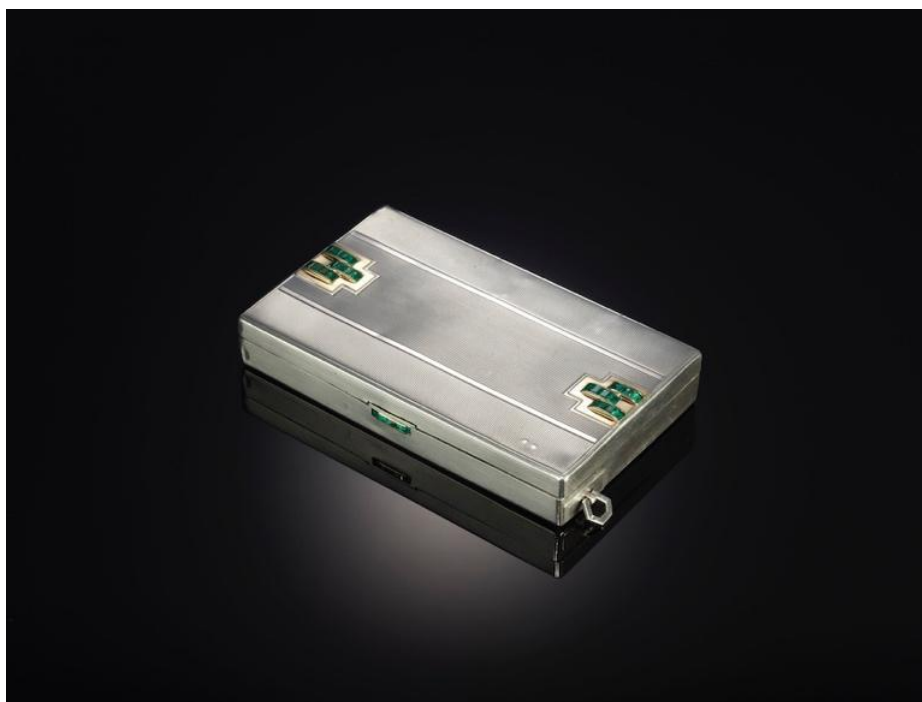


Fig. 13. Nécessaire, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1940, Silver, gold, emerald and tortoiseshell, Height 2.3 x Width 8.9 x Length 14.9cm, Liang Yi Museum

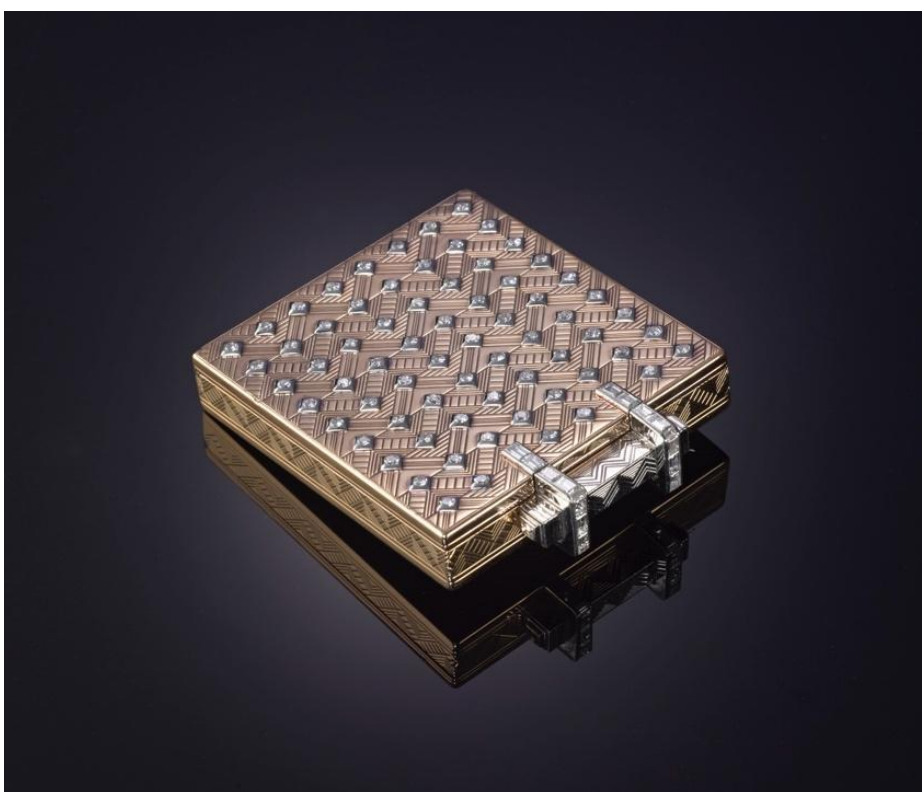


Fig. 14. Compact, Maker: Ostertag, c. 1950, Gold and diamond, Height 1.3 x Width 6.4 x Length 6.9cm, Liang Yi Museum

Conclusion

Arnold Ostertag

Many of Ostertag's designs are representative of several styles paired with expensive and rare materials, they are art pieces which presented precious, unique, and modern designs in the Art Deco period. Unfortunately, Ostertag passed away in New York in April 1940, and his wife, Verna (b. 1914), later remarried to American jeweller Paul Flato (1900-1999). His boutiques closed shortly afterwards due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941. However, his style and the quality of his pieces remain highly praised in the history of French jewellery.

Bibliography

Arnold Ostertag

Christie's, Live Auction 3269 'Important Watches' Lot Essay (2741), Hong Kong, 2013

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5752141>

de Saint-Heliare, Jules. 'Exposition de Joaillerie et d'Orfèvrerie au Musée Galliera' in *Revue du Vrai et du Beau*. Paris. Published on 10th August 1929. Accessed on

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6417424d>.

Eric Knowles, *Art Deco*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014

Hancocks, 'Ostertag', London (n.d.) Accessed on the 2nd December 2022.

<https://www.hancocks-london.com/maker/ostertag/>

J. Mark Ebert, *Gems & Gemology*, p.3-11, GIA, 1983

La Fédération Horlogère Suisse, *La Fédération horlogère suisse : organe de la Société intercantonale des industries du Jura, des Chambres de commerce, des Bureaux de contrôle et des Syndicats industriels*. Published on the 1st August 1916.

<https://doc.rero.ch/record/19362>

Le Journal, 'Des bandits pénètrent dans une bijouterie de la place Vendôme blessent deux employées dont l'un succombe et s'enfuit sans avoir pu rien emporter' in *Le Journal* [newspaper]. Published on the 27th January 1924. <https://shorturl.at/ilT67>

Meredith Etherington-Smith and Xavier Narbaitis, *Vanities: The Golden Age of Nécessaires and Mainaudières*, Surrey, Double-Barrelled Books, 2011

Ostertag, Arnold. FR480049A Perfectionnements apportés aux appareils comportant un mouvement d'horlogerie, tels, notamment, que les montres et les horloges [patent]. Published on the 7th June 1916.

<https://worldwide.espacenet.com/patent/search/family/001517316/publication/FR480049A?q=pn%3DFR480049A>

Richard, Jean-Jacques. 'Arnold Ostertag: l'un des grands Joailliers Français des années trente, injustement oublié', *Richard Jean-Jacques*. France. Published on the

15th July 2016. <https://www.richardjeanjacques.com/2016/07/arnold-ostertag-lun-des-grands.html>

Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, 'Passenger Search', Accessed on the 2nd December 2022. <https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/>

The Hawaiian Star, 'The World's News Condensed' in *The Hawaiian Star Second Edition* [newspaper]. Published on the 13th May 1912. Accessed on the Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015415/1912-05-13/ed-1/seq-9/>

The San Francisco Call, 'Elopers Wait for Mrs. Amy Gouraud' in *The Call* [newspaper]. Published on the 5th May 1912. Accessed on the Library of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1912-05-05/ed-1/seq-61/>

Arnold Ostertag

UK Parliament, 'Taxation During the First World War', *UK Parliament*,

Wilson's Estate Jewelry, 'Ostertag', America. Accessed on the 2nd December 2022.
<https://www.wilsonsestatejewelry.com/pages/learn-and-browse-history-s-most-influential-goldsmiths-and-jewelers>