

## **Paul Flato**

Paul Edmund Flato (1900-1999), a prominent American jeweller in the 1930s to 1940s, is deemed one of the first celebrity jewellers. Flato's works have been worn by countless Hollywood stars, including Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993), Greta Garbo (1905-1990) and Rita Hayworth (1918-1987). He is known as the first major American jeweller with "highly imaginative" designs that were on par with European jewellers, who had a longer history and tradition of fine jewel craftsmanship<sup>1</sup>; his 'Deaf and Dumb' collection being one such example (fig. 2). While his career was comparatively short-lived (approximately 20 years), Flato has left behind many beautiful works of art. Liang Yi Museum is home to four vanity cases designed by Paul Flato.

### **Biography**



Figure 1, Paul Flato (1900-1999)

Paul Flato was born in Texas, America. He was the son of a wealthy cattleman. When he was 10 years old, he saw silver-wire trinkets made by the gypsies and became interested in jewellery<sup>2</sup>. Flato was studying at Columbia University when his family's financial problems compelled him to find a job. His interest in jewellery led him to work as a watch salesman for Edmund Frisch, a jeweller based in New York.

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<sup>1</sup> Jewellery Historian Penny Proddow quoted in New York Times, 1996

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Irvine Bray, 2010



Figure 2. A collection of sign language clip brooches called ‘Deaf and Dumb’ made in gold, diamond, ruby and enamel, circa 1938.

In the 1930s, Flato was able to open his own jewellery store. He had an eye for talents and later hired many important designers such as Adolph Klety (n.d.), George Headley (1908-85), and Fulco di Verdura (1898-1978), who helped him bring his ideas to life<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, in the late 1930s, one of his diamond dealers was Harry Winston (1896-1978), who was not yet a recognised jeweller at the time and later achieved international fame, nicknamed ‘The King of Diamonds’. Flato’s partnership with Winston bears the fruits of quite a few successful diamond designs<sup>4</sup>, for example a necklace designed by Flato to compliment Winston’s 125.65 carat Jonker diamond (fig. 3). His business grew and he became famous for creating whimsical designs with platinum and diamonds<sup>5</sup>. Jewellery specialist, Elizabeth Irvine Bray names Paul Flato “Jeweller to the Stars” because his designs caught the attention of numerous Hollywood celebrities, and his works are seen on stars in Hollywood movies such as Merle Oberon (1911-1979) in *That Uncertain Feeling* (1941); Rita Hayworth in *Blood and Sand* (1941); and Greta Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman* (1941).

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<sup>3</sup> Christie’s, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Irvine Bray, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Enid Nemy, 1999



Figure 3. Brenda Frazier and the Jonker white diamond set into a necklace by Paul Flato, 1938.

Unfortunately, Flato's career was undermined by a series of ill-advised financial decisions. He hoped to overcome his financial difficulties by pawning jewels on consignment. In the end, he was exposed when a consigned 17-carat diamond in his store was found missing<sup>6</sup>. His success halted after he was convicted of grand theft and forgery, and was sentenced to prison in 1943. After he was released, he focussed more on designing compacts and pens. However, this career also proved to be short-lived as Flato once again lost his funds through unwise financial decisions and resorted to illegal means to make up for the funds. In the 1970s, after serving his second sentence, Flato got back to designing jewellery in Mexico. His later works often reflect influences of Mexican indigenous culture with a use of flamboyant colours<sup>7</sup>.

### **In the Collection**

Flato's jewellerys were a huge success as his compacts were incredibly popular. By 1949, it was said that Flato's business was "doing so well he's said to have turned down an offer of \$50,000 a year to join a Fifth Avenue jewellery firm"<sup>8</sup>, which was 16 times higher than the average family income of the same year. Liang Yi Museum collects a few of his signature vanity cases including compact, cigarette case and lipstick container.

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Irvine Bray, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Irvine Bray, 2010

<sup>8</sup> The Makeup Museum, 2017



Figure 4, Compact, c. 1940, gold and diamond, 5.8 x 5.8 x 0.5cm, 94g, Signed: Paul Flato

This Paul Flato compact (fig. 4) in our collection features a simple yet elegant star motif. Flato is a fan of astronomy, and many of his designs incorporate celestial elements much like this compact<sup>9</sup>. The symmetry of the stars and their geometric arrangement is an obvious influence by the Art Deco movement<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Irvine Bray, 2010

<sup>10</sup> The Art Deco movement (1910s-1930s) is an art movement characterised by its emphasis on lines, symmetry and geometry and its celebration of glamour and modernity.

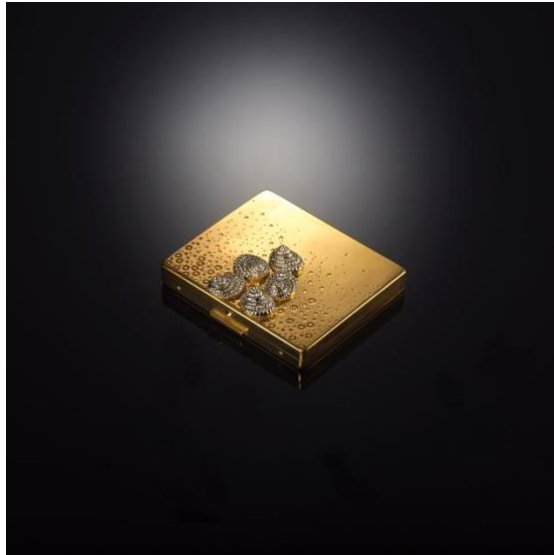


Figure 5, Compact, 1940-1950, gilded metal, gold, diamond, 6.5 x 6.5 x 0.96cm, 86g, Signed: Paul Flato

Flato is inspired by many things, and the New York Times once noted that his inspiration “came from everything from a fallen leaf to museum paintings and furniture”<sup>11</sup>. This particular compact (fig. 5) takes inspiration from seashells. Diamonds are seamlessly added to emulate the texture of the shells and bubbles are etched onto the gold surface of the compact. In fact, Flato patented his seashell design (fig. 6) in 1949.

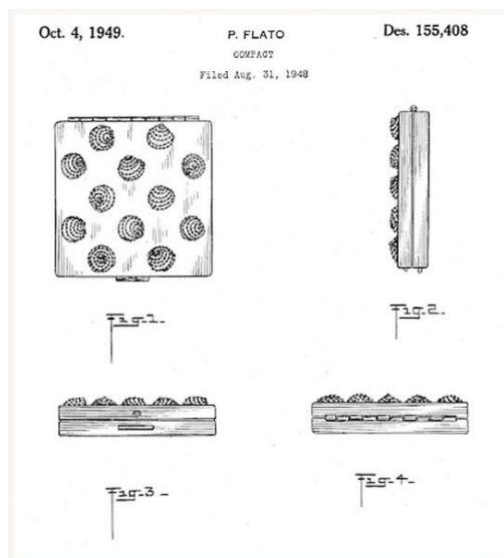


Figure 6, Flato's patented seashell design in 1949

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<sup>11</sup> Enid Nemy, 1999



Figure 7, Compact and Cigarette Case, c. 1939, silver, enamel, gold, Cigarette case: 14.5 x 7.32 x 1cm Compact: 6.9 x 6 x 1cm, Cigarette case: 193g Compact: 106g, Signed: Paul Flato, Marked '14k' & 'Sterling'

This matching compact and cigarette case (fig. 7) perfectly encapsulate the unique charm of Flato's designs. Jewellery historians Penny Proddow (d. 2009) and Debra Healy (n.d.) comment that "Flato's humour and charm found expression in a personalised 'say-it-in-jewellery' style: gold boxes, pins, rings, clips, earrings with the wearer's initials or the expression of a sentiment as their theme"<sup>12</sup>. This compact and cigarette case is stylised as a letter with enamelled faux postage stamps and postdate stamp, and gold strings that wrapped around the letter; the personalised touch comes from the engraved message or name on the cases, making it one of a kind for each customer.

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<sup>12</sup> Penny Proddow and Debra Healy quoted in New York Times, 2004



Figure 8, Compact with a Separate Lipstick, c. 1930, silver-gilt, ruby, Compact: 6.45 x 5.59 x 0.93cm Lipstick: diameter 1.5cm height 6.1cm, 87g, Signed: Flato

Flato's whimsical design shines through in another vanity set that encompasses this bejewelled compact and lipstick (fig. 8) featuring the rear of a carriage. Two precious rubies are reimagined into hanging lights and tiny wheels.

### **Conclusion**

Although Flato is perhaps more famous for his jewellery, his exuberant style is clearly reflected in his compacts and vanity sets. Today, Tiffany, Cartier and Harry Winston continue to be the biggest names in the jewellery industry, but the name Paul Flat seems to be forgotten by the larger audience. The pieces in our collection is proof that his creativity lives on in the works of art he left behind.

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