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Sexier than silver. Almost half the price of gold. No wonder palladium jewellery is...

# The latest thing in BLING

by Claire Coleman

**A**T THE recent Emmy Awards, Christina Hendricks sported some serious baubles in the form of chunky earrings and a couple of socking great rings. So far, so bling.

But the difference was that her jewels weren't fashioned from silver, gold or platinum, but from palladium, the precious metal that's fast becoming the hottest thing on the jewellery scene.

Unless you're particularly closely acquainted with catalytic converters, the chances are you won't have heard of palladium before because, until recently, its use was almost exclusively industrial.

While the majority of the 300 tonnes produced each year — mostly in South Africa, Russia and North America — is used by the car industry, you'll also find it in components for mobile phones, flat-screen TVs and computers.

But in the past few years it's become increasingly popular in jewellery — and that's largely thanks to economics. At a time when household budgets are being squeezed, the market prices for precious metals have rocketed.

'The price of gold has gone up so much that 18-carat white gold is almost as expensive as platinum,' says jewellery designer Harriet Kelsall, whose Hertfordshire-based company specialises in engagement rings. 'As a result, we've seen a huge increase in the number of palladium pieces that we're making.'

'I'd estimate that around half of the rings we make these days are made from palladium.'

Alex Goodman, of Brighton jewellers Goodman Morris, frequently suggests palladium as an alternative to customers who are worried about the price of platinum or white gold.

'To give you an idea of how prices compare, a ring that would cost £2,900 in 18-carat white gold would cost £4,000 in platinum,' he says. 'But, if you made the same ring in palladium, it would cost closer to £1,700.'

**T**HAT'S not to say palladium is just a cheap alternative. If you need proof of its status, look no further than the organisation responsible for hallmarks in the UK, the British Hallmarking Council.

As of 2010, palladium became the fourth recognised precious metal alongside gold, silver and platinum, which means that any palladium jewellery sold in the UK must be hallmarked to show exactly how much palladium it contains.

The most common form of palladium for jewellery is palladium 950, which means that it's 95 per cent pure palladium and just 5 per cent other metals — anything from ruthenium and gallium, to copper and cobalt.

Between April and June this year, nearly 30,000 items of palladium 950 were hallmarked in the UK. That might be just half



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the number of hallmarked platinum objects, but industry experts insist this figure is only going to increase.

As with any trend, star endorsement has helped propel the fashion for this new metal. Christina Hendricks isn't the only Hollywood celebrity who likes the stuff; Sarah Jessica Parker, Julianna Margulies and Kelly Osbourne have all been pictured

wearing palladium baubles, while, earlier this year, Vivienne Westwood chose the material for her very first precious metals jewellery collection.

So what exactly does palladium look like?

To the untrained eye, it's greyish silvery colour is virtually indistinguishable from platinum. Like platinum, it should keep its colour over time as it won't tarnish like silver and, unlike white gold (which is coated with the silvery metal rhodium that can wear off) doesn't need to be plated.

It also weighs less than platinum and gold, which Alex Goodman sees as an advantage.

'It's about half the weight of platinum and two-thirds the weight of 18-carat white gold, so it's particularly good for making earrings where weight can be an issue,' he says.

While it sounds like a fantastic alternative to its traditional rivals, Harriet Kelsall warns that it has its drawbacks.

'If you like clean lines, palladium is brilliant. But if you're making something that has a more organic form with plant-like detail, I'd still say that platinum was better. It just seems to have a fluidity that palladium doesn't have.'

The clean lines of palladium seem particularly to appeal to men and, anecdotally, the number of men opting for a palladium wedding ring appears to be on the up.

But women are also being seduced by the prospect of platinum without the price tag and are not only choosing palladium wedding rings, but also palladium engagement and eternity rings.

Palladium is a by-product of platinum mining, so if the sustainable aspect appeals, you might be interested to know that, in the future, you could be able to get your palladium ring crafted from recycled street dust. It sounds crazy, but because of its presence in catalytic converters — the device in a car exhaust that converts toxic emissions into non-toxic waste — trace amounts

of palladium are emitted by exhausts and one recycling firm has announced plans to recover these minuscule amounts of the precious metal.

Recycling firm Veolia is in the process of building a new plant in Warwickshire, which will be able to sift through street sweepings and extract the palladium they contain.

The company estimates that the new facility will be able to sort 30,000 tonnes of road dust every year and should be able to recover around 5kg of palladium, worth around £80,000 at today's prices.

**B**UT according to some experts, even if you're not prepared to sweep the streets for it, palladium could prove a pretty sound investment.

Nigel Dunn, the head of buying and retail at Lincoln-based jewellers John Greed, says: 'Palladium is actually quite rare.'

'There's around 40 times more gold than palladium in the world, and while at the moment palladium is not particularly well known, I think as more people find out about it and demand increases, you could find that prices will go up, meaning that it's actually a very good investment.'

'It's impossible to predict, but I wouldn't be surprised to see palladium prices outstripping those of other precious metals in the future.'

Jewels that are half the price of platinum now but could be worth twice as much in the future?

If that doesn't make you sparkle, nothing will.



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