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The Lure of Gold: An Artistic And Cultural History

Hans-Gert Bachmann

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The Lure of Gold: An Artistic And Cultural History Hans-Gert Bachmann
The dazzlingly illustrated story of how the world's most beautiful element has influenced the art, economy, and society of every civilization.

When Hesiod, the Greek poet of the eighth century B.C., recounted the history of the world as he understood it, he described the legendary first generation of mortal men, who lived in peace and ease, as the “people of gold.” Nearly three millennia later, we still refer to a particularly happy or prosperous era as a “golden age.” The reason Hesiod’s metaphor translates so perfectly into our own idiom is that the mystique of gold, the quintessential precious metal, is truly universal. The very scarcity of gold accounts for part of its allure and much of its monetary value: the total volume of gold ever mined, from prehistory to the present day, would probably fit inside a cube with sides just twenty yards (18 m) long. Yet gold’s incredible material properties also contribute to its appeal. Gold does not corrode, so it never loses its brilliant luster, and it can be chased, embossed, punched, drawn into wires, hammered foil-thin, and shaped in countless other ways.

This engaging book reveals that the ways in which gold, in turn, has shaped humanity are no less numerous. Since prehistory, for example, artisans have fashioned gold into ritual objects and high-status ornaments; beginning in the sixth century B.C., gold served as currency; and even in the modern era it has encouraged wars of conquest and triggered frantic gold rushes. Each chapter is devoted to one historical epoch, explaining how people of that time mined and refined gold, and how they used it for cultural and economic purposes. Two hundred gorgeous color photographs illustrate golden objets d’art as diverse as the funerary masks of Tutankhamen; intricate Celtic jewelry; a figurine of “El Dorado,” a pre-Columbian chief said to ritualistically cover his entire body in gold dust; bejeweled medieval reliquaries and crucifixes; and even Gustav Klimt’s gold-drenched canvas *The Kiss.* With its authoritative yet lively text and these arresting illustrations, *The Lure of Gold* sets, as it were, the gold standard for books on material culture.

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