

Prepare to be dazzled Gold from the Greeks, rings from the Renaissance: Art museum's new exhibit displays treasure from across the ages

By Doug Pullen \ El Paso Times

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EL PASO -- Diamonds may be a girl's best friend, but the folks at the El Paso Museum of Art hope people of both sexes turn out for a major jewelry exhibit opening this weekend.

"Bedazzled: 5,000 Years of Jewelry," which begins a four-month run Saturday, has some serious heavy metal, not to mention pearls, amethysts and, of course, diamonds. It's a collection of rings, necklaces, pendants, brooches and more dating from Mesopotamia in 3000 B.C. to Cartier in the 20th century.

It's not just a bunch of baubles, either. Museum officials said it's a rare gem of a show, the largest and most expensive ever mounted there, one that requires 24-hour security.

El Paso is the fifth city -- and the first west of the Mississippi -- to host "Bedazzled." The exhibit premiered in 2008 at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, the permanent home of the collection of more than 150 items.

El Paso Museum of Art Director Michael Tomor hopes the exhibit is a diamond in the rough for his museum. He's expecting a turnout of 30,000 to 50,000, the kind of crowds that can help bring other high-carat shows here down the line. (Nearly 30,000 saw it in Baltimore.)

The sparkling showcase is designed to dazzle viewers from a wide region on both sides of the border. Tomor's also hoping to strike it rich with some of the 40,000 female bowlers and their guests rolling in for the USBC Women's Bowling Championship Saturday through July 3 at the convention center across the street.

"In our profession, you always try and reach more of a universal demographic by bringing in exhibits that have universal appeal," Tomor said, "but it's difficult to do these types of exhibitions. They're very expensive."

He wanted a show that dealt with "the history of art," but the big ones cost a lot of money, especially where large-scale paintings and sculpture is involved. "Bedazzled" consists of small, mostly wearable works of art.

"They have a remarkable collection at the Walters," Tomor said, "but the beauty of this is it can be told through works of art that are small in scale, so we can bring in 150 pieces that document 5,000 years of history and help people understand the nature and variety of cultural art forms and the talents and the styles."

The items include Egyptian pendants, gold from the Greeks and rings from the Renaissance, arranged in seven sections to tell the chronological evolution of adornment art. One section is devoted to rings.

They're like "little sculptures," the museum's curator, Christian Gerstheimer, said of the various pieces in the exhibit.

"It's sculpture. It's wearable art," Gerstheimer said. "It's important that (people) recognize that. People think jewelry is not artwork. It's definitely artwork."

The jewelry was collected by William T. Walters, a 19th-century railroad magnate, and his son, Henry Walters.

A Walters Museum representative thinks viewers will be surprised by what they learn about history and jewelry's artistic merits.

"The intention of the collectors was to collect beautiful jewelry, but also to tell the broad range of stories of jewelry in different cultures," said Regine Schulz, ancient art curator for the Walters Art Museum.

"The show mainly focuses on the idea of telling the story of jewelry, how it developed, what was its meaning, what was its function," she said.

Just like any good jewelry, it's not cheap. "Bedazzled" cost \$100,000 to lease from the Baltimore museum. Another \$37,500 was needed to cover its strict shipping requirements, including two accompanying Walters staffers, who've been getting the exhibit ready here since March 11.

But that's not the reason the museum's charging adults \$10 and children \$5 to see the exhibit. Most of the show's cost has been covered by sponsorships and grants, Tomor said.

Revenues generated by sales of tickets and items from the museum store -- which is adding lines of locally made jewelry, reproductions and Southwestern souvenirs -- will go to a new exhibitions fund for more high-profile exhibits.

Tomor said the fund could amass \$300,000 to \$500,000 by the time "Bedazzled" closes on July 25. That's one reason why the show is being advertised nationally and as far south as Chihuahua City.

Local jeweler Susan Eisen, the exhibit's main sponsor, contributed \$30,000 to celebrate her 30 years in the business. "Rather than spend the money on a party or some kind of celebration, this

is the real kind of celebration to thank El Paso for allowing me to share my passion with everyone," said Eisen, who's also an author and radio host.

The money will help pay for a lecture series beginning April 15 that will focus on the art's history and role in society. Eisen's also planning a series of related exhibits at her West Side store and gallery.

Giving and collecting jewelry, she said, makes us appreciate the power and beauty of it. She's hoping "Bedazzled" adds to that understanding.

"Every piece of jewelry is loved by someone," Eisen said. "Jewelry is more than the tangible colored stones and gold that it's made from.

"That's what excites me (about this show) is how it's science, art, emotion and history all in one."

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MAKE PLANS

What: "Bedazzled: 5,000 Years of Jewelry."

When: Saturday through July 25.

Where: El Paso Museum of Art.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays (closed Mondays).

How much: \$10 for nonmembers and \$5 for nonmember children 12 and younger; \$5 for museum members and free for member children. Tickets are on sale at the Museum Store.

Information: museum, 532-1707, www.elpasoartmuseum.org; exhibit, thewalters.org/exhibitions/bedazzled.

What else: "A series of related exhibits will begin in April at Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry and Watches, 5857 N. Mesa.