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## CHARMED LIFE

*Amulets have been worn for thousands of years, and their popularity continues today among the well-accessorised set. Historians and jewellers explain the mystique.*

By Tanya Dukes

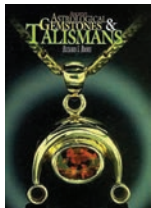
COLOMBIAN SONGSTRESS SHAKIRA sports an evil eye necklace. Bollywood star Kajol loves her om ring. American actress Jennifer Aniston favours a *hamsa* pendant.

Over the past few years, style pages have teemed with celebrities adorned with symbolic jewellery. Some pieces are simple style statements, but others are never-take-it-off favourites. The odds are good that anyone who's inseparable from a certain piece has reasons for wearing it that run deeper than mere aesthetics. Jewellery we keep in heavy rotation is usually endowed—at least in our own minds—with properties beyond the materials it's made of. When we believe in a piece's mystical powers, we transform it from a mere jewel into a charm, amulet or talisman.

Amulets or talismans are objects that are believed to offer protection from misfortune. They have been worn since antiquity. “You'll find amulets of all kinds all over the world,” says Judith Price, author of *Masterpieces of Ancient Jewellery: Exquisite Objects From the Cradle of Civilization*. “The desire for help when we're feeling fragile is universal.”

In addition to guarding against evil, such pieces also may celebrate the good things in life—new babies, travel memories, personal accomplishments. “Charm bracelets have always been very personal things that women wear frequently in order to carry the people, events or symbols of good luck the jewel celebrates with them as they go about their lives,” says Marion Fasel, author, jewellery historian, and contributing editor of fine jewellery and watches at *InStyle* magazine.

Many traditional symbols are still popular (see “Charm School,” page 108), but increasingly, the category “is less about a traditional amulet or symbol with a specific, accepted meaning” and more often encompasses “a design that's been infused with personal significance and power,” Fasel says. The new Amulette de Cartier—showcased in bracelets and pendants in gold, diamond, and mother-of-pearl or onyx—exemplifies the shift. Even without reference to a particular religious or historic tradition, the charm is



### ENDURING APPEAL

Richard Shaw Brown, gemmologist, designer and author of *Ancient Astrological Gemstones & Talismans*, says amulets date to the earliest eras of human history. In fact, objects worn to stave off misfortune date to early Sumerian settlements in the third millennium BC.

touted to “hold luck and unlock your wishes” as its padlock clasp opens or closes. Fasel sees the design as having been imbued by Cartier with “its own sophisticated symbolism.”

Customisation is key to elevating contemporary jewellery pieces to amulet status. Simple bar necklaces engraved with personal details—such as a child’s name or a significant date—are among the current charms of choice, especially from designers like Jennifer Meyer who are beloved by young Hollywood. Jewellery emblazoned with inspirational messages, like pendants from Me&Ro that bear the words “fearlessness” or “love and compassion” in Tibetan script, resonate with clients looking to their jewellery as a source of strength. Fasel explains, “Even if you have pieces with big, important stones in your collection, it’s the little, unique items that often make you feel safe and grounded.”

From his desk at New York’s Madison Avenue headquarters of Aaron Basha, company president Sasson Basha presides over an empire of pretty tokens. A third-generation jeweller who was already known as a top resource for rare antique and contemporary jewellery, Iraq-born Aaron Basha (Sasson’s father and the company’s founder) triggered a frenzy with his signature creation. Introduced in 1994, the original Aaron Basha baby-shoe charm commemorated the birth of the designer’s first grandchild, but so many of his clients requested their own that he added the design—a miniature, engravable shoe rendered in gold and decorated in precious gemstones or enamel—to his collection. The charms touch upon the same symbolism that parents have expressed by preserving baby shoes in bronze, a tradition that began in the 1930s; they’re about capturing a happy moment in time, and the hope of more happy times to come.

Now, in addition to baby-shoe charms (and red carpet-ready jewellery), Aaron Basha is known for its whopping assortment of colourful, whimsical charms and amulets: Zodiac symbols to make the wearer feel a sense of cosmic order. Evil eye symbols to protect from those who may wish us harm. Ladybug designs that serve as symbols of good luck. Such amulet jewellery



strikes a chord around the world, says Sasson. Aaron Basha sales are strong from the U.S. to China to the Middle East, and its pieces are worn by high-profile clients such as Madonna, Angelina Jolie and Princess Caroline. To ensure maximum wearability, the collection includes materials like leather and cord bracelets for clients who layer symbolic pieces with other jewellery. And the brand lets men in on the action by creating all its charms and talismans in cufflink and shirt-stud versions. Sasson says that no matter who they are or where they live, clients see the jewels as “a way to hold onto their loved ones, and a form of protection, as well as a style statement.”

Crucial to the appeal of talismans and charms are the stories that go along with them. “The pieces create communication, whether that’s across generations of a family or with someone you’ve never met before. With a charm bracelet or amulet, you can explain what each element means and why it’s important,” Sasson says. “No one does that with a 10-carat diamond.”

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**above:** From celebrating a significant moment to invoking protection, these baby-shoe and hamsa charms by Aaron Basha demonstrate the range and style of today’s talismans.

## CHARM SCHOOL A guide to commonly seen symbols

### Scarab

Less glamorously known as dung beetles, scarabs were worn as talismans in ancient Egypt and considered protective during life and after death. Today they remain symbols of renewal and reincarnation.

### Wishbone

It’s a Western tradition for two people to grab the ends of a wishbone and pull it apart. Lore has it that whoever ends up with the larger piece will receive good fortune. Wishbones in jewellery augur wishes fulfilled.

### Laughing Buddha

The jolly character doesn’t depict *the* Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Instead, the rotund Laughing Buddha is based on a folkloric 10th-century Chinese Zen monk and is said to bring the wearer prosperity and success.

### Four-Leaf Clover

The discovery of a four-leaf clover—a rare variant of the common three-leaf kind—is considered auspicious. Rather than leaving good luck to chance, some wear jewellery with a four-leaf clover motif.

### Hamsa

Shaped like an open palm, the *hamsa* is an ancient icon that’s present in religions from Islam to Christianity to Hinduism. Wherever it appears, it’s viewed as a protective talisman.

### Evil Eye

Cultures worldwide recognise some version of “the evil eye,” a hex cast with a malicious glare. Evil eye charms allegedly ward off wicked intentions, and are popular in blue and white—say, diamonds and sapphires.