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## Diamonds Are A Man's Best Friend

BY LAUREN DAVIDSON

Over the last century, women have been marching into territory traditionally considered male: executive jobs, university degrees, the vote. Now men are claiming something from the world of women: engagement rings.

Jewelry on men is not new. Ancient Egyptian rulers were draped in lapis lazuli and gold, and men sported signet rings from Ancient Rome through the Middle Ages. But engagement rings never quite jumped the gender gap.

Until recently, that is.

David Alan, a jeweler in Manhattan, is one of several across the country to report that more men are rocking the engagement ring look. For some, it's a proposal gift from a girlfriend or boyfriend; for others, even when the man has proposed to the woman, the male engagement ring indicates their commitment to gender equality. Robbins Brothers, an engagement ring company that has 12 shops across Texas and California, has coined a name for this fashion – "man-gagement rings" – and even high-end jewelers such as Tiffany & Co. and Harry Winston now stock engagement rings for men.

Alan said the number of male gay customers commissioning his engagement rings has tripled over the last three years. His heterosexual clients have started to order engagement rings for the groom-to-be, too.

Katy Robles, from La Marque, Texas, decided to propose to her boyfriend last February, after they'd already talked about marriage. She figured, "If I loved him enough to spend the rest of my life with him, I was woman enough to ask him."

She selected a simple ring, called his family to ask for their blessing, got down on one knee, and popped the question. "If I'm the one" proposing, "I should follow all the protocols of when a man does it," Robles said.

Ryder Hohman, now Robles' husband, was shocked, but game. "He put that ring on, and he didn't take it off," Robles said. "He was showing that ring off to everybody."

Historically, the man presented the engagement ring to the woman for her to wear as a sign that she was no longer available to other men for courtship. The tradition was so set in stone that when the jewelry industry tried to introduce engagement rings for men in the 1920s, the fashion flopped. It has taken almost a century for gender norms to shift substantially enough for male engagement rings to finally find their place on store shelves.

"Up until the 1980s or so, men looked for a good housekeeper above a good conversation, and women valued earning power in a man," said Stephanie Coontz, professor of history and family studies at Evergreen State College in Washington. "Increasingly, men and women are looking for something equal."

That decades-old dynamic no longer holds for the modern marriage. Seventy-two percent of millennials prefer an egalitarian relationship – where both the husband and the wife earn money and contribute toward housework and childcare, as opposed to one where the man provides and the woman runs the home – according to a nationally representative 2011 report by the Pew Research Center.

"When I got married the first time in 1974, I didn't want any ring at all – only women had them and it symbolized ownership to me," said Barbara Risman, head of the sociology department at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a senior scholar at the Council on Contemporary Families. "But as we've morphed in our gender revolution towards convergence of how men and women live their lives, it became clear to me that there's something bonding and public about the wearing of rings. And to me, it has to be reciprocal."



When Risman was preparing for her second marriage, in 2010, she and her now-husband searched for an engagement ring for each of them. In the end, they designed and commissioned their own: he wears a white gold band inlaid with three blue sapphires and she wears a wraparound ring with a single diamond.

Another change in notions about relationships is the widening acceptance of same-sex

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Thom Watson and Jeff Tabaco show off their engagement rings. They wear them as a sign of commitment, as California has not legalized gay marriage. (Photo by Julie Bernstein)

marriage, accompanied by more gay men who want to exchange engagement rings.

Paul Tickner, a public relations executive, wears a 4 millimeter white gold ring with a row of diamonds down the middle. He chose the design last summer before proposing to his boyfriend, David, who then bought the same ring for him.

Tickner was apprehensive about the idea at first; he had never worn hand jewelry before. Besides, he said, "You don't generally see men wearing diamond rings unless you're in the Mafia."

"But I just thought that to propose I wanted to have something to propose with. You see all your friends and family do it. You see it in movies. It's just the tradition to get down on one knee with a ring."

For some in the gay community, wearing an engagement ring is about more than just family or fashion. It's a political statement: the ring is a show of pride that gay couples today can publicly display their commitment, but it is also aspirational – a comment that gay couples still do not have the same rights as straight couples.

This is certainly the case for Thom Watson, social media director at Marriage Equality USA. Though he and his fiancé have had a commitment ceremony, they can't formally wed until gay marriage becomes legal again in California, where they live. Until then, they both wear a ring to express their commitment to each other – and to this goal.

"They are de facto engagement rings, since we've been wearing them during this long period while we're still waiting, hoping and planning to marry legally, but prevented by the state from doing so," Watson said.

Los Angeles-based jewelry designer Claudia Endler still remembers the first couple who walked into her studio seeking a male engagement ring.

"He must have been in his mid to late fifties. He had not been married before, but the woman had been. He asked, 'Don't men get engagement rings too?'" said Endler. "I thought it was so thoughtful – and really progressive."

He did, however, insist his diamond be smaller than his fiancée's.

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