



The National Museum's digger brooch (about 1900) proclaims the essentials of gold rush pride and success.
Photo: Dragi Markovic

THE DIGGER BROOCH: AN AUSTRALIAN ORIGINAL?

How do the following stack up as an Australian way of doing things? Motivated by the dream of instant riches, reality turns out to be hard yakka facilitated by low-tech inventions, all in the dirt-scrabbling back of beyond, and finally celebrated by bingeing the profits... Yes, it sounds like gold digging!

Digging for gold certainly shaped formative elements of Australian culture. The character of the digger, the lucky strike and equally, the dead loss, are legendary Australian types and events.

In this context, a surprisingly sentimental summary of the diggings experience is represented by a genre of jewellery which appears to be an original Australian design: the digger brooch, as illustrated in the Museum by a specimen on display in *Nation*.

The heraldic arrangement of miniature pick and shovel is among the least fashionable forms one could imagine to adorn a lady's bosom, but it was a popular symbol in digger culture. No other form of jewellery, anywhere, so explicitly incorporates the instruments of labour. The digger brooch amounts to a uniquely proud statement of the virtue of the digger's work.

The Museum's brooch is the most characteristic form. Crossed pick and shovel are sometimes joined by other tools such as crowbar, sieve, bucket, windlass and even a stamper battery. The tools may constitute a free-standing composition, or be mounted on a single or double bar brooch. There is usually a nugget or two or three studded somewhere in the composition.

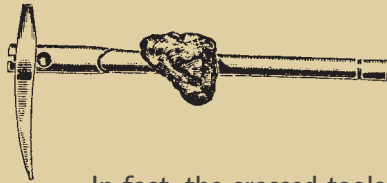
Sometimes the tools are arranged in parallel rather than crossed, but it's an anaemic design by comparison with the dynamic crossed arrangement. Less frequently, a single tool, either a pick or a shovel, constitutes the entire brooch. A very tiny version of the crossed pick and shovel appears as a tiepin for masculine wear.

A very special design adds an arch above the trophy of tools, bearing the name of a gold town or mine in cut-out letters. All the known specimens are Western Australian, from the glory years of the Eastern Goldfields, 1892-1910.





An unknown Westralian woman wears a digger brooch with style, about 1895. (Private coll.)



In fact, the crossed tools brooch itself may be an original Westralian invention. It is possible that the design arrived in the West from the South African goldfields, which began to boom in 1884. The design is found there, sometimes with 'South Africa' in small, engraved letters on the shovel blade. But it is equally possible that the Westralian form emigrated to South Africa with globe-trotting diggers.

The evidence of an earlier tradition of gold digger brooches in Victoria and New South Wales supports the argument for an Australian origin. This is a remarkable genre of large, figurative brooches composed of miniature tools, digger figurines and nuggets, set in a frame of rustic stickwork or foliage. Depicting a more total and confusing diggings scene than the abstract heraldry of the later Westralian brooches, there is little hard knowledge about these rare pieces (there may not be more than twenty).

They are obviously celebrations and souvenirs, extravagant jewels which lucky diggers might bestow on lucky (?) women. One survives with this context, presented to the infamous dancer Lola Montez by her admirers at Melbourne in 1855, and now in a private collection.

Another piece of evidence is found in *Coxon's Comic Songster*, a Ballarat publication of 1859, where the ballad 'The Flash Colonial Barmaid' recounts:

*She's numbers of admirers who hang about the bar,
Fast storekeepers, flash Yankees, each trying to be thar;
One gives her a great digger brooch with cradle, tub and things,
Others, lockets, pencil cases, big colonial rings...*

It's undoubtedly a reference to the Lola Montez kind of jewel. The biggest and best, now in the Powerhouse Museum collection, is a superb piece of work, and considered in the light of goldfields glamour, it is rather magnificent.

We can see that the idea of miniature tools was vivid in the minds of colonial Australian jewellers and their customers in the 1850s-60s. Could it have arrived with American diggers from California? It is a tempting thought, but in twenty years of research, I have found no trace of digger brooches earlier or elsewhere than south-eastern Australia.

There is a genre of digger jewellery from the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s, sometimes employing crossed tools, but most characteristically composed of patterns of tiny nuggets. Gold diggers were a mobile lot, and the essential digger brooch forms of crossed tools may have travelled with them. South African and Alaskan brooches occasionally turn up in Australian antique shops, just as Australian brooches have been identified in Britain and repatriated for more lucrative sale here.

Both the large figurative brooches and the Westralian crossed tool brooches were manufactured by goldfields jewellers as well as Melbourne, Sydney and Perth workshops. They often employed readymade findings such as decorative trims and pins, but clearly made up site-specific pieces on the spot. By the early 1900s, big London jewellers were mass-producing the main forms.

It is hard to see digger brooches as beautiful in the decorative sense of fashionable jewellery. One wonders whether the recipient of such a gift might not have preferred a more conventional, pretty, gold brooch! But photos prove that Westralian women wore their golden picks and shovels with their best clothes – they were evidently as proud of the digger tradition as their men. The brooches speak to the power of the digger experience in Australian life. 📌

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The WA Museum's brooch was made before Hannan's strike became Kalgoorlie in 1896.

