

## Jaques & Marcus Brooch / Pendant with Opal Intaglio by Wilhelm Schmidt, circa 1890



This is a circa 1890 "Gilded Age" natural pearl and diamond brooch/pendant by the predecessor to Marcus & Co, Jaques & Marcus (stamped J&M, total width 36.6mm).

It features an opal intaglio of the goddess Vesta, carved by Wilhelm Schmidt, the last neo-classical gem engraver.

The piece is an early example of opal in American jewelry, and as an opal intaglio by Wilhelm Schmidt it's particularly rare. It's also unusual for its Classical Revival theme, and scarce as one of the few Jaques & Marcus jewels to survive.

The Gilded Age was the U.S. equivalent of the European Belle Époque. During the final quarter of the C19th huge fortunes were accumulated in the USA from mining, railways and commerce. New York society flourished, mansions proliferated, and there were conspicuous displays of wealth via the jewels worn at grand parties, balls and fashionable venues like the Metropolitan Opera.

Tiffany & Co and Marcus & Co were among the leading New York jewelers that met this demand, with the Gilded Age now hailed as the first truly great era of American jewelry.

Jaques & Marcus started in 1882, and became Marcus & Co in 1892 when the Marcus family took full control of the firm. The Marcus patriarch was Herman Marcus, who'd worked for Ellemeyer, the court jeweller in Dresden, and emigrated to USA about 1850. He initially joined Tiffany & Co, then went to Black, Ball & Co, and later formed Starr & Marcus with Theodore B. Starr, exhibiting at the Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition in 1876.

Starr & Marcus ceased trading in 1877 and Herman returned to Tiffany, representing them at the Paris Exposition of 1878. Meanwhile Herman's son William formed Jaques & Marcus with George Jaques. Herman joined his son in 1884, and eight years later when Jaques left the business it became Marcus & Co.

The central rectangular cabochon of opal is carved intaglio with an image of the Roman goddess Vesta. This will be from the hand of Wilhelm Schmidt, called "the last neo-classical gem engraver" by his biographer Gertrud Seidmann.

It's a solid piece of translucent crystal opal, and must originate from White Cliffs, NSW, Australia, where deposits of this type of opal were first discovered in 1889. Accordingly the jewel must date between 1889 and 1892 when the name Jaques & Marcus stopped being used.

We know Schmidt sourced boulder opal from Australia as early as 1874, and his first opal cameo was exhibited in a piece by John Brogden at the Paris Exhibition of 1878. It's also recorded that he supplied several intaglios to The Geological Museum in London. His early relationship with Tiffany & Co is documented, and it's evident that Schmidt was the source of the famous "Dawn" opal cameos used by Marcus & Co in the early 1890's.

Herman Marcus would've known of Schmidt from both Tiffany and the 1878 Paris Exhibition. They were fellow countrymen who shared common interests in mythology and cameos. Herman's obituary in the Jewelers' Circular of 1899 speaks of "a voracious reader and student of mythology and art" ... "and in some lines such as cameos, he was a connoisseur without a superior", so in all likelihood it was Herman who sourced Schmidt's intaglios and cameos for Jaques & Marcus and then Marcus & Co.

This jewel is an example of the late C19th Classical Revival. The opal intaglio has Vesta seated opposite the sacred flame in the inner sanctum of her temple within the Roman Forum.



The entire piece is probably a stylized depiction of Vesta's temple, likely derived from images on Roman coins. The temple contained cult items and Vesta's sacred fire, which represented the authority of the Roman State.



While the outward form of the jewel is symbolic of power and place, it has a more intimate interior message. Vesta was the goddess of the family and home, embodied in her fire burning in the hearth at the center of every Roman home. The intaglio image of Vesta is within the opal, with a personal meaning for the wearer and the one who gifted it. This elevates the piece to a love token, perhaps intended for a special person who "keeps the home fires burning".

Examples of how similar pendants and brooches were worn in the 1890's are seen in these contemporary paintings by John Singer Sargent.

[Mrs. Joshua Montgomery Sears \(Sarah Choate Sears\), 1889](#)

[Lady Agnew of Lochnaw, 1893](#)

[Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler, 1893](#)

[Mrs. William Shakespeare, circa 1896](#)

[Mrs. George Swinton \(Elizabeth Ebsworth\), 1897](#)