

TOOTH GEM STYLE



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BEDAZZLED SMILES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOOTH ADORNMENT

★ LAUREN LEVY 🌍

What you might not realize, given the TikTokification and trendiness of tooth gems, is that they are really a very worldly thing—and nearly as old as civilization itself. People have been adorning their teeth since before Caesar conquered Rome; since the Mayans were building pyramids; since the year AD 300 in Japan. This is to say that if you thought the phenomenon was only a hip-hop thing (which, of course, it also is), you're leaving out just about all of history. As societies have risen and fallen around the globe, so too has the popularity of dental decoration. And in that way, it's an impulse that is incredibly human.

Of course, this is a very existential way to talk about a fun accessory that the model Hailey Bieber once wore to the Met Gala (helping to spark the return of tooth adornments once more), but when it's all put into context, it's quite easy to see: like dancing, creating music, or forming cliques, bedazzling teeth is one of the most natural and consistent things people do. There seems to be something about teeth that, across time and cultures, keeps shouting: "Adorn me!" But what is it?

It all began in ancient Italy, around 800 BC (that's before Jesus), back when the Etruscans lived in what is now Tuscany. At the time, high-status Etruscan women would remove their front teeth and have them bonded in place with a gold wire—about as thick as a rubber band. As far as eating, the teeth became mostly useless—but that was also the point. These upper-class women wanted to communicate, front and center, that they had enough money to hire chefs to cook foods they could actually eat, like soft white bread (remember, before Jesus). They were as rich as their male counterparts and free to do with their money as they pleased. So they used their teeth—what more obvious thing?—to show it all off.

Those were basically the first grills. And just like today, they were a flex. By around 49 BC, Caesar conquered Rome, women lost rights, and tooth adornment went out of fashion, but that's a story for another book.

Some 1,200 years later in the Americas, Mayan kings and queens preferred jade to gold. They would drill holes in their upper teeth and fill them with round pieces of the gemstone—the lighter and more translucent shade of green, the better. It was for looks, yes (it always is), but here's why they used jade: green was a symbol of plant growth, agriculture, and sustenance. By wearing it at all times and in clear view, Mayan royalty took on an obligation: they were responsible for bringing rain, growing crops, and feeding their people. For these royals, tooth adornment wasn't just bragging; it signified a responsibility.

Halfway across the world in Sweden, around the time the Mayans disappeared, Vikings began filing their teeth. Only men participated in the practice, and they didn't use gold or gems; instead they would file a flat area on a tooth and make ridges. Sometimes they stained the ridges with a charcoal mix so that their white teeth featured black lines. For these burly men, the idea wasn't about decoration for decoration's sake but rather to create a group identity. If you filed your teeth this way, everyone knew who you belonged with.

The Vikings weren't actually the first people to stain their teeth black, though. When the Japanese did it as early as AD 300, it was because, among other considerations, pitch black things were considered to be the height of beauty—so, of course, their teeth should be black too. The Japanese called the custom *ohaguro*, and they used a specific iron and vinegar mix to achieve the color. That concoction also offered one of the world's first-ever dental health benefits, since the mixture prevented tooth decay by acting as a sealant.

So tooth adornments have represented boastfulness, responsibility, and health. But wait, there's more: according to ancient Filipino mythology, Melu, the creator of the world, had pure gold teeth. Filipino mortals followed suit and

started decorating their teeth with metals as early as AD 1300 (they even had specific words for tooth gold that differed from the word for plain old general gold); there's also evidence that they blackened and filed their teeth as well. These practices were so prevalent that all around the Philippines there were different styles of decoration: some regions preferred gold pegs, others wrapped gold all around their teeth, and people further north (mostly women) wore fitted gold bands that covered their entire front row of teeth—perhaps the closest example of what we would call a grill today. These bands made it impossible to speak and were taken off to eat. More importantly, they became family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation.

Over time, as oral hygiene became a bigger consideration around the world, gold teeth turned out to be the cheapest form of dental care. They offered protection and would last forever (unlike the more expensive white crowns that most traditional dentists use today). And this is how we arrive at grills. The West Indies was one of the places that used gold in dentistry, so people there often had one or two gold teeth. In the 1970s and '80s, when West Indians started immigrating to New York City and living next door to the rappers and DJs who were creating hip-hop, a key exchange took place. Flexing was fundamental to the burgeoning culture, so if a guy like Slick Rick wore gold chains and gold watches, why not gold teeth too? It's an obvious extension—just ask the Etruscans.

At first, though, people didn't want removable grills, instead preferring to get gold teeth implanted at the dentist: the real deal. Then, in a pivotal moment, members of the rap group the Wu-Tang Clan started wearing grills that didn't require a trip to the dentist, were detachable, and actually looked legit. That marked a turning of the tide, and by the 1990s, rappers like Flavor Flav would make grills ubiquitous. Within a decade, songs were written in homage to bling, as the most dominant cultural invention of the twentieth century now had a very famous accessory bound to it.

Of course, this is where grills went mainstream. However, around the same time as hip-hop began to take over America and then the world, another lesser-known tooth decor trend was spreading, mostly in Europe (Sweden specifically, and then a little bit in England): tooth gems. They entailed the semipermanent placement of a diamond, gemstone, or small piece of gold on a tooth.

While rappers were making grills the biggest thing in the US, rocker Mick Jagger was putting a diamond stud on his tooth in the UK. Or maybe it was an emerald initially. There's this Andy Warhol quote about it: "He had an emerald put in one of his side teeth. Every time he smiled someone said, 'Mick, is that a piece of

spinach stuck on your tooth?’ Mick was forced to switch to a diamond because rubies look like beets.” Whatever the origin story, there it was. Less famously, the lead singer of the British band Simply Red had a tooth gem. Neither of them had rapper Nelly’s “Grillz” or his clout, though, so tooth gems didn’t make much of a dent in America at the time.

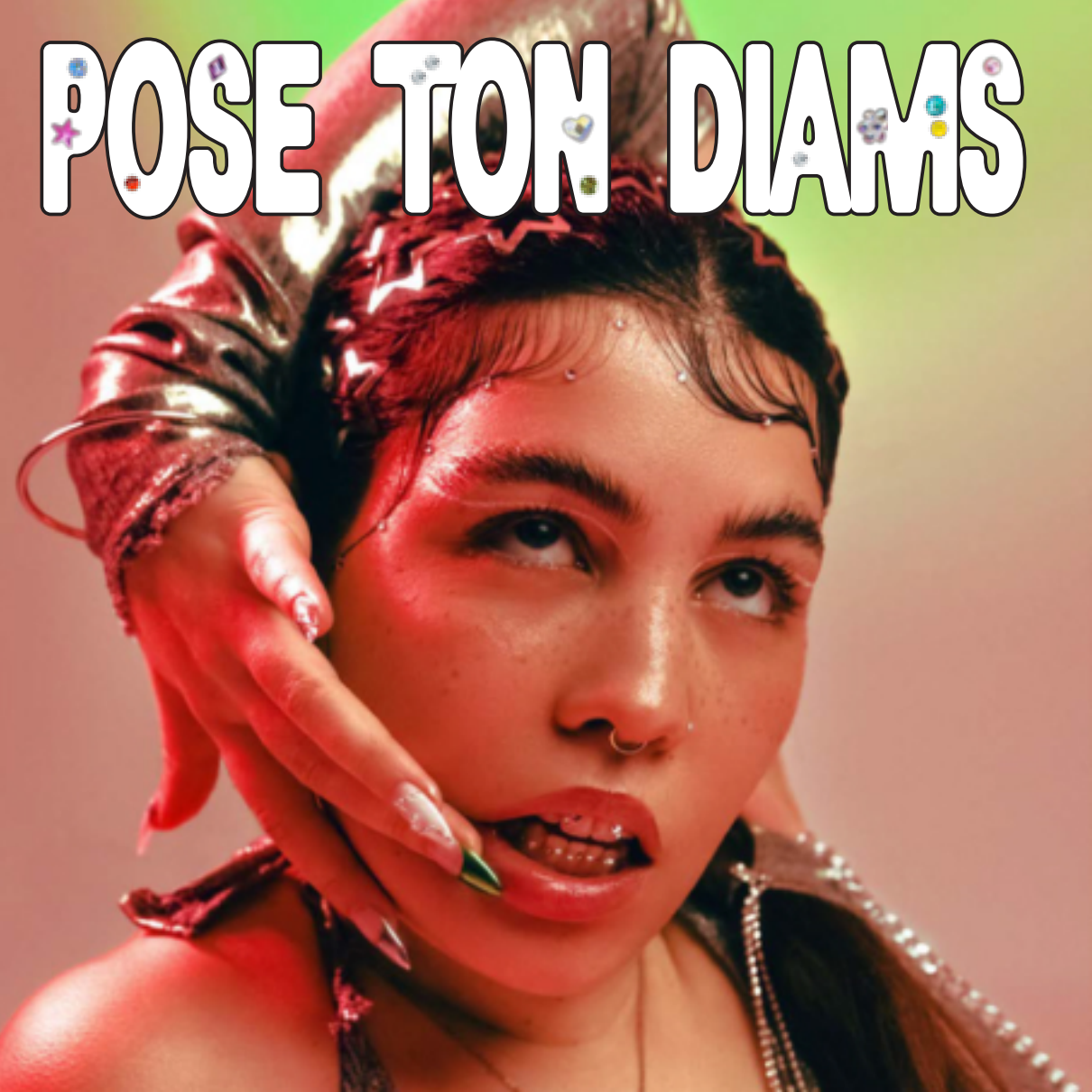
Yet the trend returned, as they are wont to do. As you’ll see in this book, today’s tooth gem artists are mostly young and fashion-obsessed, and they mostly decided to get into the business in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are inspired by ’90s and Y2K style (especially those with a connection to Sweden or the UK who remember when it became a thing there). Some even know about the Mayan history of the practice. But now there’s something a little bit off-kilter about the look. It’s not purely to flash wealth. People highlight things that might otherwise be played down, like gaps, crooked teeth, or small imperfections. Could a little bit of nostalgia for braces be hidden in there? Probably.

Today, just like many humans throughout history realized before us, teeth remain one of the most obvious places to make a statement: what you stand for and who your people are. It could be saying, “Look at my crooked tooth; I don’t care!” It could be sporting a Chanel or Nike logo, the very twenty-first-century brand-allegiance-above-all version of the Vikings’ uniform. Or it could be the age-old flex, one celebrities are gravitating toward once again: Drake, Rosalia, Rihanna, Katy Perry, FKA Twigs, and Billie Eilish have all been spotted sporting gems. While the commitment is lower now—no one’s ripping out their incisors—the high impact remains. Tooth adornments still make people look cool. An eternal quest achieved.

LAUREN LEVY

is a writer and editor based in New York City who has contributed to outlets including New York magazine, Dazed, ELLE, Billboard, and the FADER. She once spent much of her savings on a custom Dolly Cohen grill.

POSE TON DIAMS





SOLENE GROSJEAN
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Solene Grosjean first discovered the phenomenon of tooth gems through social media and was instantly attracted to their potential for enhancing people's personal style. She decided to start her business, Pose Ton Diams, in 2021. Now, in addition to offering dental jewelry to clients one-on-one, she works on fashion shoots and appears at pop-ups and events.

"I have always been passionate about everything that shines. I like to enhance people's smiles, sometimes even to uninhibit them. I like to constantly evolve the identity of my brand."

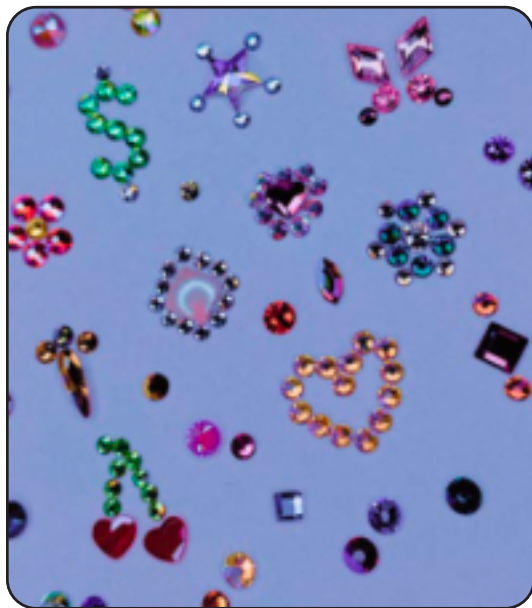




“If a person is hesitant about their choice, I direct them to something simpler. If they have an extravagant look and like bling bling things, I suggest my inspirations.”



"I like the fact that tooth gems complete a look. Like nails or fashion, once you start, you can't do without them."



“I work with artists on fashion shoots, and it’s something that I love.”



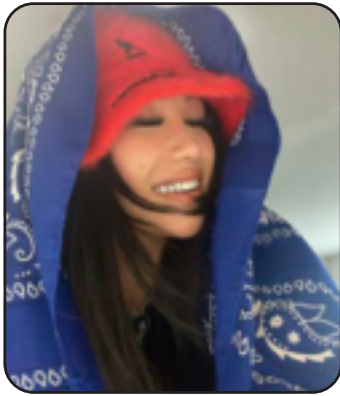




“I would like to put gems on Lala & ce, a French rapper/singer from my city. I really like her music, and I think the gems would go perfectly with her style.”

SAY JEWEELED





STEPHANIE A. YOUNG
DALLAS, TEXAS
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Stephanie A. Young used to work at a company selling teeth aligners and enjoyed helping people feel more confident through dental treatments. In April 2022 she decided to start her tooth gem business, Say Jeweled. A jewelry obsessive, she was excited to find a career that gave her the opportunity to be creative. She now operates out of her own space in Dallas, Say Studios, and applies gems at pop-ups and events around the city, including The Sneaker Exit.

“My style is heavily inspired by street-wear and luxury fashion. I love to create a trendy statement design that can be viewed as unisex.”

