Ancient jewelry covers a wide variety of aesthetics and styles. Although most is beyond the reach of a basic artisan, a large subsection can be authentically recreated in a modern living room. *With carefully chosen materials and a pair of pliers, the more basic artifacts can be recreated by intrepid SCAdians with no previous jewelry experience.*

The goal of this class is to get you started making period jewelry. When you get home, do some research into YOUR time and place, and make that!

My website has an expanded paper on Making Roman Jewelry (RomanaSum.com/papers). If you need help with research, check out my guide on that same page, and click on “Research & Documentation” on the right column for some articles.

One way to go is to replicate individual finds. You can also look at a large number of pieces in books and on museum websites from your period, which lets you understand that aesthetic and be able to invent jewelry that would be congruent with that cultural style.

Note: When researching online, pains must be taken to vet all sources carefully. For example, many pieces labeled “Roman” are a pastiche of antiquities restrung, remounted, and rearranged with later elements. This was very popular in the Victorian era, and can even be seen from otherwise trustworthy sites like Christie’s auction house. A close examination of clasps and findings can usually ferret out the truth.

**Materials**

Carnelian, pearls, and emerald were Roman favorites. Between extant Roman jewelry pieces and Pliny’s writing, we also know they had pearl, opal, carnelian, chalcedony (and its variants, onyx, sardonyx, agate), sapphire, star sapphire, ruby, garnet, amethyst, bloodstone, coral, amber, obsidian, rock crystal (quartz), tiger eye, turquoise, tourmaline, topaz, malachite, lapis lazuli, and an array of colors of jasper.¹ Bone, ivory, shell, horn, and glass were also used in jewelry. When substituting, consider color, opacity, and shape.
Stones were cut into drums, bicones, spheres, tubes, and other carved shapes. Natural crystalline structures were sometimes drilled and mounted. Basic faceting appeared in the 1st century. In order to create more convincing “straight from the dig” Roman jewelry, when possible I use stones that are handshaped. The slightly irregular spheres are more authentic looking than perfectly round machined beads.

The Romans used gold in natural and refined alloys (combinations of metals). Both coins and jewelry of my period run 90-99% pure. I use a combination of brass and hypoallergenic wire in a gold tone, focusing on yelloower wire that more closely matches the purity of the gold of the ancient world. Valuable gem necklaces were usually strung on metal wire. Others have been found with organic materials like flax, cotton, Egyptian reeds, and sinew. Even animal hair – horse, elephant, giraffe, and cow - was used.

Techniques & Tools

This sketch (Ogden, 75) shows a few common Roman techniques, including both soldering and wrapping of wire, to secure beads. Note the inconsistency in the number of coil wraps. For vertically strung beads, twists, loops, or soldered bulbs on the bottom keeps the bead in place.

Clasps for necklaces were cast hooks, or wire wrapped to form hooks (Johns, 100).
I used **round nosed pliers**, **flat nosed pliers**, and **wire snips**.

First, bend the wire, using the round-nosed pliers (so the wire curves instead of creasing), until you have a loop. Then, holding the loop firmly with those pliers, use the flat-nosed pliers (for a precise grip) or your fingers to wrap the wire 1-2 times around the neck just below the loop. Clip off any excess wire and use the flat pliers to pinch the end close to the neck, so there's no pointy bit to snag. If your loop is irregular, put it onto the round-nosed pliers and pinch to shape it. Video instruction here: [http://www.firemountaingems.com/resources/videos/652t](http://www.firemountaingems.com/resources/videos/652t)

Modern techniques like bending the wire around the pliers to make a perfect circle, or marking the pliers with a sharpie, will ensure identical lengths. Ancient Roman jewelry has a charming irregularity that I like to maintain. On the right, the dangles on this obviously expensive cameo have 8, 7, and 10 wire wraps. Likewise, they weren’t particularly precise in their loop sizes. One thing that makes modern replicas stand out is the post-industrial obsession with symmetry. I prefer a more organic, handmade aesthetic, and find its products more convincing as a period item. In other words – RELAX – it’s ok if it's sloppy!
**Bracelet:**

A wire-mounted necklace of natural emerald crystals, from the Met (Left). Below: My recreations. 24ga wire is durable enough to wear for a necklace, but for bracelets I prefer 22ga (the wire is thicker as the numbers get smaller). The hook closure is 20ga wire.

1) Cut a piece of 22 ga wire about 3”. Using the technique on the previous page, make a large loop and wrap the wire to secure it. This will be the loop part of the clasp.
2) Put a bead on the wire.
3) Make a second, small loop at the other end and wrap. Trim excess. Your bead is now secure.
4) Cut another 3” piece of 22 ga wire, and make a small loop. String a bead, and make a second small loop. Before closing it, connect it to the small loop of your first piece.
5) Repeat #4 until the bracelet fits snugly around the intended wearer’s wrist.
6) Cut 4-5” of 20 ga wire. Make a hook on one end, tucking the pointed end in. At the other end, make a loop and attach it to the small loop of the last bead segment you made. Cut away any excess.
7) Check over your bracelet for pokey ends. Use pliers or files to fix them.
EARRINGS

DANGLING EARRINGS

For the dangling style of earring, the separate wire mounted elements move independently. That is, the earring is a collection of distinct segments, not multiple beads stacked on a single wire.

Below: My recreation substituted carnelians for the pearls, and a seed pearl for the emerald. I also did a riff on #7, with an aventurine tube.

1) Use the technique from page 4 to make a loop and wrap.
2) String your bead and make a bottom loops and wrap.
3) Use a ball-head pin OR make one by bending a tight, tiny loop in wire. Add your bead. Secure with a loop and wrap, joining with the top segment.
4) Go to Earwire section.
Crotalia

Crotalia (from the Greek word for rattle or castanets) are named for the jingling noise they produce when worn. Earrings of this type, with two or three pendants, were extremely popular with Roman ladies. Numerous examples have been found at Pompeii and Herculaneum. The trick here is getting your dangles the same length so they hang evenly. We don't need perfection here, but take some time with it.

1) Using a ball-head pin, thread a bead on and create a loop. These won't be under much stress, so you can just cut away the excess. If you prefer, hook them on to the finding and wrap downwards towards the bead. Both looks are period. NOTE: If you don't have a ball-head pin, you can make a tight loop or coil at the end of the wire instead (see my green danglies on page 5).

2) Repeat until you have a dangle for each loop of your findings. (4 or 6).

3) Make a pair of earwires.
**Earwires**

I always use hypoallergenic or at least nickel-free for anything touching the skin, like earwires. When using modern findings, you may need to modify them a little. Left, earwire as purchased. Right, after using pliers to straighten the pre-made angles. This more closely mimics ancient shapes.

You can also make your own, from wire. If you look closely at the crotalia pictures you can see the back of the earwire rises up. They look uncomfortable but I can attest they are not. This was a popular security measure in Roman earrings.

In either case, use the same looping technique to attach your earrings.

**Final thoughts**

I encourage you to constantly check back with your gallery of extant pieces (Keeping them all together, in a computer folder or Pinterest board, really helps with “at a glance” review) to stay within your chosen style.

Even if you stay tied to the archeological record, there is still plenty of opportunity for creativity. I was thrilled by how many period-looking components are out there, if you look for them. Some are too pricey to make practical largesse offerings, but others are well within a modest budget. I hope it inspires you to make jewelry that’s accurate to your period, whatever it may be.

Don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions!

Yours in service,
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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES


Pinckernelle, Kathia. *The Iconography of Ancient Greek and Roman Jewellery*, University of Glasgow, 2007

Footnotes

1 John Bostock’s commentary on Natural History, book 37


4 National Museum of Georgia

5 Gold and emerald necklace, 1-2nd century CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, # 21.29.2

6 Gold, emerald, pearl. 4.8 cm Thorvaldsens Museum. Inventory number: H1836

7 Gold, emerald. 3.2 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum. Inventory number: H1829

8 Gold, sapphire, pearl. 3.4 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum. Inventory number: H1824

9 Metropolitan Museum of Art, item # 20.235. 3.3cm.

10 Cameo and gold earring (c. 1 to c. 199 Italy)

Supplies

Local craft stores (JoAnn Fabrics, Craft Warehouse, etc.)
Local bead stores (Google is your friend)
FireMountainGems.com (be careful – some of the stones they send out are suspect)
ShipwreckBeads.com
RioGrande.com
Etsy & eBay