The development of Montenegrin jewellery has to be seen in the context of the Balkan jewellery in general. It was conditioned by the existence of many silver mines in Serbia and Bosnia. Since the Middle Ages this region was a meeting point of Western and Eastern worlds, so the influences of both Western European and Byzantine arts were reflected on the work of local craftsmen. That was encouraged by common medieval practise of travelling artists to spread styles and techniques from their home towns to other environments. Also the representative silver and gold objects were imported from Byzantium and Italy becoming a model and inspiration for local masters.

Balkan area has always been a crossroad for caravans travelling from East to West and vice versa, and towns on Adriatic coast had an ideal strategic position for Mediterranean trade. Both facts were of great importance in exchange of artistic influences in addition to the exchange of goods.

On the territory of the present-day Montenegro the main artistic centres used to be on the Adriatic coastal area, with the town Kotor in Boka Bay being the most important one. In the 13th and 14th centuries Kotor was part of a mighty Serbian medieval state and many silversmiths and jewellers were active there, while the first laws regarding this craft were issued in 1352. Beside local craftsmen, the silversmiths and goldsmiths from other European centres, like Venice and even Basel, were active in Kotor. Some of Kotor masters were so successful that they worked in Moscow and Bari (Italy), other travelled to inland spreading the most innovative styles and techniques of the period to more remote places. The most opulent and elaborate works were the silver reliquaries, altarpieces, sanctuary lamps and other sacral objects made for churches. But jewellery as a status symbol of aristocracy was also very refined and luxurious. Unfortunately the majority of medieval silver artefacts are lost, due to melting or robbery.

The main techniques for manufacturing and decorating silver objects, including jewellery were casting, forging, engraving and perforating. The enamel in different colours was used on especially precious artefacts, while black composite of metals niello was also used for ornamenting silver jewellery and other objects. The technique that enjoyed particular favour and which reached the height of its development was filigree work, which consists of modelling of silver or gold wire forming circles, flowers and geometrical patterns. Filigree was often combined with granulation, which represents applying of very small silver or gold pellets.
The apex of Balkan silversmith and goldsmith craft was reached in the 14th century, when the characteristic autochthon style emerged by fusion of Western European and Eastern Byzantine styles. This situation drastically changed with Ottoman invasion in the late 14th century, when rich medieval towns and monastery complexes were devastated and local population taken to slavery. Nevertheless, the Ottomans favoured the class of craftsmen, so since the 16th century the guild organization flourished and some peasants also began to practise different crafts. This was a period of renewal of local silversmith and goldsmith profession, when craftsmen, although adopting some Ottoman and Islamic influences, still adhered to their own tradition from the past. In this period the majority of silver objects were of sacral type and intended for churches. On the other hand, the jewellery was neglected because of impoverishment of local population and extinction of aristocratic classes. As a consequence, the latter period saw a development of rustic jewellery connected to the folk tradition and rural environment, which accompanied the national costume.

This ethnographic jewellery bears great similarities with the same type of jewellery from diverse Balkan states and provinces, including Montenegro, Dalmatia, Croatia, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. The design of jewellery shows that the Ottoman influences were present, and more or less pronounced all over Balkan area. Sometimes it could be difficult to distinguish jewellery from various Balkan regions.

Balkan national costume, including Montenegrin and that of the Adriatic coastal area, although different within various regions, was very sumptuous, made of fine fabrics in vivid colours. That especially refers to the women’s bridal costume which was made with great care, from the refined fabrics, in elaborate and representative manner. Favourite materials for the national costume were hand woven white linen and multicoloured woven fabrics hand made on the loom. Some parts of the ladies’ costume, such as waistcoat (jelek) and dolman (dolama), were made of especially luxurious fabrics, like velvet and silk, and they were richly embroidered with golden thread. This kind of embroidery is known as “srma”.

This elaborate costume has been worn only in special occasions, such as festivities, weddings, or other events which were of importance for the community. At those occasions women from wealthy families used to wear appropriate and opulent jewellery too.
On most of the Balkan rustic jewellery from the 18th and the first half of the 19th century the influences of Ottoman design are obvious and predominant. This jewellery is massive and opulent, pervaded by Middle Eastern motives, while the Medieval Byzantine influences were neglected or completely abandoned. On the other hand, the great part of the Adriatic coast remained under the Venice and afterwards under the Austrian rule. Hence here the influences of Western European art were stronger than those of Levant. By pervading of those two influences emerged characteristic local style. From the second part of the 19th century there was a marked shift in style conditioned by great resistance movements against the long lasting Ottoman rule which ended in definitive liberation. In this period the interest was shifted towards Western European art and culture. The new type of national costume was introduced, first in towns, known as the urban costume. It was a combination of traditional national costume and some new Western European trends. This led to the changes in jewellery design, and new more delicate forms, of smaller size, often decorated with precious stones or pearls, replaced earlier examples.

Materials and forms of jewellery as well as the semi-precious stones, minerals and glass used for its decoration often had a symbolical meaning and properties believed to be beneficial. There was a widespread belief that silver protected against bewitchment. The circle of bracelet, earrings, and a ring was a symbol of eternity and permanence. The custom of adorning the jewellery with silver coins represented a desire for showing the family wealth, which was of special importance in matchmaking.

Across as the most important Christian symbol of eternal life was present as a motive on Balkan jewellery, but there it had its pre-Christian meaning too, which was connected to fertility.

The meaning of coral has its roots in Greek mythology. According to the legend coral arose from the drops of Medusa’s blood, when Perseus cut off her head. The legend tells that the look of Medusa’s eyes turned everybody into stone, so the coral was worn as a protection against evil eye. Among Slavs red colour was a symbol of blood and therefore of life, so there was a widespread belief that coral ameliorated health and incited fertility. According to tradition the turquoise protected from the evil eye.

Glass paste insets of different colours were often used on Balkan jewellery. The Christian women preferred red glass paste while Muslim women tended to wear jewellery decorated with green glass paste. Glass paste was imported from Venice, more precisely from the island of Murano famous for glass producing.

One of the folk beliefs was that the evil forces could be sent off by different sounds, so the pendants in the form of small bells were incorporated in some pieces of jewellery. While dancing the bells would produce noise which dispelled all evil spirits.

Regarding the national costume, especially the bridal gown, the ornamentation of the head was of the great importance. Traditional jewellery forming the complex
system of the head ornament consisted of silver hairpins, rows of silver or gold coins, earrings and other silver ornaments. Many shapes of this jewellery are of the Christian Byzantium origin, while some reflects the influence of eastern Ottoman taste. In the head ornamentation there were also various types of fabrics in form of veils, caps, and later, small hats. Sometimes the head ornament included natural flowers and peacock’s feathers, too. The most prominent element of head ornament was a crown which reflected the Balkan medieval tradition of rulers’ crown inspired by jewellery of the Byzantine court, and it was an obligatory part of bridal jewellery in Boka Bay.

The fashion of elaborate and heavily adorned head ornament was most pronounced during the 18th and 19th centuries, while at the beginning of the 20th century it became more reduced following Western European taste.

Women were particularly keen on their long hair being the most beautiful and natural ornament of the head. The favourite hairstyle was braid which could have been twisted forming a chignon which usually was fixed and adorned with few hairpins.

There were various types of hairpins. They were usually made in silver or gilded silver. The upper part was the only decorative element, and it was in a form of a globe or apple known as “pomolo”. It was made in solid silver or in the technique of filigree work, and both variants could be sometimes in combination with the granulation technique. The top part of a hair needle could be further embellished with few short and fine chains ending with silver coins.

One of the favourite types of jewellery for head were earrings, which could be of different shapes including semi-lunar form or flower form, some of which were inspired by medieval and Byzantine jewellery. They were made in silver or gilded silver in filigree technique, sometimes decorated with glass paste or coins.

Necklaces, among people known as „đerdan“, and other types of jewellery for chests which were fixed to the clothes, known as „ćustek“, represented an important part of women ornamentation. Usually they were made of one or a few rows of strings of silver coins with central coin within elaborated filigree frame sometimes further embellished with glass paste insets. The pendants in form of a cross or medallion with Madonna were also present among Christian population.

The type of jewellery characteristic for Adriatic coastal area, Dalmatia, and Boka Bay, was globular filigree button, made in silver or gilt silver with granulation. There are indications that it was of Italian origin but it gained great popularity in this region. It had more a decorative role than practical use, and it was sowed on a shirt or on a short waist coat (jelek) in two rows. The equivalent of buttons were men’s cufflinks which had a similar form but with additional
parts for fixing sleeves. The silver filigree cufflinks were characteristic for the traditional costume of Boka Marine Fraternity.

The traditional costume of the members of the Boka Marine Fraternity consists of a men's festive dress of Boka Bay, with the addition of appropriate arms and hats indicating the status of the owner. The national costume was the combination of oriental and European clothing. Unlike the most part of the Balkan the influences of Western fashion were present in Boka Bay since the Middle Ages. The costume consisted of a white shirt with black neckerchief, black trousers of Ottoman – Levant type, red silk belt, green, red or blue waistcoat – jelek or ječerma, short black coat with long sleeves – koret, black socks and black shoes with a ribbon. The waistcoat and coat were ornamented with golden cords and tassels. Waistcoat was further embellished by the row of 10 gold or silver buttons on the right side. The admiral uniform was distinguished by bi-corn hat with a white crest. He would wear white gloves and the coat with longer back side (like tailcoat according to the European fashion) which was introduced in the time of French Revolution. The sailor wore a black cap with silver tassel and a short coat.

The cufflinks were spherical and hollow, made of silver wire and decorated with silver pellets. In the 18th and first half of the 19th century they tended to be rather massive and showy, of bold design, while in the latter 19th century and in the 20th century more delicate forms of smaller size were adopted. In the first half of the 20th century new forms of cufflinks emerged, so we encounter triangular and rectangular cufflinks, but filigree always remained the manufacturing technique.

Bracelets were very popular kind of jewellery. In the Middle Ages they were integral part of the sleeve but with the appearance of Ottoman fashion when sleeves became wider it gained its present role of an independent piece of jewellery. One of the oldest types originates from the 13th and 14th centuries and it was an open circular bracelet, not making the entire circle, decorated with two semi globes representing stylized breasts with symbolical meaning of fertility. This bracelet is very massive, but often of a strangely small size. The more precious version was made in silver and sometimes it was decorated with niello, while it’s more modest counterpart was made of brass. The middle part of this kind of bracelet could be ornamented with cross of Greek type (with four arms of equal sizes).

Round or bangle bracelets could be of solid silver or covered with fine filigree work. They consisted of two semi circular parts connected by a hinge and closing with movable needle. Sometimes they could be decorated with red corals or glass paste insets.
The favourite bridal jewellery was a type of bracelet known as “belenzuka”, which was given as a present to a future bride by a bridegroom as a promise of marriage and a sign of love. This bracelet consists of several rows of chains connected by a rectangular clasp made in the technique of filigree work, sometimes gilded and often decorated with glass paste. There could be from six to twelve chains. The clasp is the most pronounced and elaborated decorative element on this type of bracelet. It had a safe closing system with the movable needle. The one variant of belenzuka could have a clasp in the form of a flower, and it could have strings of red corals instead of silver chains.

Belenzuka

Special type of filigree bracelet, which is very elegant, was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, and it was made of two semi circles with frontal part in a form of an elaborate flower with glass paste inset. Filigree bracelets of different shapes and sizes were among the favourite jewellery, remaining one of the favourite souvenirs from Adriatic coastal towns it to the 20th century.

Since the Middle Ages rings had a special role among the jewellery. They were a status symbol; they had a role of a seal; and they were connected to the customs regarding proposal and marriage. One of the Medieval types of ring was so called “stolovat”. The word “sto” means table.

Filigree bracelet, second half of the 20th century

Silver ring of “stolovat” type, 18th century

The ring of this type used to be worn by a man who was the head of the family and the host in special occasions when family and friends were gathered around a table, therefore the name of the ring contains word “sto”. This type of ring emerged in the 16th century, and it remained popular into the 19th century and latter, when it became more woman type of the jewellery. It is a massive round ring with central motive of rosette, and it could be further embellished with enamel, niello, or red coral inset.

Filigree rings of different shapes with or without red coral or turquoise insets were largely produced in all coastal towns if Montenegro. That refers to the all kinds of filigree jewellery, including bracelets, pendants and brooches. However from 1970’s this difficult and time consuming craft was less and less practised, until gradually it completely ceased.

Silver ring made in filigree and granulation technique with turquoise inset, first half of the 20th century

Silver ring of “stolovat” type with red coral inset, late 19th century
The first half of the 20th century is marked by almost complete abandon of Levant influences and by adoption of Western European trends. That refers to the jewellery too, which began to be imported from major European centres like Vienna and Nuremberg. Local craftsmen began to aspire towards European standards, adopting more European design in their creations. The young generation of jewellers used to go to Vienna, Pest (part of present day Budapest) and Prague to learn the craft.

When it comes to bridal costume, the over elaborate system of head ornament was replaced by white veil and coronet. The rest of the gown was according to the European fashion, although the fine silver filigree belt often remained in use, as well as different kinds of silver belt buckles.

The favourite kinds of necklaces became oval medallion or locket, with a picture of a dear person, on long fine chain and a pearl necklace. Very delicate and refined silver filigree brooches were worn on a high collar near the throat. The most popular was in the shape of a flower, although the charming butterfly shape was introduced, too.

The jewellery is an important witness of the life of primarily wealthy classes in the past. The most precious pieces of jewellery were regarded as important family treasure and patrimony and were kept and cherished from generation to generation. The jewellery as the integral part of applied arts is a testimony about the skills of local craftsmen and the artistic taste and customs of former generations from the Balkan area.

It is interesting to note that collections of prominent European museums, such as Victoria and Albert Museum and British Museum (both in London) possess Balkan silver filigree jewellery, including hair pins and different fragments.
Lustica Bay Collection

Only the most luxurious examples of antique jewellery were originally gold-plated. We introduced the novelty in our selection of local silver jewellery: new gilding on genuine antique pieces. This collection of jewellery is created exclusively for our gallery located at Lustica Bay, and it consists of the finest and the most unique examples of the local silver jewellery applied with 24ct gold coat.

Belt buckles

The belt was very important part of jewellery since the Middle Ages, but while in the past it was a status symbol of kings, aristocrats and knights, in the 18th and 19th centuries it was predominantly woman jewellery connected to her married status and worn as a part of bridal jewellery as opulent ornament of a wedding gown. The belt usually was of multicoloured woven fabric and the most prominent and de-corative part was its belt buckle. But there was also a variant of a belt entirely made in silver in filigree technique; this type of belt is known as „ćemer“. The belt buckles, known as „pafta“, were made in forged silver with embossed decoration or in filigree technique decorated with granulation technique and glass paste insets. Belt buckles were made in various forms; the most common were belt buckles in almond shape usually made of forged silver, but filigree variant was produced too. Buckles of solid silver could also be round consisting of two parts, or more elaborate in three parts with oval central element flanked by two arrow-shaped components. Particularly popular was a three part belt buckle with arched vertical central element and two horizontal elements with rounded sides. This type of belt buckle was often decorated with a motive of stately coat of arms, while other decorative elements, including floral and foliage motives, rosettes, volutes, and stylized geometrical patterns were used too. The tulip is of Islamic Ottoman origin, while in the 18th and 19th centuries the Western European Baroque motives were introduced, too. Filigree belt buckles were exceptionally opulent, and they were characteristic for Montenegro and Boka Bay. They could be made of three to seven plates with the most elaborate central one with upper side in a form of arch or crown.
Special type of filigree belt buckle was a rooster shape reminiscent of rooster crest and decorated with a six pointed star. This motive was not connected to the Jewish religion, but it is of Eastern origin and it was believed that it protected from evil forces. This kind of belt buckle, as one of the most luxurious, was embellished with insets of glass paste and hanging silver chains. Appended silver chains occurred on the other types of belt buckles, too.

Belt buckle of almond shape, made of forged silver with embossed decoration, with floral and foliage decorative elements including foliate scrolls, reminiscent of Baroque style, 19th century

Belt buckle with circular central part flanked by two arrow shaped elements, made of forged silver with embossed decoration reflecting Baroque taste, 19th century

Silver filigree frontal part of the belt, with gilded details and glass paste insets, it consists of five plates, central one is arched and it is ornamented with two headed eagle surmounted by crown taken from the Montenegrin royal coat of arms. On the back the belt is stamped with initials of master form Kotor, late 19th century

Belt buckle of rooster type, silver filigree with applied three gilded flowers within six points stars and glass paste insets, appended with few massive silver chains, the shape is reminiscent of rooster crest, middle of the 19th century. On the back the buckle is stamped with hallmarks for Austrian (Vienna) silver, but it was intended for Balkan market. Rooster type belt buckle was among the most luxurious jewellery

Belt entirely made in silver filigree with opulent clasp in a form of a bow, it has gilded parts also, early 20th century. This type of a belt was introduced in the second half of the 19th century and it reflected the tendency towards more delicate jewellery according to the Western European taste. It was obligatory part of a wedding gown which otherwise looked up to the European fashion.