

bite me



big mouth

Grills:



A Smile on the Rocks



“I got my mouth lookin’ somethin’ like a disco ball . . .
my teeth gleaming like I’m chewin’ on aluminum foil”

by Katy Lefroy

Grills (or Grillz depending on how urban you want to sound) are a type of jewelry worn over the teeth. They are generally made of solid gold or silver, then inlaid with diamonds, rubies, sapphires or any other precious rocks your smile desires. Grills can be made to entirely cover both sets of teeth (remember Jaws from James Bond?), or as a highlight for one or two of your favorite pearly whites. The visual effect of wearing Grills is probably best described in Nelly’s 2005 hit song Grillz (feat. Paul Wall, Ali and Gipp): “I got my mouth lookin’ somethin’ like a disco ball . . . my teeth gleaming like I’m chewin’ on aluminum foil.”

Also known as Fronts or Golds, Grills have traditionally been associated with hip hop culture. However, in recent years the mouth jewelry has become a mainstream fashion statement, with everyone from Justin Bieber to Khloe Kardashian to Madonna sporting a set. Even Olympian Tony Estanguet, who won gold for France in canoeing, displayed an iced out smile at his medal ceremony.

But wearing Grills will not give you Jaws-esque super powers, so no attempting to bite through steel cable please. In fact, according to the American Dental Association, the wearing of Grills can promote acid production and bacterial growth, which can cause tooth decay, harm gum tissue, and wear away enamel on teeth. Make sure you floss!

The majority of Grills are custom made and fitted to the individual’s teeth. First, an impression of the teeth is taken and a tooth mold is obtained by filling the negative. This mold is then used to fit the Grill. Custom designed Grills by the big names in the business such as Johnny Dang, Paul Wall or Sincere Palacios can be upwards of \$10,000, but cheaper made-to-order versions are available for a couple of hundred dollars from stores with names like Mr Bling Gold Teeth, Grillz 4 U, or Krunk Grillz. These days, you can even buy a DIY dental putty kit, send off the impressions to any number of online Grill retailers, and have your bling delivered to your door. (There are also ‘universal’ Grills, but that’s sort of like buying one-size-fits-all shoes).

And nothing screams edgy and urban more than a French canoeist, right?

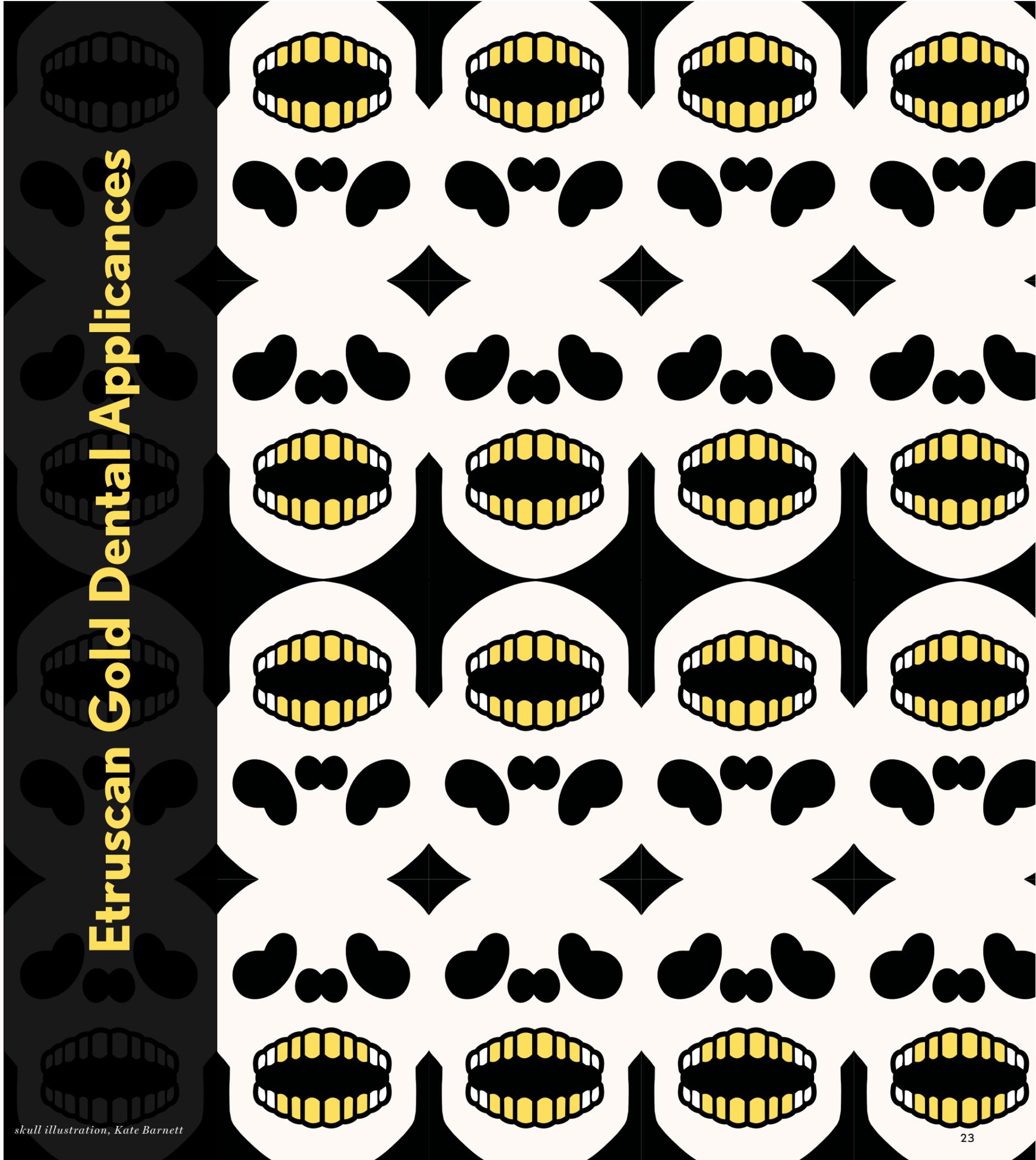
Like so many trends, the modern concept of Grills emerged from practical necessity. Gold teeth started appearing in the mostly black areas of New York City around the 1970s, when immigrants were arriving from the West Indies and Jamaica--countries where gold was used to fix broken or rotten teeth. Before long, flashy gold smiles had been appropriated by hip New Yorkers, and in the 1980s and 90s rappers like Slick Rick, Big Daddy Kane and Kool G Rap were all wearing gold Grills in their music videos.

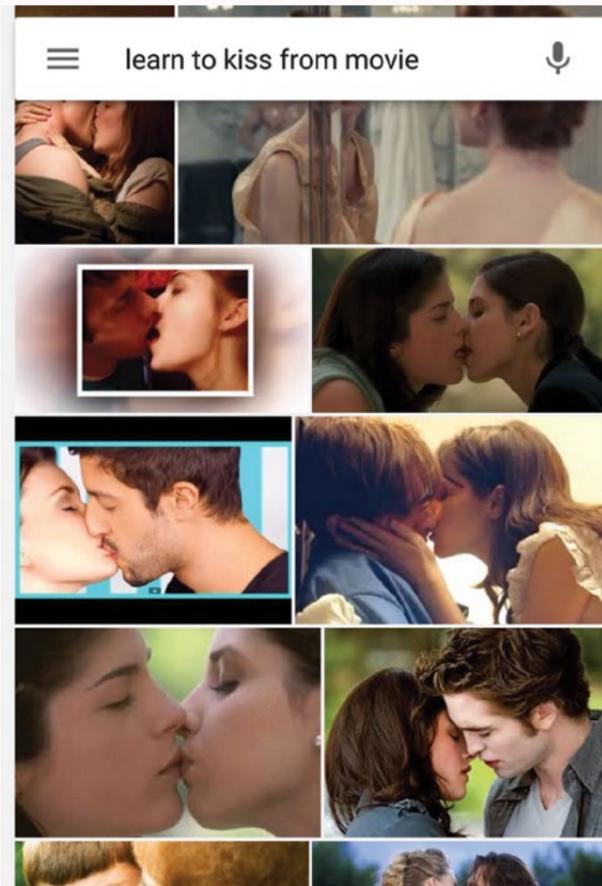
In the early 2000s, Grills became even more entrenched into popular culture due to the popularity of Southern hip hop, which emerged out of Atlanta, New Orleans, Houston, Memphis and Miami as a reaction to the domination of East and West coast styles. Anyone who was anyone was sporting a set of Grills, and the plain gold versions had morphed into bedazzled tiaras for the teeth (apparently, Lil John has a platinum and diamond set which are valued at \$50,000). Eddie Plein, often credited as the grandfather of Grills (he did golds for Flava Flav and Big Daddy Kane in the 80s) spoke about this time: "By 2000, 2001 I started noticing jewelers come out of the woodwork, trying to do gold... Things have changed. The last couple of years have been about the 'ice age'... Everybody wants ice."

The concept of decorating teeth with jewelry didn't start last century. In fact, the first known evidence of people wearing what we would now call Grills can be traced back to the Etruscans, who lived in Italy from 800 BC to 200 BC. In his 1999 study *Etruscan Gold Dental Appliances*, Marshall Joseph Becker writes: "high-status Etruscan women deliberately had [front teeth] removed in order to be fitted with a gold band appliance holding a replacement, or reused, tooth." Archeologists in France discovered dental implants from a skeleton at a Celtic burial site that dates back to the third century BC. The Celts were in contact with the Etruscans via trading routes, and it's likely they became aware of Etruscan elites sporting mouth bling that way. And later, during the Classical period (300--900 AD), Mayan kings and queens drilled holes in their teeth to insert pieces of jade as a symbol of wealth and status symbol.

Today, people wear Grills for the same reasons--as a way to ostentatiously display a perception of wealth. Gabriel Tolliver, author of *Bling: The Hip-Hop Jewelry* book says, "you can be the most broke-ass rapper, but if you accessorize, you're balling. It's all about appearance, even if there's a recession."

Etruscan Gold Dental Appliances





BY KATHRYN LEFROY

Cinema and television have shaped our expectations of kissing and being kissed. On-screen kisses are glamorous, choreographed, and breathtaking—a la Scarlett and Rhett, Baby and Johnny, Piper and Alex. That isn't to say our own experiences don't live up to the Hollywood hype, but I don't remember the last time orchestral music swelled when I puckered up. And let's face it; my first kiss was slightly more fraught than Kevin and Winnie's in *The Wonder Years*. I'm talking teeth clashing, lips chaffing, and spit going everywhere. There was probably some warm vodka stolen from my parent's liquor cabinet involved, too. Romantic, right?

The entertainment industry has mastered the art of presenting the on-screen kiss. Music swells, fingers intertwine, eyes close, lips skim softly against each other...

But a kiss is never just a kiss. In Hollywood particularly, kissing is about more than just two individuals sharing a special moment. Kissing can be open to endless interpretations. New York Times Film critic A.O. Scott writes: "Scroll through the famous kisses of classic Hollywood, and you find yourself in a dense forest of sexual semiotics. There is yearning and hostility, defiance and pleading, male domination and female assertion."

And although, in theory, anything goes these days, kissing on-screen is still a representation of the sexual act that won't be shown. Freud claims that "no one rejects [kissing] as perverse; on the contrary, it is permitted in theatrical performances as a softened hint of the sexual act."

But there was a time when even the representation of a kiss was not acceptable to show on screen. In 1896, Thomas Edison scandalized the world with the first on-screen kiss in his aptly named film, *The Kiss*. The film is only about 18 seconds long, and features May Irwin and John Rice reenacting a kiss from the final scene of the stage musical *The Widow Jones*. Public kissing was greatly frowned on by Victorian society at the time, and one contemporary critic of the film wrote: "The spectacle of the prolonged pasturing on each other's lips was beastly enough in life size on the stage but magnified to gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over it is absolutely disgusting."

Although censorship laws have changed, we see continuing echoes of this moral stance over two consenting adults pressing their lips together throughout the history of film and TV. The first interracial kiss in film was in the 1957 Robert Rossen movie *Island in the Sun*, which was about race relations and interracial romance. The film caused an uproar—particularly in the south of America—and many cinemas refused to screen it.

In 1964, an episode of the British medical soapie *Emergency-Ward 10* included the first interracial kiss on television when Dr. Louise Mahler (Joan Hooley) and Dr. Giles Farmer (John White) fell into each other's arms. Soon after, Louise Mahler was written out of the script. Actress Joan Hooley says: "I suddenly found myself in the papers under the headline 'Black and White TV Kiss Banned' . . . My part suddenly evaporated and Dr Mahler was sent back to Africa where she was bitten by a snake and died. What an exit!"

Our Lips Are Sealed

The first same-sex kiss occurs in the 1927 silent movie *Wings*, in which Buddy Rogers and Richard Arlen star as rival combat pilots. Even though the film's main characters are fighting for the affections of the same woman, neither, (as Kevin Sessums recognizes), "show as much affection for her . . . as they do for each other." The first intentional and affectionate same-sex kiss is often credited to the 1971 John Schlesinger film *Sunday Bloody Sunday* in which Peter Finch and Murray Head lock lips. However, there were a number of films prior to this in which same-sex kisses were portrayed as an assault on an unsuspecting and unwilling victim.

Prime time TV has been a little later to the party. The first lesbian kiss on network television was in 1991 on *L.A. Law*, when actors Amanda Donohoe and Michelle Greene shared a moment. Advertisers threatened to pull their ads after this scene. And it wasn't until 2000 that *Dawson's Creek* aired the first passionate male kiss between Jack and Ethan (actors Kerr Smith and Adam Kaufmann), igniting a dialogue surrounding representations of same-sex love. This dialogue has fired up again recently due to ABC's *The Fosters* airing the youngest gay lip lock on screen, a first-kiss between two 13 year old male characters. Twitter, of course, went crazy.



While *The Fosters* kiss may not be the most realistic representation of a first kiss (where was the warm vodka? Seriously?) representations of kissing on-screen continue to break new ground and provoke discussions about issues larger than just the kiss itself.

When is a kiss just a kiss indeed.