RBG Collars Photographs by Elinor Carucci

Through her decorated legal career, Ruth Bader Ginsburg (American, born in 1933, died in 2020) had an impact on the lives of all Americans. As director and cofounder of the Women's Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union, she argued six cases of gender discrimination before the Supreme Court of the United States, winning five. In 1993 she became the second woman and the first Jewish woman to serve as a Supreme Court justice. Ginsburg later emerged as a feminist icon, "the Notorious RBG," her bespectacled face appearing on totes, T-shirts, and tattoos.

Ginsburg's elevation to pop-culture fame paid tribute to her immense achievements as a litigator and a judge. It also drew on her distinctive personal style, embodied not only in crisply written legal decisions but also in self-presentation. During three decades on the bench, Ginsburg accented her somber judicial robes with a veritable library of collars and necklaces. Photographs of this neckwear are shown here, taken by the contemporary artist Elinor Carucci (Israeli, born in 1971) weeks after Ginsburg's death. These accessories, occasionally used as wordless communication, imparted a sense of the wearer's individuality despite her august role.

Ginsburg's Jewish upbringing shaped the person she became. Questioned about her sensitivity to racial bias, she invoked her experiences growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930s and 1940s, the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe casting ominous shadows over antisemitic slights at home. Ginsburg's chambers at the Supreme Court held a plaque inscribed with these words from Deuteronomy: "Justice, justice shall you pursue."

Carucci's stark, gemlike images of Ginsburg's collars and necklaces reflect on the justice's legacy while marking her absence. Shown alongside is a selection of jewelry from the Jewish Museum's collection. Through carefully chosen materials, forms, colors, and amuletic inscriptions, these objects beautified, protected, and empowered those who wore them. Most of these items come from corners of Jewish history and geography quite distant from Justice Ginsburg's twentieth-century American context. Yet Ginsburg, too, understood adornment's potential to communicate beauty and power, joy and defiance, optimism and resolve.

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