

HISTORY

By Diane Sostendal

The Lore and Lure of DIAMONDS

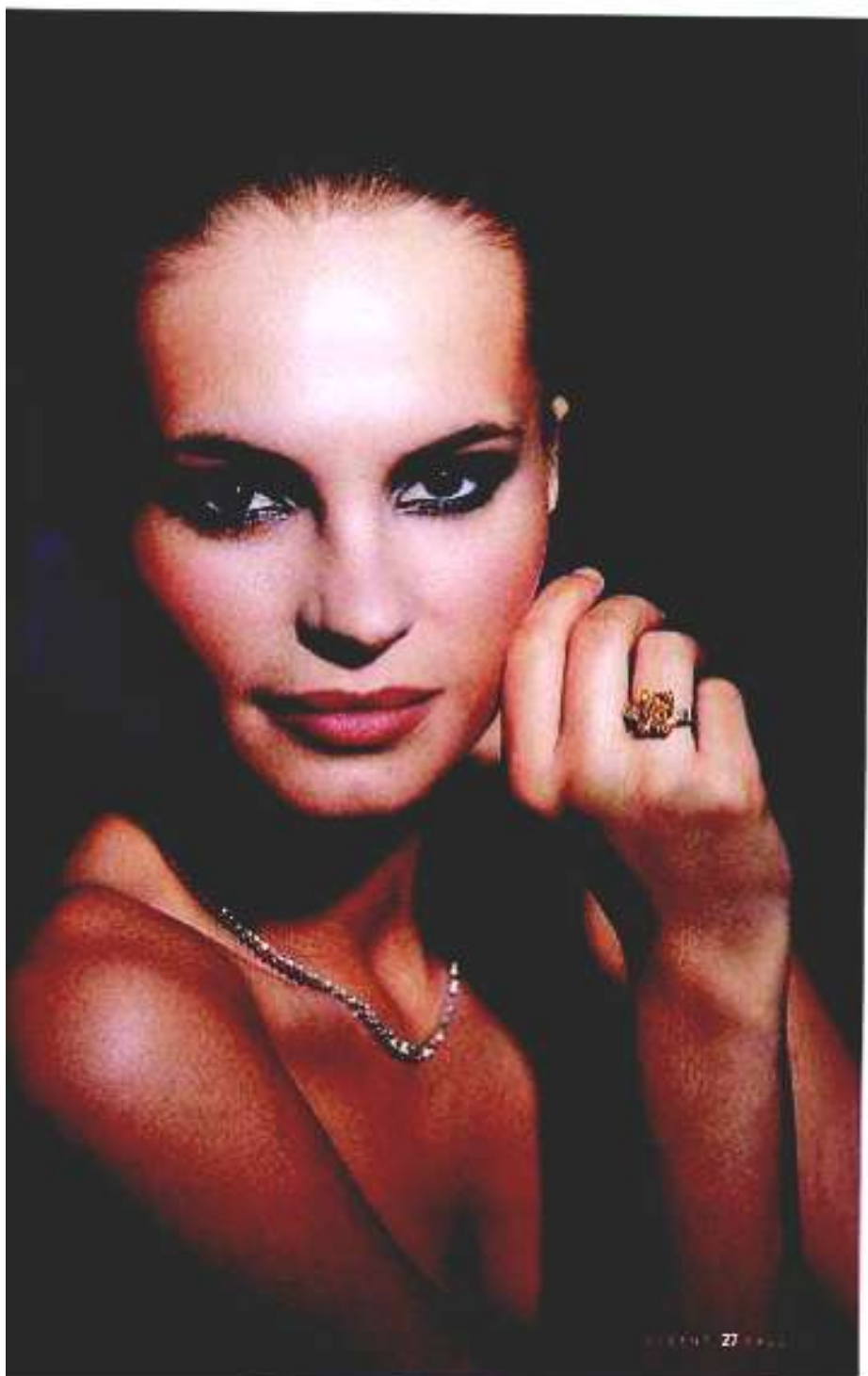
Wars have been fought over them, hearts won, forgiveness granted.

ONE CAN SPEND months in the diamond mines of South Africa panning the riverbeds. Still, there's little to prepare the untrained eye for the magic that is a diamond.

A diamond is a mineral, a natural crystalline substance and form of pure carbon. As such, it is completely unglamorous, shaped in the earth's interior and shot to the surface by the force of volcanoes. It might be billions of years old, clearly the oldest thing any of us will ever own. It's certainly the hardest and toughest.

But enough technical data except to point out that diamonds come in hundreds of colors: The Aurora Collection, shown several years ago at New York's American Museum of Natural History, comprises 260 natural fancy-colored diamonds, the rarest a small natural colored red.

I am neither miner, geologist, chemical engineer, designer, retailer, cutter, appraiser or member of the GIA. But like most women in the universe, my heart is set awither by the very mention of diamonds. History proves that I am a late bloomer when it



comes to this appreciation.

Long before me, Aristotle wrote that Alexander the Great (356 to 323 BCE), on conquering Persia, returned with colorless stones, some engraved in a text unknown outside of India. Other versions of this story appear in the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* and in Marco Polo's books dating from 1298.

It is long held that India is the country of origin for the first known diamonds. In the beginning, they were neither cut, polished nor set. Today, though diamonds are found in other countries, India's Golconda diamonds still command premium prices because the source implies a rare quality.

Diamonds did not begin as the symbol of power and privilege that they are today. The humble Buddha, incorporating many Hindu tokens into his teachings, proposed the diamond as a Buddhist sign of religious virtue. But soon, piety gave way to showmanship and snobbery. Maharajas decked themselves, their courts, their arms, their armor and even their beasts of burden in diamonds...or what could pass for them.

Louis IX of France (1214 to 1270) put his foot down: he established a sumptuary law reserving diamonds for the king. But a century later, Louis would have been shocked to see the plenitude of diamonds appearing not only in the royal jewelry of the king, but also on men and women of the court!

In the 15th Century, the world's first engagement ring was created to celebrate the betrothal of Mary of

i-Noor diamond, said to date from 13th century India. It made its way from the court of Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal, to the present day crown of Queen Elizabeth of England via Persia, Afghanistan, through plunder, theft, and tribute. Finally, the East India Trading Company on behalf of the 12-year old Regent of the Punjab provided it as a gift to Queen Victoria.

The Koh-i-Noor was said to have a curse upon it, but the Queen Mother took care of that by declaring that "Only God, or a woman, can wear it with impunity." (You have to love those royals for these kinds of statements!) The Koh-i-Noor now resides in the Imperial Crown of Queen Elizabeth, for public view along with the Cullinan diamond (weighing in at a remarkable 530 carats) in her scepter.

Perhaps the most famous diamond, also cursed, is the Hope. This big blue gemstone has brought such inordinately bad luck to each of its owners that it wound up in the Smithsonian Institute (where so far, so good).

There are so many diamonds with so many stories... including, and most importantly, yours. The average engagement ring is .5 to 1 carat, and may be the first of many diamonds given to a woman by her special someone. An eternity band, a three stone ring (symbolizing yesterday, today and tomorrow) and all manner of redesigned rings should follow the engagement ring (if you're lucky...) If not, buy yourself a multi-stone diamond ring and wear it on your right hand to "express yourself."

In writing about jewelry over the years, I've been privileged to visit backrooms and sit cross-legged on floors watching stones being hand cut. Vault-like doors have swung open, and men with long beards have poured diamonds out of paper packets, patiently explaining their virtues. I've covered auctions, including recent ones at Christie's and Sotheby's, where inexpensive jewels were sold along side those worth a nice little mansion, yacht or sports car.

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Burgundy to the Archduke Maximilian of Austria. It was a modest, tailored design: baguette diamonds set in gold forming the letter M (for their initials as well as the Virgin Mary).

Oh, Max, look what you started! Now, every girl in love dreams of the quintessential engagement ring. Fascinating, how these pieces of carbon have evolved, especially once man figured out how to cut and facet and polish them to enhance their beauty. Wars have been fought over them, hearts won, songs sang, forgiveness achieved. Certainly one of the astonishing examples of this is the legendary Koh-

It takes years of training to learn to grade, cut and polish a diamond. It takes as much talent to bring out the full beauty of a small baguette as to carve the facets in a larger stone. Until you see stonemasons, polishers and matchers bent over their tables as their fathers and grandfathers did before them, it's hard to appreciate the art form. And until you've witnessed today's advanced laser-cutting techniques, it's impossible to imagine true brilliance.

Still, one look at a dazzling diamond (top carrying that adds sparkle to the smile and wonder to the woman, and all the history and craftsmanship in the universe take second place to the magic. For when it comes to diamonds, lure outweighs lore every time. ♦



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