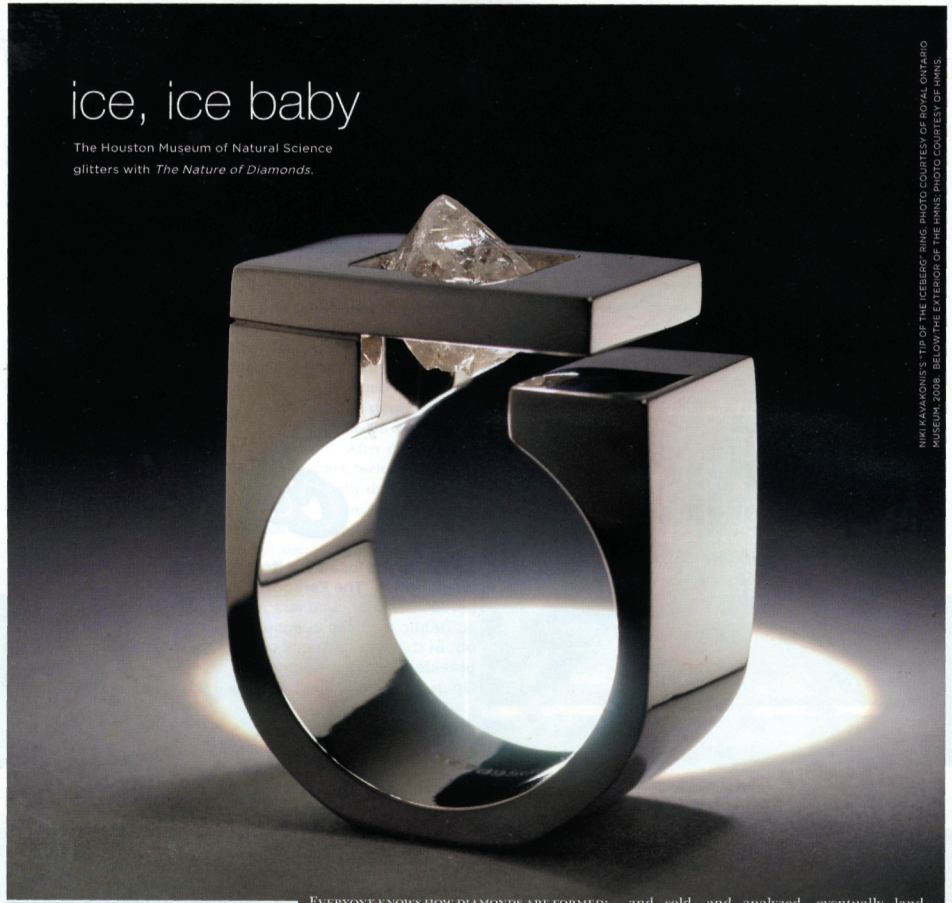
ice, ice baby

The Houston Museum of Natural Science glitters with *The Nature of Diamonds.*



NIKI KAVAMONIS'S "TIP OF THE ICEBERG" RING. PHOTO COURTESY OF ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM. 2008. BELOW: THE EXTERIOR OF THE HMNS. PHOTO COURTESY OF HMNS.

EVERYONE KNOWS HOW DIAMONDS ARE FORMED: Superman grabs a briquette of coal and crushes it between his mighty hands. In a few seconds—voilà—a diamond.

At least, that's the scene I recall from my youth. In real life, those beautiful baubles require millions of years of intense geologic forces to transform from lowly carbon to faceted finery. After being unearthed (either in deep mines in South Africa or Canada, or exposed through eroded Kimberlite pipes around the world), they're auctioned, bought and sold, and analyzed, eventually landing in a jeweler's workshop to be painstakingly cleaved into a Cushion, a Brilliant, or an Ascher cut, among so many options. The lesser quality stones are ground up and glued to the end of a drill bit or saw blade, which is equally vital.

From May 8 through September 7, Texans will have the opportunity to learn all about diamonds—from homely rocks to gorgeous gemstones—at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, in a new traveling exhibit entitled *The Nature of Diamonds.*

"I love this exhibit," HMNS president Joel Bartsch enthuses. "You have diamonds from A to Z—how they're formed, how they're cut, and their role in history. It's everything you wanted to know about diamonds but were afraid to ask."

It's not all geology and history (though the walk through a simulated diamond mine is remarkable). In fact, the exhibit highlights some of the largest and most beautiful diamonds ever found, such as the 407-carat "Incomparable Diamond." It presents a stunning array of vintage and modern jewelry, including the 1911 Kokoshnik Crown created by Cartier and a 1928 Cartier diamond-and-platinum shoulder brooch once owned by Sir Elton John. In addition to the "Incomparable," there are other superlative displays: a German-made brooch in the shape of a gecko featuring 1,524 green diamonds; the 253.7-carat Oppenheimer Diamond; The Aurora Butterfly of Peace—a suite of 240 diamonds representing every natural fancy color variation.

The traveling extravaganza is culled from a major exhibit that debuted at New York's American Museum of Natural History in 1997. Prior to landing in Houston, Canadians enjoyed the spectacle at the Royal Ontario Museum. Now, HMNS has paired some of the world's most jaw-droppingly beautiful diamonds with its own extensive permanent collection in the recently opened Smith Gem Vault, boasting one of the world's finest collections of natural, uncut gem crystals.

"The Smith Gem Vault allowed philanthropists Lester and Sue Smith to help share our vision, raise the funding, and make the new display a reality," Bartsch says. (Lester Smith is also the museum's Chairman of the Board). "We probably have the premier uncut gem collection in the U.S., built up over the past 30 years. The walk-in Gem Vault was built as a complement to that, and to reinforce to the public that the gems you wear around your neck start out in the earth as Mother Nature's raw material."

The Nature of Diamonds exhibit works seamlessly in concert with the Gem Vault. "I'm excited to engage people," Bartsch explains. "A lot of people know, in their mind's eye, what a diamond is supposed to look like. But if you saw a raw diamond pebble, you might not notice it. It's really the cleaving and cutting that brings out the sparkle."

Whether it's comparing soft, powdered graphite (another form of carbon) to the hardest natural gemstone, or tracing humankind's culture and history through royal jewels, Bartsch notes that "it all comes down to the fact that diamonds are beautiful, timeless, and can be cut and re-cut. They're portable, have durable wealth, with a built-in sense of mystery and romance."

This is not the first time the HMNS has teamed with the American Museum of Natural History to explore the earth's natural luxuries. In fact, HMNS launched the exhibit *Gold!* in 2005, which later drew crowds at the American Museum of Natural History in 2007. The two museums have also partnered on traveling exhibits exploring pearls and recent dinosaur discoveries.

To launch *The Nature of Diamonds*, HMNS has planned a number of galas and events for VIPs and members and even the general public. Childrens' activities will also be incorporated throughout the exhibit's tenure.

No word yet on whether Superman will show up. ROBERT HAYNES-PETERSON

THIS PHOTO: THE 407-CARAT "INCOMPARABLE" DIAMOND IS THE LARGEST YELLOW CUT DIAMOND IN THE WORLD. PHOTO BY ASHER WILSON. PREMIER GEM CORP., COURTESY OF THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM. BELOW: TIARA DESIGNED BY CYNTHIA BACH WORN BY SALMA HAYEK; PHOTO BY CYNTHIA BACH. COURTESY OF HMNS.

Five Brilliant Diamond Facets

- Diamonds were prized by royals in ancient India, though really hit their gemstone stride in the 19th century.
- Some researchers believe that Carbonado diamonds originated from an asteroid that impacted South America and Africa when the two continents were joined.
- The Kimberley Process was introduced in 2002 as an attempt to prevent the buying and selling of conflict diamonds out of Africa.
- The Canadian diamond industry has expanded dramatically in the 21st century and stresses environmental and cultural sensitivity, as well as sustainable practices.
- Natural color diamonds—brown, pink, yellow, etc.—have become increasingly popular in fine jewelry in recent years, boosting both their value and collectability.