

style

This week, everyone's favourite arrangement of carbon atoms may be the hardest known natural mineral, but that doesn't mean they aren't ready to adapt to the new economy by shedding some of their shine



ICE WAS NOT SO NICE

A new shine on diamonds doesn't gloss over the painful past of these compressed lumps of carbon

By Nathalie Atkinson

From top left, the Engelhard Diamond of about 25 carats; Niki Kavakonis's Tip of the Iceberg ring, made with an uncut 2.78-ct. diamond from the Ekati mine in the Northwest Territories; Dieter Huebner's Milky Way necklace of 2,000 diamonds in a platinum grid; Diamonds in the Rough necklace by Frank Gehry for Tiffany & Co., 2006.

COURTESY ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Guys looking to pop the question on New Year's Eve might want to pop in to the Royal Ontario Museum's current exhibition for a crash course in diamond history before getting down on bended knee. *The Nature of Diamonds*, presented by De Beers Canada, is a reprise of the American Museum of Natural History's enormously popular exhibition of a decade ago, the same year Ekati, Canada's first diamond mine, began operations.

In the intervening decade there's been a seismic shift in the industry, with the context of and conversation about diamonds evolving substantially. A second more comprehensive and realistic look at the lump of carbon couldn't be more timely.

The exhibition moves from diamonds' geologic origins in kimberlite to the Kimberley diamond rush of the 1870s to the crystals' extraction on grease tables and advances in synthetic, lab-grown crystal specimens in the 1950s. And in examining the pretty carbon phenomenon's geologic origins, the exhibition doesn't sidestep the controversial aspects of the trade's history with slave labour and illicit trade. Among the jewellery displays by Canadians Shelly Purdy and Polar Ice in the dedicated gift shop at the end of the exhibition, I was pleasantly surprised to see stacks of *The Heartless Stone*, journalist Tom Zoellner's engrossing journey of reportage through the diamond industry's heart of darkness. That's something you would never have seen in the exhibit 10 years ago.

Patrons taking in the elaborate diamond corsage brooch owned by Napoleon's niece or the breathtakingly backlit Incomparable Diamond, a 407.48-carat, golden-coloured, kite-shaped diamond found in the rough of the Congo in the early 1980s, will certainly be

looking at things differently. There's also a sizable section devoted to Canada's recent contributions to the world trade and Canadian diamond jewellery designers.

The troubled history of diamonds is a constantly evolving story, the latest chapter of which is Canadian, both in terms of its ethical diamond origins and its changing aesthetic. Tiffany & Co., through its subsidiary Laurelton Diamonds, has been investing in Canadian diamond sourcing and polishing in Yellowknife since 2002 and is a key and vocal supporter of the Kimberley Process, the international certification and monitoring scheme that prevents the flow of smuggled blood diamonds into the market. (Conflict diamonds are those unidentified stones that originate in African countries such as Angola and Sierra Leone and are channelled through the grading and polishing houses of Europe.) Birks, the historic Canadian jeweller (though no longer Canadian-owned), has also been selling Canadian diamonds in a proprietary cut for several years.

Nunavut's only diamond mine, the Jericho, may have suffered operating losses, declared bankruptcy and ceased operations last week but Canadian diamonds are still a \$2-billion enterprise, making us the third-largest supplier of diamonds in the world. The exhibition details the discovery of the Ekati, then Diavik mines in the Northwest Territories. Then Snap Lake Mine near Yellowknife opened this summer; as did the Victor Project near Attawapiskat in the remote James Bay area of Northern Ontario; the former is the first De Beers mine outside of southern Africa.

Now that we are moving beyond the right-hand ring marketing push of the mid-naughts and the celeb-driven

craze for coloured diamonds, the most interesting diamond jewellery design today echoes this interest in theme with a rough and raw aesthetic. When Elsa Peretti created Diamonds by the Yard for Tiffany & Co. in 1976, she was among the first to give cut and polished diamonds a casual, everyday elegance. Architect Frank Gehry, who also designs jewellery and tableware collections exclusively for Tiffany, gives Peretti a nod and goes one further with his own take (also part of the ROM exhibit) — a necklace of raw diamonds floating on platinum mesh alongside the equally organic shapes of keshi pearls. Canadian designer Niki Kavakonis's Tip of the Iceberg ring is a starkly geometric palladium setting that shows off an uncut 2.78-carat octahedral diamond from the Ekati mine; its design was inspired by Newfoundland's Iceberg Alley. Toronto-based Dieter Huebner's Milky Way neck cuff is twisted swirls of platinum wire scattered with diamonds.

During my visit, I noted that patrons lingered the longest in front of the raw diamonds, forgoing all but the most twinkling bling for the uncut, unpolished real thing. Could it be the new austerity brought on by the economic climate? If so, what's next for diamonds may be almost completely inconspicuous consumption. Acclaimed Colorado artist Todd Reed (available in Canada at Richard Booth Fine Jewellery in Toronto) works with diamond octahedrons, macles and rose-cut diamonds so rough-and-tumble that to the untrained eye they resemble rock crystals, at best.

And only your jeweller knows for sure.

■ *The Nature of Diamonds* is on at the ROM's Garfield Weston Exhibition Hall through March 22, 2009. Visit rom.on.ca for more information.

Weekend Post

SCENT • MMM, YOU SMELL JUST LIKE A WISE MAN!

Bethlehem's three fabled wise men proved their street smarts by bearing gifts not of diamonds but of gold, frankincense and myrrh. After everyone's favourite metal, frankincense is the oldest precious commodity in the world — its aromatic crystals, made from the resin of the tree *Boswellia sacra*, were used in incense and embalming rituals and coveted by the Queen of Sheba. The finest frankincense in the world comes from Oman, and is the signature ingredient of Omani niche perfume house Amouage. Clearly, the Sultan of Oman also coveted the fragrant stuff because he himself established the luxury brand 25 years ago, though its sweet and musky eponymous fragrance also includes notes of Yemeni myrrh (in a gold bottle, natch). The latest addition to the Amouage range, Lyric, layers frankincense with other Omani ingredients such as spicy cardamom and Damascene rose (\$300 for 100mL eau de parfum at Andrew's in Toronto and The Perfume Shoppe in Vancouver). Don't balk at the price: Today, the frankincense tree population is in decline and the aromatic ingredient will soon be worth its weight in gold again. *Nathalie Atkinson, National Post*

