

JEWELRY CONNOISSEUR

DIAMONDS

Indian brilliance: The Collection of Benjamin Zucker

BY JOYCE KAUF SEPTEMBER 22, 2019



Benjamin Zucker has amassed a striking collection of diamonds from the country's Valley of Gems.

When Benjamin Zucker encountered the diamonds of Jaipur, India, in 1973, it was a “deeply aesthetic and religious experience” for him. “The shock of white [in] an Indian diamond is so extraordinary,” he recalls.

Now, almost five decades later, the Benjamin Zucker Collection will go on sale at New York gallery [Les Enluminures Ltd](#) (October 24 to November 9, 2019). Sandra Hindman, the gallery's president and founder, bought the collection from Zucker several years ago.

“**Diamonds** are an incredible vehicle for taking white light and changing it into prismatic colors that also reflect the inherent whiteness of the diamond — if the diamond is cut properly,” says Zucker, a gem dealer and historian. “The light in India, specifically in Jaipur, is overwhelmingly bright, made even more so by the heat. The diamonds looked even brighter than they would in Antwerp — the Northern Light standard by which all diamonds are judged.”

The 35-piece collection consists primarily of rings, but also includes brooches, hairpins and earrings. Spanning six centuries, the diamonds came from India’s Valley of Gems, which includes the famed Golconda mine, and eventually found their way to the royal courts of Europe.



OCTAHEDRAL: Sultan Muhammad of Ghor’s diamond ring, Afghanistan or Pakistan, 13th century. Set with three point cut diamonds on a substantial hoop, this Islamic ring can be regarded as a trophy of conquest. It belonged to the famous Sultan Mu’izz ad-Din Muhammad Ghor, or Muhammad of Ghor, who in 1173 departed from Ghur in central Afghanistan to invade India.

Evolution of cutting

In addition to representing some of the most important Indian diamonds ever amassed, the collection has a distinctive theme: It shows the evolution of diamond-cutting techniques, particularly how skilled cutters managed to release more and more white at each stage.

“For hundreds of years, careful people have been transforming these crystals, passing along the secrets from father to son or from master to apprentice,” explains Zucker. “What really made it so exciting for me to put this collection together is that I came to understand descriptions such as luminous, watery, sensuous, whiter than white. I can see it in so many of these diamonds.”

Among the highlights are an uncut octahedral diamond, followed by examples of the point cut, table cut, rose cut and brilliant cut. (Zucker especially favors the term “highlights,” which to him represents the “high light of the diamonds.”)

He points to a 16th-century ring “with beautiful octahedral crystals. Even if they couldn’t cut the diamond at this stage, you can still see the incredible display of the power of a diamond.”

As another example, he indicates a brooch with rose-cut diamonds. The rose cut came into being when cutters learned how to put facets on top of a table cut. Composed of white, greenish-yellow, slightly pinkish and brown diamonds, this brooch ranks as one of the rare examples of multiple colored diamonds featuring in a single piece of jewelry from the 17th century.



TABLE: The Guilhou Renaissance table cut diamond, Western Europe, 16th century. The prestigious combination of a diamond with rubies, forming the raised quatrefoil bezel, unites two powerful talismans, and their protective powers or virtue are referred to by John Lyly, *The Anatomy of Wit* (1578): “is not the diamond of more vauw than the Rubie because he is of more virtue?” It was treasured by two of the most important collectors of rings in the 19th and 20th centuries.



POINT: The Spitzer Renaissance point cut diamond, Italy, Venice (?), 16th century. Of spectacular effect and important provenance, this ring has been traditionally associated with Venice at the apogee of its power and wealth. Its high bezel displays five point cut diamonds arranged like a star, with table cut diamonds and rubies on the hoop. The striking ring epitomizes the grandeur of the best Renaissance jewelry and was likely made for a princely patron who wished to be associated with the properties of invincibility, fortitude, and dignity signified by diamonds.



ROSE: "The Dutch Rose Jewel", Western Europe, The Netherlands (?), early 18th century. The jewel is set with colored (grey, greenish, and brownish-yellow) rose cut diamonds, the effect deriving from the subtle rainbow shimmer of the "almost fancy stones." Of this early date, virtually no other colored diamond jewels are known, except within the French royal circle. The style can be found on "Golden Age" jewelry work by sitters in Rembrandt van Rijn paintings and in jewelry designs by the Dutch jeweler Thomas Cletscher.

Cross-cultural links

Not only do these jewels feature "absolutely beautiful stones and settings, but the historical aspect is fascinating," remarks Hindman. "As a medievalist, as well as a jewelry and manuscript dealer, it is one of the most meaningful projects I've ever done that shows the cross-cultural link between India and Europe. Even with unlimited money, you couldn't create a collection of this magnitude now."

Some of the jewels were previously on display at museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, and the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut, among others. However, the present collection has never before been offered for sale.

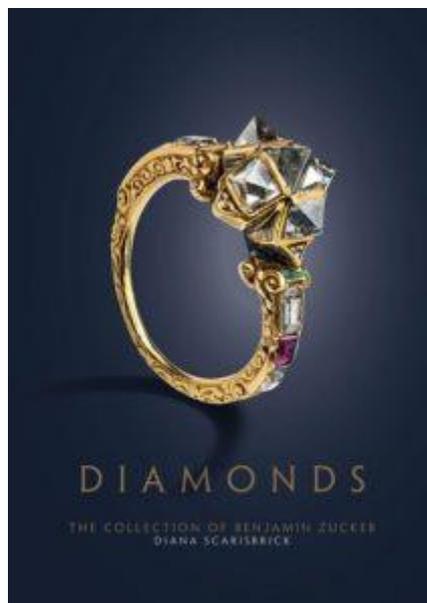
Indeed, it's being sold in its entirety for \$4 million, with no pieces held back for future sales. "I would like to respect not only the quality, but the historical [context] for posterity," says Hindman, emphasizing her collaboration with Zucker to ensure the presentation reflects his wishes.

Having the collection together also lets the viewer compare the way each of the different cuts refracts light, Zucker explains. "Seeing six wonderful pieces on a table, you can train your eye to see what the Indian white-light diamond really is."

Even after all these years of collecting, he remains in awe of these diamonds. "A diamond is such a specimen of rarity...that comes from below the surface of the earth, shot up with incredible pressure, found with great difficulty in the ground, and then, precious as it is, given to someone to cut. But once you put a facet on the stone, you can't go back. It's not like a novel that you rewrite."



BRILLIANT: The St. Alban's Bodkin, England, 17th century, remounted and inscribed 18th century. The silver and gold bodkin (ornamental hairpin) is a landmark in diamond history and composed of a large brilliant, the reverse inscribed, The Gift of Charles II to Nell Gwynne. The jewel was inherited by the king and his mistress' illegitimate son, Charles Beauclerk, created First Duke of St. Albans (1670-1726).



BY THE BOOK

Diamonds: The Collection of Benjamin Zucker is the accompaniment to the historic Indian jewels that go on sale in October. The book, written by jewelry historian Diana Scarisbrick, covers six centuries of Indian diamonds. It traces the evolution from the octahedral shape found in nature, to the point, table, rose and brilliant cuts of a polished diamond.

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