

The Hope diamond.
PHOTO BY CHIP CLARK,
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GAGA OVER GEMS

From an academic perspective, gems may be some of the most overvalued and most underappreciated objects on the planet. At least that is what the authors in this issue want to demonstrate—well, at least the latter part of the statement. Indeed, gems are where mineralogy and geology intersect culture most sensitively: by their beauty, they reach our hearts and humanity. Value derives from emotion as much as from actual need, so gems are the stuff of love, greed, legends, lust, envy, and lies. Forget about the science for a minute, and let's explore some amazing objects and stories.

Perhaps the most popular and well-known object of any museum is the Hope diamond. Yes, this is the 45.52-carat, intensely blue, cushion-cut diamond housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. You may like the Mona Lisa better, but the Smithsonian knows that the Hope is priceless, not just because it is unique, irreplaceable, and superb. It also has the greatest name recognition of any object in all of the Smithsonian institutions, so everyone wants to see it. And like any great diamond, it has a story wound around it, a story that our colleague Jeff Post is wont to correct, but not too strenuously. Although there are missing pieces of the history, the stone, named after Henry Philip Hope (1774–1839), undoubtedly was previously part of the crown jewels of France. Known as the French Blue or Tavernier Blue, this diamond was acquired in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, brought back from Golconda, and sold to Louis XIV in 1668. As became fashionable for great diamonds in the 20th century, a death curse has been attributed to the Hope, the only true part being that each of its owners died, but only as a result of being mortal.

Many diamonds are the stuff of legends, some fanciful and others not so. And diamonds carry more names than all other gems combined. Cullinan (there are more than nine), Orlov, Regent, Sancy, Koh-i-Noor ("Mountain of Light"), Kasikçi, Shah Jehan; the list goes on and on. Some names honor owners, others indicate some relation to the finder, and still others just reflect their fabulousness. Diamond was the symbol of virtue and power, and was an alleged poison when powdered and consumed. Recently we have had "blood diamonds," the destroyer of lives and societies. Diamonds have also been the stuff of Hollywood fantasy in movies such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* and *Flawless*, and in the annual parade of beautiful, diamond-bedecked women at the Academy Awards.

At the opposite end of the gem property spectrum is opal. While precious opal is transcendent for its iridescence, it is plagued by fragility and, once, was the object of a curse that rendered it unpopular and rejected. In Sir Walter Scott's *Anne of Geierstein*, published in 1828, the heroine's somewhat sinister grandmother, Hermione, dies when a

Pendant, 4.5 cm in length, set with Australian opals, chrysoberyl, sapphires, demantoid garnets, and pearls in gold. Louis Comfort Tiffany, 1915–1925. COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY; PHOTO BY VAN PELT PHOTOGRAPHERS

drop of holy water touches her enchanted opal, quenching its fire and the woman's life. Soon thereafter, opal's popularity plummeted as a result of this new symbolism (and coincidentally its relative unavailability at the time). New sources in Australia, plus some promotion by Queen Victoria, helped revive opal's popularity. New deposits, such as in Ethiopia, may help its rising fortunes. The currents of emotion swirling around gems are colorful and run deep.

George Harlow
American Museum of Natural History

PARTING QUOTE

ANYONE WHO KEEPS THE ABILITY TO SEE BEAUTY
NEVER GROWS OLD.

FRANZ KAFKA (1893–1924)

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