

Source – NYTimes.com: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/10/fashion/10iht-acaajchamp.html?_r=1

SPECIAL REPORT: JEWELRY

Taking a Shine to Brown Rock

By VICTORIA GOMELSKY
Published: December 9, 2009

Randi L. Molofsky had just returned from a luxury jewelry fair in Switzerland a year and a half ago when her boyfriend, Nathan G. Lithgow, surprised her with the gift of a diamond engagement ring. This is a bold move for anyone, but it was especially courageous for Mr. Lithgow.

Ms. Molofsky, author of “A Girl’s Guide to Buying Diamonds: How to Choose, Evaluate, and Buy the Diamond You Want,” had spent nearly a decade writing about jewelry for a handful of trade and consumer publications.

“I’d looked at thousands of engagement rings over the course of my career, and I knew that I didn’t want something conventional,” she said.

With help from the British jeweler Stephen Webster, a close friend of Ms. Molofsky’s, Mr. Lithgow picked out a 2.12-carat, oval, naturally colored brown-yellow diamond and asked Mr. Webster to design an 18-karat rose gold setting. Unusual for its champagne sparkle and custom mount, the diamond ring, to Ms. Molofsky’s surprise, fulfilled her exacting criteria.

“With colored diamonds, it’s not about what’s beautiful to everyone else,” she said. “It’s about what speaks to me and my personal sense of style.”

Fifteen years ago, few jewelers would have endorsed that rationale. Brown diamonds, better known by their more effervescent name, champagnes, were first offered to the trade in the early 1990s after a big discovery at the Argyle mine in Western Australia. Since they are small, marked with internal flaws and plentiful, they had only been used for industrial purposes. Retailers, the gatekeepers of the jewelry industry, disdained them.

Years of training by the Gemological Institute of America had instilled in retailers the notion “that white was better,” said Elizabeth L. Chatelain, president of MVI Marketing, based in Paso Robles, California, which helped Argyle introduce champagne diamonds to the American market. “To retailers, these were off-color goods.”

Consigned to mass merchants, who sold them on the cheap, browns languished in the low-end market until the turn of the millennium, when opinions began to change and designers warmed to the idea of jewelry with the refractive brilliance of a diamond and the singular palette of a colored stone.

There was a bonus: At prices 15 percent to 25 percent lower than their white counterparts, champagnes were a bargain.

“It gave designers a way to do quite exuberant and elaborate diamond designs at a lower cost,” said Sally C. Morrison, director of the Diamond Information Center. “There are so many shades to create nuance and texture using browns. It’s a way to paint in color.”

Diamond miners, long deprived of ways to get more money from the browns, could not have been happier, especially Rio Tinto, the owner of the Argyle mine.

At its peak in 1994, the open-pit mine produced 42 million carats of diamonds, about 40 percent of the world supply. By last year, annual production had fallen to about 15 million carats, but a decision to bore underground into deeper ore deposits could extend the mine’s life through 2018, with an annual yield of about 20 million carats.

The majority of Argyle's bounty is brownish stones, but a tiny supply of pink diamonds is also sold, at prices of up to \$1 million per carat.

Because they are extremely rare, the pinks usually receive most of the hype. But things are changing. Six months ago, Rio Tinto started a champagne diamond jewelry design competition open to all U.S. designers. The winning designs — a necklace, two sets of earrings and a brooch — were manufactured and hit the road on Nov. 2 as part of a traveling exhibition, stopping at leading jewelry retail locations in the United States through Dec. 27. The show is the most recent initiative in the 18-month-old trade campaign, which includes sales training, new marketing material and a revamped consumer Web site, champagnediamondcenter.com.

Helped by the recent attention, champagnes, along with their darker-hued and more valuable cousins, cognacs, are now so in vogue that designers traditionally wedded to colorless D-flawless stones, including Frédéric Mathon of Mathon Paris and Caroline Gruosi-Scheufele, co-president of Chopard, are weaving them into couture showpieces that cost tens of thousands of dollars.

H. Stern, the Brazilian jewelry house best known for its Carmen Miranda-inspired colored stone designs, was an early adopter, introducing a line of brown diamonds in 1997. "This year, our launch is a collection called Giverny, for which we selected very light cognac diamonds, which are literally light beige and light brown, to recreate the idea of dawn and dusk," said the jeweler's creative director, Roberto Stern.

In 2000, Eddie Le Vian of the Le Vian jewelry company, a family business with roots dating to 15th-century Persia, introduced a collection called "Chocolate Diamonds" that has become a pillar of the brand and, as of June, includes a line of bridal rings.

"It's been an interesting journey," Mr. Le Vian said. "We've taken stones considered low quality and made them attractive to consumers."

Few people understand that effort better than Alisa Moussaieff of the Moussaieff jewelry house in London. Mrs. Moussaieff must compete with the likes of Laurence Graff for rare colored diamonds at auctions.

"I recall that nobody else wanted them and we kept on buying them," Mrs. Moussaieff said of her early experiences with brown diamonds in the 1960s. "We made a brooch with different shades of brown: light, dark and grayish. You combine all the shades together and you get a magnificent ball of fire."