

ALL THAT GLITTERS

THE SPLENDOR & SCIENCE of GEMS & MINERALS

Exhibition Curator

Elise Misorowski: Self-styled Jewelry Historian

By Lydia Heberling

As a little girl Elise Misorowski played with the jewels in her mother's jewelry box and examined the contents of her father's curio cabinet. The jewelry box was full of antique jewels, like a 19th-century citrine heart and a marquise-shaped diamond ring set with rose cut diamonds, both of which had belonged to Elise's grandmother. The curio cabinet contained fine ivory carvings and silver objects that her grandfather had collected from around the world.

"I've always been fascinated with little precious things," she told me as we sat in her office. "I've had an appreciation for a fine level of excellence in gems and jewelry since I was a child."

This appreciation turned into a passion that has become a full-time career, something that many aspire to and few accomplish. Elise attended Knox College, where she studied art history. After marrying and giving birth to her daughter she began making jewelry at home.

"I made jewelry out of silver, agate, malachite and other ornamental gems," she recalls. "I did this for two years, and supplied three boutiques with my work." But when her family moved to LA for her husband's work she was unable to continue making jewelry: "Because of the fire laws I couldn't use the torch in our two-bedroom condo."

Without jewelry making Elise became a little restless: "I find jewelry irresistible!" And so she began taking classes at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), then located in Santa Monica, CA and now in Carlsbad, CA, to learn about gems. Within a few short years she was hired there as a diamond grader, a job she held for two and a half years.

For Elise, looking at diamonds through a microscope opened up a whole new world. "Looking into a diamond is like looking into the cosmos. Each diamond holds its own universe inside." Here her appreciation for a fine level of excellence came in handy in this position, as she spent her days grading diamonds based on color and clarity.

In 1984 Elise took a position as an assistant to the head librarian at GIA. "This was before email and faxes, so people would call the library with their questions, and GIA staff writers would visit with questions, and it was my job to research the answers and report back," she explained. The head librarian would handle the geology- and science-related questions and Elise took the rest.

“It was the most exciting job in my life, bar this one,” she says (referring to her current job as curator of the San Diego Natural History Museum’s exhibition *All That Glitters*). “All day long people would ask questions, and all day long I researched to answer them. I learned so much.”

Eventually she became the acquisition librarian and she began ordering as many books on gemology, geology, mineralogy, and jewelry as she could. One of the biggest acquisitions by GIA for the library was the purchase of the Sinkankas collection. The 30,000 geology-related books in Mr. Sinkankas’s collection immediately vaulted GIA into the position of being an important international resource for gemology information. But they were still lacking in jewelry history books.

“There were very few sources for information about period jewelry. Colleges and universities didn’t have courses that addressed jewelry past the fall of Rome, and museums didn’t place much importance, or even understand much, about the importance of jewelry throughout history,” she said. But she was convinced of its educational value: “Jewelry is filled with clues about the economics of a time period. A necklace or a ring can tell you so much about the economics, social structure, and technology of the culture it came from.” Only a few esoteric societies existed who taught and wrote about the importance of period jewelry.

But on April 24, 1986, that changed. The Duchess of Windsor died, leaving behind a lifetime of scandal and a collection of jewels. The Duchess’s jewelry brought seven times its worth at auction and launched a huge public interest in fine jewelry. Jewelry aficionados had finally found an audience, and they began writing books about period jewelry, fashion jewelry, and everything in between. Elise purchased every book she could for the GIA library.

After 13 years of researching and learning and establishing the GIA library as one of the leading sources for information in gemology and all subsequent aspects, Elise took a leave. She traveled internationally from Switzerland to Hong Kong, lecturing to various elite jewelry societies. She wrote essays, book reviews, and a monthly column called *From the Vault*, and worked on the San Diego Natural History Museum’s *Nature of Diamonds* exhibition. The week a 100-carat flawless diamond entered her office was an exhilarating one for her. “It was awesome and amazingly nerve-wracking with the security that accompanied that diamond. But it was spectacular to see up close.”

Elise returned to GIA in 2001 as Director of its Museum, and for seven years served in this position, organizing exhibitions that highlighted subjects such as animal motifs in jewelry, gem carving, award-winning jewels and contemporary jewelry artists. The animal jewelry, which will also play a prominent role in *All That Glitters*, is a recurring motif for Elise because “lots of people relate to animals. We all have a favorite animal and many of us have pets, so animals are endearing things that jewelers have translated into art.”

Now Elise is back at the San Diego Natural History Museum, curating the most comprehensive gems and minerals exhibition the Museum has ever presented. And she's having fun doing it.

"I want to get everyone excited about the subject. I want people to see things they've never seen before and learn things that will leave a lasting impact on them. Very few people in southern California are aware of the legacy the area has for producing beautiful museum-quality gems," she says enthusiastically.

Her excitement is contagious. One of her office walls is lined with calendars open to each month from February to May when *All That Glitters* opens, and each week has a countdown to opening. Next to the calendars is a poster of a diamond-studded butterfly brooch. She removes the necklace from around her neck and explains that she purchased it from an up-and-coming artist after writing an article about the technique—granulation—that he used to create it.

"That's how I acquire most of my jewelry now. I build a relationship with a designer and then I have to have a piece by that person," she says. She wishes she had more antique jewelry but most of hers, including the marquise-shaped diamond ring that belonged to her grandmother, was stolen.

I asked Elise what is next for her, after *All That Glitters* runs its course. While she hopes that the exhibition will lead to a permanent gems and minerals hall at the Museum, she isn't sure what her future holds, although she hopes to eventually write a book. But she leaves the possibilities wide open with much hope and a never-fading enthusiasm for precious little things.