

Smithsonian National Gem Collection

Some of the world's most spectacular diamonds and other gems can be admired in the National Gem Collection in the Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Collection in Washington, D.C. The collection is comprised of diamonds known to almost everyone, as well as other diamonds and precious gems possessing a priceless place in history.

While many are familiar with the Hope Diamond, they may be surprised to find out it is not a clear diamond, but instead of brilliant blue stone, surrounded by white diamonds and suspended from a diamond necklace. The Hope Diamond first appeared in history around the mid-1600s when it was purchased by a merchant named Jean Baptiste Tavernier who admired the stone's original violet color. He later sold the stone Louis XIV of France, who gave it to Marie Antoinette.

The spectacular Blue Heart Diamond is a large, heart-shaped diamond mounted on a platinum ring surrounded by white diamonds. It was cut in Paris between 1909 and 1910 but the stone's origin – Africa or India – is unclear. Famous jeweler Harry Winston mounted the diamond in its current setting in 1959 and sold the ring to Marjorie Merriweather Post. It's possible that the popular "Heart of the Ocean" heart-shaped diamond necklace in the movie Titanic was based on the Blue Heart Diamond, which is actually set in a ring.

A wedding present from Napoleon, the Marie-Louise Diadem was presented to his wife on the occasion of their marriage in 1810. The diadem, originally part of a set that also included a necklace, comb, belt buckle and earrings, were all made of emeralds and diamonds set in silver and gold. They were made by French jeweler Etienne Nitot et Fils of Paris. After the fall of the empire, Marie-Louis fled to Vienna with her jewelry. She left the diadem to her aunt in Hapsburg. The emeralds were eventually sold individually as pieces "from the historic Napoleon Tiara." The diadem, reset with turquoise cabochons, was purchased by Marjorie Merriweather Post for the Smithsonian Institute.

One of the most spectacular all-diamond pieces of jewelry in the Smithsonian Institution is the Napoleon Necklace. Though to have originally been owned by Catherine the Great of Russia, it was presented by Emperor Napoleon of France to his second wife, Marie-Louise of Austria on the birth of their son in 1811. After a succession of owners, it eventually was sold to Harry Winston in 1960. Marjorie Merriweather Post obtained the necklace from Winston and donated it to the Smithsonian Institution in 1962. While difficult to place value on a piece such as this in today's market, it is estimated to be worth millions.

While one does not typically associate diamonds with the Spanish Inquisition, a stunning necklace of diamonds and emeralds of the same name is part of the Smithsonian Collection. According to legend, a portion of the necklace belonged to Spanish royalty and was later worn by ladies of the French court. However, there's little information about the provenance of the necklace. In the early 20th century, it was purchased by the Maharajah of Indore, whose son sold the necklace to Harry Winston. Winston sold the necklace to Mrs. Cora Hubbard Williams of Pittsburgh. She bequeathed it to the Smithsonian in 1972.

Having met an untimely end at the guillotine in 1793, Marie Antoinette loved jewelry and possessed many magnificent jewels. Two large, pear-shaped earrings, part of the Smithsonian collection, were supposedly set in earrings that belonged to Marie Antoinette. The diamonds were later acquired by the Grand Duchess Tatiana Yousupoff of Russia. They were never rested in the 100 years that they were in the family. Marjorie Merriweather Post acquired the earrings in 1928. They were eventually reset in platinum replicas of the original silver settings in the 1950s. The diamonds are originally from India or Brazil.

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About the Author

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