

# GREEN DIAMONDS

*Were you familiar with white, yellow, pink, blue or even black diamonds? Did you know the three traditional colours of gold? Now, they're all turning green.*

*The ever-growing concern for sustainability and transparency has not only won over our plates and wardrobes, it has also conquered our jewellery safes and boxes, initiating the transformation of the whole industry. Marie Fourmeaux went mining for the details...*

The jewellery business has reached a decisive era. It has been facing a new challenge for a few years now: preserving its magic necessarily implies dealing with and tackling the impact of its activities on both the environmental and human levels. Its current rallying cry could be taken from two of the four "Cs" properties of diamonds: colour: green, clarity: flawless and this, from mining to your ring finger.

Ethical jewellery is born, wielding responsible sourcing and traceability as its founding principles.

Emerging and independent designers now structure their core business around the sole use of responsibly sourced materials while historical "maisons" have also been paving the way by designing dedicated ethical jewellery ranges. Chopard is famous for its Green Carpet collection, created back in 2013, which has been enriched every year since then. It consists of a selection of high-jewellery pieces, made exclusively from ethically sourced gemstones and gold. Since July 2018, the jeweller has committed to work with fair trade gold only.

On another level, Swarovski and De Beers have opted to build their sustainable collections around

lab-grown diamonds and gemstones. Responsibility and sustainability have unquestionably become an integral component of the identity of jewellery brands and of their corporate values, but have also been turned into a marketing strategy and a business opportunity.

If ethical jewellery is a reality, it is still, however, very much a work in progress. Actions have multiplied and are still multiplying in an effort to secure responsible sourcing and transparent chains of custody.

The Responsible Jewellery Council (RJC), a not for profit organisation and leading authority in this area, has set international standards and business practices aiming at establishing responsible sourcing and transparency "from mine to retail". Created in 2005 on the initiative of some giants of the industry like Rio Tinto and historical



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jewellers like Cartier and Tiffany & Co amongst others, its corpus of rules must be abided by all its members, having been awarded the RJC certificate after an independent audit, and said members being professionals intervening on all levels of the supply chain.

“The COP (Code of Practices) provides a common standard for ethical, social, human rights and environmental practices (...). COP certification provides a strong system for assuring stakeholders, shareholders, customers and business partners that a company conducts its business responsibly. (...)”. Originally applying to the trading of precious metals and diamonds, it has been extended since 2019 to include rubies, sapphires and emeralds in its spectrum.

If it does not yet encompass all gemstones within its scope (though this new expansion is currently under consideration), the RJC generated a system initiating a virtuous circle where, for example, jewellers have the opportunity to select only duly certified business partners to acquire diamonds or precious materials. Also, for individuals keen on buying sustainable jewellery, the RJC made a list of jewellers, which have been granted its label publicly accessible on its website.

As far as responsible sourcing is concerned, many initiatives



have been implemented by key players. These ensure that mining activities, whether they concern diamonds, gemstones or precious materials, are carried out in a way that minimises or mitigates their adverse impact on the environment. They also secure safe working conditions, social and labour rights for miners, as well as a decent wage, and collaborating with and partaking in the development of local communities and banning child labour.

For example, Gemfields, an emerald, ruby and amethyst supplier, commits to collecting the seeds of the plants unearthed by mining activities in a seedbank.

They will grow in order to be replanted after mining. Schools and medical facilities are also being built to ensure the welfare of locals.

On the other hand, the Diamond Producers Association (DPA), which gathers 75% of the diamond producers in the world, specifies that “potential members have to demonstrate that they meet stringent sustainability standards (...)” as a prerequisite to be affiliated to the association. As for gold, two labels have been created – Fairmined and Fairtrade – which both commit to preserve small scale and artisanal gold mining. They have been granted the RJC responsible seal of approval respectively in 2014 and 2017.

However, sourcing materials in an ethical way is just one part of the process. Another aspect to ensure fully responsible jewellery lies in transparency and traceability – namely knowing the origin of the material and the ability to track its chain of custody by following and documenting its changes of ownership, all along its journey to the final customer.

Given the number of intermediaries involved, the odyssey of diamonds, precious metals and gemstones can be made as intricate as the corridors of a mine. Numerous processes have been put into place implicating not only the protagonists of the





industry but also governmental bodies, but they remain somehow fragmented either by their scopes, which are very specific (some apply to precious materials exclusively, others to diamonds, others to coloured gemstones), the authority in charge or date of implementation.

Mining firms Muzo and Gemfields took to provide certificates, establishing, in particular, the origin of the gemstones they produce. Another example is the Kimberly Process, which has been enforced by states and governments since 2003. It applies solely to rough diamonds and aims at eradicating “conflict diamonds” from the market (currently “rough diamonds used by rebel movements or their allies to finance armed conflicts aimed at undermining legitimate governments.” The extension of the definition of “conflict diamonds” is currently under consideration so as to encompass “all forms of systemic violence, including those carried out by state and private security forces”).

The Chain of Custody Certification implemented by the RJC since 2012 deals exclusively with “gold and platinum group metals”. More recently, the development of new technologies has allowed some gemmological laboratories and jewellers to set up a blockchain system, which is also used by luxury houses to assure the traceability and, therefore, the authenticity of their products. The blockchain consists of “a system for storing data in which groups of valid transactions, called blocks, form a chronological chain, with each block securely linked to the previous one”, according to an



article by Laurent E. Cartier, Saleem H. Ali and Michael S. Krzemnicki in *The Journal of Gemmology*. De Beers has launched its very own blockchain system for diamonds, Tracr, in 2017.

The quest for sustainable and ethical jewellery has led to new business opportunities. The most emblematic of all is undoubtedly laboratory grown gems and diamonds. Could they be the answer to ensure an industry free from causing any adverse environmental impact and ascertain the origin and traceability of gemstones?

While it took millions of years to grow a natural diamond or gemstone, an artificial one takes only a few weeks in the making, or rather, in the baking, when you consider the very high temperatures to which they are submitted to be created. Synthetic diamonds and gemstones show the exact same properties as actual, mother-earth grown ones. In addition to seducing clients concerned with ethics and sustainability, they provide another convincing argument: their attractive price. For instance, De Beers which has its own range of lab-grown diamonds, Lightbox, sells them at \$800 per carat... a real bargain!

If synthetic diamonds shouldn't raise any controversy over the social and human context in which they are produced, it seems they may not be the environment's best friends. Indeed, very recently, several laboratories growing diamonds have been called to order by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for using the terms “eco-friendly” or equivalent as a



selling argument which, according to said commission, was misleading, given the environmental impact of this technique, using very high-temperatures.

Also, no later than May 2nd, 2019, Trucost, a subsidiary of S&P global, issued a report following a consultation commissioned by the Diamond Producers Associations (DPA), stating that, even if, historical mining companies should increase their use of green energy, naturally sourced diamonds had a less adverse environmental impact than their lab-grown counterparts. Blimey! A bit difficult to swallow when you're a consumer who, on ethical grounds, kissed the magic and prestige of actual diamonds goodbye... I don't know about you, but I would turn green with disappointment.

If it appears there is still work to be carried out to unify and extend the scope of the processes relating to traceability in order to meet with clients' ever-growing demands for transparency, the industry has undoubtedly begun a transition from which there is no turning back.

The future will tell what its real impact will be, especially on how jewellery, as we know it, will be perceived. Particularly, it will be interesting to witness how lab-grown gems might impact the prices of natural ones even if some houses are playing on both sides of the fence, offering both natural and synthetic diamonds and gemstones to their clientele.

Reference the 2019 RJC Code of Practices here:  
[www.responsiblejewellery.com](http://www.responsiblejewellery.com)