

Aurora Dazzle

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The Aurora Collection of 260 natural colored diamonds is one of the most spectacular exhibits in the Morgan Hall of Gems at the American Museum of Natural History. And while one would expect that it was assembled by a scientist or museum curator, that is not the case. Instead it was a labor of love by collector Harry Rodman, who turned 91 at the turn of the millennium.

“The idea of putting a collection of colored diamonds together fascinated me from the scientific and educational point-of-view. The picture we were trying to paint is like a Van Gogh. It will last forever. We decided to call it the Aurora Collection because it is unusual like the Aurora Borealis,” comments Rodman.

Rodman, the son of a Russian immigrant fine jeweler and metalsmith, got his start in the jewelry industry when he went to work in a metal refinery that his father and brother had started. In 1942, Rodman entered the army as an infantryman and fought in the D-Day battle. He returned to New York in 1945 where he and his cousin started a gold refinery — Rodman & Yarriss — on 47th Street.

“At first it was a struggle to make a living. The business grew to \$40 million a year and in 1983 we decided to sell it,” says Rodman.

Retirement

Now that he was “retired,” Rodman had more leisure time on his hands and began buying and appraising jewelry. He met colored diamond dealer Alan Bronstein, who invited him to his office, where Rodman began helping him with the business. It was then that Rodman fell in love with colored diamonds. Bronstein had started buying colored diamonds to create a comparison set. Each stone was bought for its rarity and beauty and because it was the best specimen of its kind. Bronstein suggested starting a collection and the 18 year treasure hunt for the best colored diamonds was on.

“I thought what difference does it make if I have my money in the bank or in diamonds?” recalls Rodman. “The Aurora Collection is 260 diamonds; all of the colors that come in nature. It is the best specimens together.”

The gems were found in a variety of places, some pinks came from the Argyle Pink Tender. Other diamonds were purchased at auctions at Christie’s and

Sotheby's. The search for the best of the rarest diamonds took Rodman to Geneva and Antwerp to see diamonds he had heard about, or in some cases on an exploratory mission to track down diamonds that were hidden away in vaults.

"I would go to see if there was something there. Dealers often keep colored diamonds as collectibles, but sometimes they would be willing to sell," recounts Rodman who also used his expertise to buy stones for others.

Museum Treasure

The Aurora Collection landed at the American Museum of Natural History when some contacts of Bronstein's at the museum expressed interest in exhibiting it. In addition to being in residence in the Morgan Hall of Gems, the collection was displayed as part of De Beers' "Nature of Diamonds" exhibition that was at the American Museum of Natural History for over a year and the collection later traveled to the San Diego Natural History Museum with the De Beers exhibition. It is now scheduled to go with the "Nature of Diamonds" exhibition to the National Science Museum of Japan in Tokyo.

"I decided to loan the collection for one year. It's now been there for ten years," says Rodman. "The goal was to show the world that diamonds are a natural, beautiful object."

Once the collection was complete, Bronstein and Rodman decided that it would be a good idea to document it in case it was ever broken up. The documentation became a 738 page book — "Collecting and Classifying Coloured Diamonds" — authored by gemologist Stephen C. Hofer, who spent eight years researching and writing the book. The tome features color photos by gem photographer Tino Hammid along with illustrations.

"The book ensures that the collection will stay together. It shows the beauty of the stones and educates the world," notes Rodman.

While Rodman acknowledges that each of the gems in the Aurora Collection has its own special beauty, he is particularly fond of one.

"One of my favorites is the chameleon diamond, which changes color. When it is in the safe in the dark for a couple of days and then gets taken out, it goes from yellow to olive green."

While there have been some occasions when Rodman was tempted to sell diamonds from the collection because of the profit, he has chosen not to sell, but to keep the collection together.

"I enjoy owning it. While it's not for sale, if someone wanted to buy it, or donate it to the museum I wouldn't be adverse to the idea. It has to go to someone who

will appreciate it," concludes Rodman.