

Re-inventing antiques: Is this an acceptable face of gem vandalism?

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What some call improvement others call vandalism. This applies not only to facelifts and buildings but to antique gems and jewels.

Geoffrey Munn, managing director of London jeweller Wartski, compares “demolishing an antique jewel to cutting an oil painting down to size”. Many collectors, dealers and art historians believe such pieces should never be touched.

“You have a duty of care with historical jewels and gems,” says Derek Content, a private dealer in ancient jewellery.

Pieces that have survived intact for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years, should be passed to future generations untouched. Although this was not the case with the Wittelsbach diamond, which was recut, the market sometimes comes to the aid of this principled ideal.

A woman who inherits great grandma’s **Tiffany** sapphire brooch may feel it would be more wearable if taken apart and made into a pair of earrings. She may reconsider on learning that the “old-fashioned” whole may be worth rather more than the sum of its parts.

Tiffany, Cartier, Van Cleef and Castellani are among the makers whose early pieces are in demand, provided they are intact.

“There is a band of collectors to whom original condition is paramount, and rightly so,” says Mr Munn. If collectors will not buy jewels that have been altered, top dealers will be disinclined to handle them.

An act as seemingly trivial as resizing an antique ring can sharply lower or even destroy both its historic and monetary value. This is particularly true of jewels having an important provenance. Royal or aristocratic connections – or their latter-day celebrity equivalents – are about as impressive as provenance gets.

At a Christie’s auction, Robert Procop, chief executive of Asprey, bought an emerald-set ring that had been a coronation gift from Queen Victoria to her maid of honour. Inside were the date, the Queen’s initials and a lock of her hair. Mr Procop bought it for his “beloved”. Alas, the ring did not fit. “I would not have it resized,” he says. “It would lose its power to evoke its original wearer and the Queen who gave it to her.”

Mr Procop is not always so faithful to the past, however.

In 2000, Hilary Swank asked if she could borrow a dazzling antique necklace to wear to the Academy Awards. Not long before, Asprey had bought back a diamond tiara the company made in 1890. Its frame had deteriorated; its provenance was undistinguished.

Mr Procop decided to plunge ahead. The jewelled elements from the tiara became the necklace Hilary Swank wore when she collected her first Oscar. Images of the event flashed round the world, followed by a stream of inquiries about the necklace. It sold quickly.

The tiara would have been priced at \$125,000; the necklace went for twice that. Few outside the

company knew or cared that an antique jewel had been transformed to create the piece.

But “everybody” seemed to care when Laurence Graff recently recut the exceedingly rare, 17th century blue diamond known as the Wittelsbach.

In 2008, Christie’s announced it was going to auction the 35.56 carat gem. The auction house wrote that it had “all that one looks for in a gemstone or indeed a work of art: history, royal provenance, exceptional beauty and original condition”.

All coloured diamonds are rare; blues rarest of all. Very, very few important diamonds date back hundreds of years. This one has multiple royal provenances, too. In 1664, Spain’s King Philip IV is said to have given it to his 15-year-old daughter, the Infanta Margarita Theresa, as part of her dowry.

Margarita Theresa, aged five, is the little girl at the centre of Velazquez’s painting “Las Meninas”. Christie’s coupled images of this, one of the world’s greatest paintings, with one of the world’s greatest gems when advertising the auction. (“The Great Blue Diamond” as it was once known became the Wittelsbach in 1722 when it passed into the Royal House of Bavaria where it remained until in 1918.)

Mr Graff paid \$24.3m for the Wittelsbach; a world auction record for any gem or jewel. He called it “a bargain”. His plan was to recut it, thereby improving its colour and fire, and then sell it on.

Within months, the diamond was more than three carats lighter. Its grey tinge had been removed and it gained a flawless rating. It is now on a six-month loan to the Smithsonian Institution where it is displayed alongside the 45-carat, deep blue Hope Diamond, the late Harry Winston’s gift to the nation.

The Smithsonian does not usually accept loans. However, geologist Jeffrey Post, curator responsible for this one, is ecstatic about the beauty of this gem and the opportunity it gives the public and scientists to compare these two, great blue diamonds. He suggests that its recutting amounted to a tidying up of chips and scratches. But 3.5 carats is a lot of diamond to remove and tidying is not the way a flawless reclassification is achieved.

Alan Bronstein of Aurora, coloured diamond specialists, is more forthcoming. He saw the Wittelsbach before and after the recutting and says: “It absolutely does not look as it did before. It has a degree of modernisation necessary to get more colour and brilliance out of the stone.”

Mr Bronstein is describing, not criticising, what has been done. “I don’t think Mr Graff sacrificed the personality or history of the stone in cutting it away,” he says.

Laurence Graff would not be called “the King of Diamonds” if he did not have extraordinary marketing skills. The recutting and the Smithsonian display have attracted considerable attention. But applause and delight have not been the only reactions to the recutting.

“It was hubris,” says Inez Stodel, a noted Amsterdam antique jewels dealer. Fritz Falk, retired director of the Jewellery Museum of Pforzheim, writes in an e-mail: “Maybe it looks more brilliant after recutting, but it has definitely lost its authenticity. The stone was part of European history, related to famous families and their official and private lives. The ‘new’ stone – as I see it – is not the Wittelsbach any more.”

Two experts, who asked to remain anonymous, described the act as “criminal”. That is metaphorical only. Unlike real estate, historic jewels are not protected by preservation laws.

The diamond has been rebranded as the Wittelsbach-Graff. But can its owner have it both ways? In removing carats, has he also removed its links to the past? Well, what if he has?

Does it matter if today the stone is livelier and therefore more attractive to certain potential buyers? Is history more important than striving for perfection; than profit?