

All That Glitters: The Splendor and Science of Gems and Minerals

San Diego Museum of Natural History, May 15, 2010 to April 2012

The San Diego Museum of Natural History is currently playing host to a wonderful exhibit entitled "All That Glitters: The Splendor and the Science." Expertly weaving together the story of mineral utility with gem studded jewelry glamour exhibit curator Elise Misiorowski draws gemstones, mineral specimens and jewelry pieces from more than 30 lenders to create a masterful tale.

On entering the exhibit the visitor is greeted by the Balboa Park Carousel Egg, an enameled musical replica in miniature of a popular attraction at the San Diego park, depicting in detail each of 56 hand carved animals that populate the actual carousel. Facing the Carousel Egg is a display of stone intarsia boxes across from a window onto the Aurora Butterfly of Peace, a display of roughly 240 fancy color diamonds that took 12 years to assemble. The butterfly is viewed under alternating fluorescent and ultra-violet light sources to best display the remarkable color range and fluorescence of these rarest of the rare gemstones.

Exhibit labels are in both English and Spanish to cater to the large Hispanic population indigenous to the San Diego area and with displays that appeal to a wide age range. Children can look in the birthstone case to see which gemstones are assigned to which month; an alphabet of diamond letters spells out "SAN DIEGO" and there are many touchable exhibits, like the giant California jade boulder and the iron meteorite with etched Widmanstätten lines on its surface. Large wooden examples of the six crystal systems are also accessible to curious hands and are shown next to actual large natural crystals that display the same crystal form. One exhibit wall is a photograph of the giant selenite crystals found in the caves at Naica, Mexico with orange jump suited miners showing the scale of these massive bladed crystals. The exhibit is sprinkled throughout with realistically carved animals such as a Fabergé' chalcedony pig with diamond eyes in one case and the opal and diamond jellyfish brooch by Mauboussin in another. A recurring theme in the exhibit is butterflies, including a collection of thirteen butterfly brooches composed of rare gemstones.

Interactive displays are present in the form of a flat-screen of the periodic table

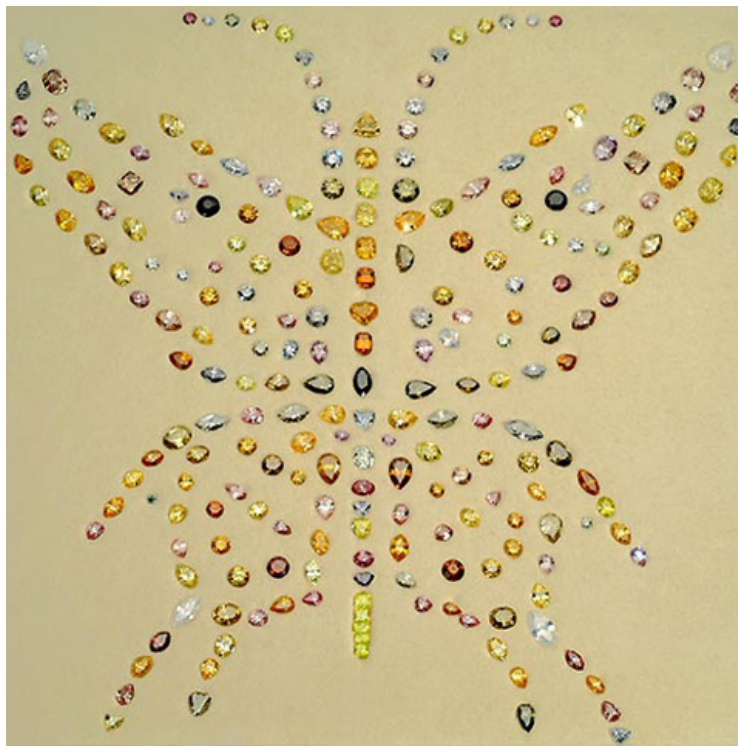
that is tied to displays of native metals so when a button in front of a particular metal is pushed, the element that mineral is composed of is displayed on the flat screen and where it came from in the periodic table. Another flat screen demonstrates time lapse photography of crystal growth on a wall behind cases explaining the formation of synthetic home-grown gems. Ingeniously placed behind a mock tunnel replete with real ore truck is a continuously running film of a family exploring the local Himalaya Mine and showing pocket formations. On the other side of the tunnel wall is an "assembled" pegmatite pocket behind glass displaying actual gemmy crystals as they might be found in the pocket.

A primary theme of this exhibit is gemstones and minerals of California. An entire case is devoted to the story of pink tourmaline from the local Pala District of San Diego County and how it was exported to meet the passion for pink (and to fill the coffers) of the Chinese Empress Cixi in the early years of the last century. Separate cases tell the story of California's gold finds and of the state gemstone, benitoite. A dark blue beauty, benitoite only occurs in gem form at one source in San Benito County, California. The crystallography of benitoite was hypothesized long before actual benitoite crystals were ever found.

Another room of the exhibit contains cases of specific gemstones or groups of gemstones with rough and cut examples as well as designer jewelry that is set with gemstones. The jade case displays a whimsical pair of fu dogs with tael of coins draped over their backs; the organics case contains another Fabergé' carved

pig, this time in coral and with baby piglets in tow. A central case contains a portion of a collection of hand carved bowls by local lapidary George Ashley in numerous agate and chalcedony patterns and colors. Another central case displays a life-size smoky quartz skull carved by Harold Van Pelt that looks just right alongside the carved agate skeleton of a life-size human hand.

At the end of the exhibit is a small room with a mirror on a counter. In front of the mirror are exhibited three necklaces that



appear to be worn by the viewer in the mirror. Now, that is my kind of interactive exhibit!

The flow of this exhibit is excellent; you never feel overwhelmed by the information presented to you and cases and models are placed so that it invites you to investigate further. The lighting is superlative and hard won for a detailed exhibit like this. An exceptionally rich and educational exhibit such as this informs without tiring. Besides that it is a lot of fun to view. I've only hit on some of the highlights, you'll just have to come and see the rest for yourselves!

Reviewed by Jo Ellen Cole, GG