

The blue curse, story of a carbon crystal

Diamonds are crystals of carbon formed in rocks by time and fire. The term “diamond” derives from an ancient Greek word meaning untameable, indestructible. They form in the lithosphere, 140-190 kilometres below the earth’s surface where the temperature may reach as much as 1,300 degrees Celsius and the pressure exerted by the rocks is 50,000 bars, that is 23,000 times that of the air in a car tyre.

On the first floor of the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institute, there is a very special exhibit, unlike any other on the Earth: it is the Hope Diamond, also known as the French Blue.



Hope Diamond. Credits: Wikipedia

It is a deep blue stone, set in a pendant encircled by clear diamonds. Its inestimable value is not so much determined by its size, since it weighs only 45.52 carats, that is just over 9 grams, as by its absolute beauty and by its centuries-old, disturbing history. The Hope Diamond is reputed to carry the most powerful curse on the planet. It was discovered in the mines of Golconda, in Southern India, a city that is now in ruins but which was once synonymous with prosperity, so rich was it due to diamonds. Initially this diamond was enormous: a blue stone weighing 115 carats, or 23 grams. According to legend, it was one of the two eyes of a statue of a very powerful and vindictive Indian god. In 1642, when a French gem merchant removed it from the head of the statue, the god was angry and cursed the diamond for all eternity. Anyone who touched the stone would come to a bad end. And no one knows if it was just by coincidence or due to the curse, but many did indeed die. When he returned to France, the merchant himself fell on hard times and died. The diamond came into the possession of King Louis XIV, better known as the Sun King. The King, who had it cut into a heart shape, halving its weight, died an old man but of an atrocious death, as did his successor Louis XV, who inherited his throne, the jewel and the curse. Marie Antoinette had it made into a pendant but the diamond was separated from the neck of the unfortunate queen along with her head when, during the French Revolution, she was guillotined together with her husband, King Louis XVI. During the tumults of the revolution, all trace of the diamond was lost and it is said that many rogues who had the misfortune to own it, came to a sticky end. But this is just legend. The first reliable documents are dated 1839 when the diamond was purchased by an English nobleman, Lord Hope, who named the diamond after himself and had it cut to its current size. The Hope family fell on hard times and was forced to sell the diamond. It then went through many hands, other people died in circumstances that were sometimes gruesome until it was finally bought by Pierre Cartier, the famous jeweller. Cartier sold the stone to Edward McLean, a rich American who was the owner of the Washington Post, one of the most important daily newspapers in the United States. After the McLean family was

wiped out in a series of accidents and suicides, the diamond was sold to Harry Winston, the best-known jeweller in America, known as the King of Diamonds. When Marilyn Monroe sang that “Diamonds are a girl’s best friends”, in one verse of the song she addressed a plea precisely to Winston, the King of sparkling stones.

In 1958, Winston donated the gem to the Smithsonian Museum where it is still on show in a thief-proof case. Winston sent the gem to the Museum by normal registered mail: the brown paper package that contained the inestimably valuable stone, is now displayed with all its postmarks and stamps in the Museum together with the legendary blue diamond.

By Andrea Bellati