



Legend of the Rock:  
A Two Thousand  
Year History of the  
Diamond





# Introduction



When we think "[diamond](#)", we think about wealth, status, glamour and romance. But throughout history, the diamond has been associated with everything from magic, to power, to protection. The history of the diamond is a long and magical one, starting from ancient Greeks and Egyptians and ending on your ring finger.

The word "diamond" comes from the Greek "adamao," or "I subdue," referring not to a chauvinist attitude towards marriage (we hope), but to the diamond's hardness and its ability to scratch any surface without being scratched. The word "adamas" was used for diamonds for centuries, although it is not always clear that gem being referred to was actually diamond, or if it was sapphire, the next hardest mineral.



# Diamonds in the Ancient World

No one knows exactly who discovered the first diamond. Chances are, that person did not stumble over a chunk of translucent rock sticking out of the ground and exclaim, "Look at the size of that diamond! Someday, it will come to represent the importance of relationships and be worth thousands of dollars a gram!" However it was first discovered, ancient Indian Hindu writings refer to diamonds as the weapons of Indra, the warrior god. Valued at the time both for its exceptional hardness and the flashes of light given off by its natural crystal structure, the ancient Indian word for diamond was similar to the word for thunder and lightning.

The ancient Indians revered diamonds as a gift and tool of the gods. Carrying a diamond was seen as a good luck charm and a protection from threats like poisonous snakes, fire, thieves, or evil spirits. Owning a diamond would ensure that the owner would always have plenty of food, although surely anyone who could afford a diamond would hardly be worrying about food! The rainbow colored brilliance of the diamond was especially valued and it was said that a king who owned a colorless stone that sparkled with all the colors of the rainbow could not be conquered in battle.

Diamonds seem to have mostly religious significance for the ancient Hindus, but they also appreciate the stone's technical properties. Writings from the third century BCE note the octahedron crystal structure of the diamond, its weight, durability, hardness, and symmetry. We don't know if they wore their diamonds in jewelry, but we can see from the holes left in jewelry in grave sites that jewelers were using diamond drills to create holes in other stones and metals as early as the fourth century BCE. Archeologists have found evidence of diamond-tipped drills on artifacts from this time period from Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Yemen, and Egypt.



The ancient Greeks and Romans must have discovered diamonds through their contact with the Indians, but we have no record of exactly when that happened. In the first century BCE, as the Roman Empire was just warming up to be a major world power, diamond rings were used as talismans of good luck and power, much as they were in India. It can be difficult to know for sure which societies did have diamonds because the word for diamond, “adamas,” was also used to refer to other hard gemstones and even iron. Keep in mind, however, that at this time diamonds were not cut and looked nothing like the sparkling gems we know today.



*A large, unpolished stone—this is what ancient societies thought of as a diamond.*

Ancient societies loved diamonds, but they wondered where they came from. Many Indian societies believed that diamonds were a gift of the gods, while Romans said that Zeus had transformed people who did not obey him into diamonds. Thinking somewhat more scientifically, Plato hypothesized that diamonds were “fermentation of the stars,” bits of star matter that had fallen to earth. Today, we believe that some rare diamonds, like black diamonds, may have been produced by meteorite contact, so that hypothesis is not as crazy as it sounds.



The Romans clearly learned a lot about diamonds from the Indians. Pliny, a Roman scholar who wrote one of the first encyclopedias, wrote that diamonds were so hard that they could split the hammer that was used on them. He also included some superstitions about diamond that are probably Indian in origin—that diamonds were an antidote to poison, could prevent hallucinations, and would even soothe anxiety. He also mentions the practice of imbedding tiny diamond chips into tools that could then be used to cut other very hard substances, like engraved sapphires.

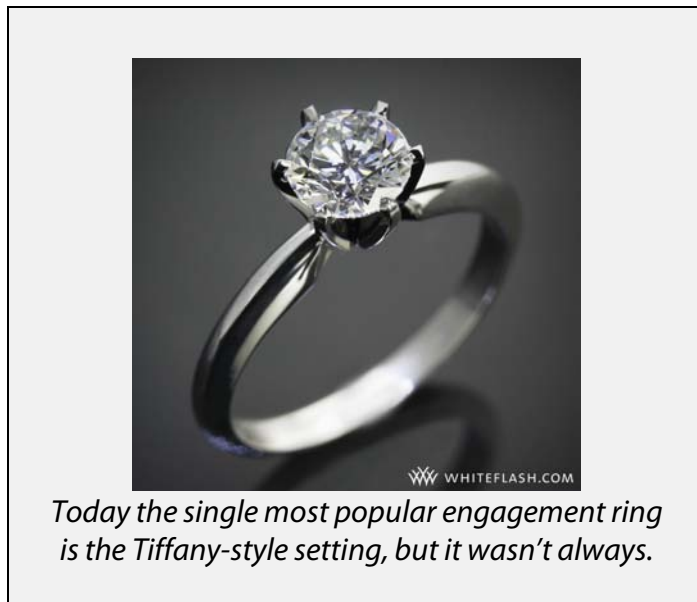
The great philosopher Aristotle quotes a legend about the diamond: The diamond is produced in a valley in India, he wrote, which also contains snakes, which no man can look at without dying as long as they are alive. Alexander the Great, wanting to see the source of diamonds for himself, had a mirror placed in the valley. The snakes were then forced to see their own reflections and died. Still, none of Alexander's men would make the treacherous journey into the valley itself, so Alexander's advisors told him to throw pieces of meat down into the valley, where diamonds would stick to them. Then, when vultures picked up the meat, all his soldiers would have to do is retrieve the diamonds from the carcasses. As fantastical as this legend sounds, it actually refers to a little-known characteristic of the diamond: its ability to stick to fat or grease, a not-so-useful trait for those who get their hands dirty a lot.

The Chinese seem to have gotten diamonds not from the Indians but from the Romans. The Chinese did not wear diamonds as jewelry, but they used them as tools to engrave jade and drill holes in pearls.



# Wedding Rings – A History

Wedding rings were not always the solitaire diamond and gold wedding band we know today, but the history of engagement and wedding rings nonetheless traces far back into history. Urban legend posits that the [engagement ring](#) was created by the Tiffany diamond company as a way to boost profits, but the truth is that engagement and wedding rings have existed in one form or another for over a thousand years.



The oldest wedding rings we have date back to the earliest days of the Roman Empire. Archeologists know these are wedding rings because they have inscriptions of the marriage contract engraved on the inside of the ring. Weddings were made more Christian in the fourth century CE, and wedding rings were adapted to the new religion with inscribed Christian images on the front of the ring.



*Inscribing the inside of the ring a romantic phrase is still popular today, but did you know the Romans started that trend?*

In the seventh century, a bishop, Isidore of Seville, wrote, "It was given by the spouser to the espoused whether for a sign of mutual fidelity of still more to join their hearts to this pledge, and that therefore the ring is placed on the fourth finger because a certain vein is said to flow from thence to the heart."

This is the first reference we have to an engagement ring, a promise of a future wedding, rather than a ring symbolizing the marriage ceremony

itself. Also, the bishop notes that the stone used in these rings was not necessarily so beautiful or valuable, but was mostly as symbol of faith and devotion.



*The tradition of wearing the ring on the fourth finger can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, who believed a vein ran directly from there to the heart.*



As the time between engagement and marriage increased, and betrothals become more complicated, it became traditional to commemorate the pledge to get married as well as the marriage itself.



*Anyone who's ever received a pair of diamond earrings as a gift knows why the Italians call it the "Stone of Reconciliation!"*

Interestingly, the reason cited for the ring to be worn on the fourth finger of the right hand is an ancient Greek one—that a vein runs from there directly the heart—and one we still observe today. The Italians at this time called the diamond the "Stone of Reconciliation," wisely noting the effect that a gift of diamond jewelry can have on the relationship between husband and wife!

All this time engagement rings were becoming more popular, but diamonds were still reserved for the royal classes. Most common people use other precious metals and perhaps gemstones in their engagement rings, but among royalty, some spectacular diamond engagement rings began to emerge. The famous "first diamond engagement ring" was given by the Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian I to Mary, the Duchess of Burgundy, in 1477. We don't really know if this was the first diamond engagement ring or just the first one recorded for posterity, but after this point, we know that diamond engagement rings became more popular.



*What did the first diamond engagement ring look like? No one will ever know.*





# Symbol of Royalty: Diamonds in the Middle Ages

Back in the thirteenth century, the kings of Europe created special laws, limiting the kinds of luxuries the lower classes were allowed to have, ensuring that a prosperous merchant could never be mistaken for a nobleman by accident. It is one of these sumptuary laws, created by King Louis IX of France, that legally prohibits anyone besides the royal family from wearing diamonds.



*Even today, wearing a diamond jewelry piece like this one connotes wealth and power.*

For the next few hundred years, members of the aristocracy, men, women, and children, often wore diamond jewelry or diamonds sewn to their clothing, but the merchant classes were restricted from showing off their wealth with bling until the seventeenth century. At this time, men's jewelry was just as elaborate and ornate as women's; a prince or a duke might wear necklaces, brooches, and several rings, all dripping with gemstones like diamonds, rubies and sapphires. Wearing a diamond was a sign that you were someone special; this attitude has pretty much carried over to the present day as well.

The earliest examples of diamond jewelry feature unpolished diamonds, which are beautiful in their own way, but lack the fire and brilliance of the cut diamonds we know today.



This was partly because people simply did not know how to cut diamonds the way we know today; but partially this can be attributed to a superstitious taboo imported from India (where diamonds were first discovered) against altering the stone, for fear of minimizing its magical properties. Medieval treatises called lapidaries discuss the medicinal properties of various gemstones, and always attribute various powers of antidote and protection to the diamond. This was generally believed until the eighteenth century, and even today, you can find some people who believe in the protective powers of a diamond.



*Even as jewelers began to cut and facet diamonds in the late Middle Ages, these stones were nowhere near as brilliant as the cuts we know today.*

In the Middle Ages in Europe, however, demand for diamonds began to increase, and jewelers began to polish the stone to remove traces of other minerals before setting the stone in jewelry. In the sixteenth century, great advances were made in the technology and art of diamond faceting, which led to even more demand and the use of larger stones.

The diamond cutting industry began in Venice, a busy, prosperous trade city in the Middle Ages. Techniques developed there spread to Paris and Belgium, which was also the source of diamond importation. Since most diamonds were coming from India at this time, they had to be transported over land through the treacherous outer lands of the Ottoman Empire, today's Middle East, until, in 1499, a sea route to India was discovered. A diamond trading center was established on the coast of



India: this was one of the first European outposts in a land that would soon be colonized by everyone from the Dutch to the English.



*Belgium remains a center of diamond production today; here, a gemologist in Antwerp inspects a stone.*

Meanwhile, in India, the increase in diamond production (we don't know exactly at what point mines began to be dug) led to an increase in domestic use as well. The Mogul rule, the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, was a time of prosperity and of art, and during this time, Indian royals and other wealthy Indians saved the best diamonds for their own personal use. The Peacock Throne was an otherworldly masterpiece that included the famous Koh-i-Noor

diamond in its design. When India went to war with Iran in the eighteenth century, however, many of these treasures were taken back to Tehran with the conquering Persians. Many of them are still in Tehran today; the Peacock Throne was unfortunately destroyed.

As art flourished in the later medieval period, the styles of diamond settings became more and more elaborate. In fact, the settings, which included scrolls, angels, military symbols, and religious imagery, became so intricate that the diamonds themselves were no longer the focal point. Enamel is often used prominently on the jewelry, and complex pieces like brooches and pendants dominate.



# Elegance and Quality: Diamonds in the Modern Period

After the year 1600, however, a sharp increase in the size and quality of the diamonds being imported from India leads to the diamonds taking a central role in the jewelry design once again. The use of metal is reduced to the more streamlined settings we know today, and enamel is used only on the back of most jewelry pieces. More geometric design elements, like circles and ovals, are used, as well as shapes taken from nature, like flowers and leaves.



*Simple, streamlined designs starring well-cut diamonds, like this tennis bracelet, begin to emerge in the nineteenth century.*

The earlier, unsophisticated point and table cuts are replaced with rose-cut diamonds, a drastic improvement in fire and brilliance, but still not the light performance we enjoy today. The first brilliant cuts, a precursor to today's round brilliant and [princess cuts](#), appear, and these improvements in diamond cut quality lead jewelers to give the new and improved stone a starring role in their jewelry pieces.

Prior to the development of white gold, jewelers begin to use silver in diamond settings, to avoid the yellow reflections cast by yellow gold.



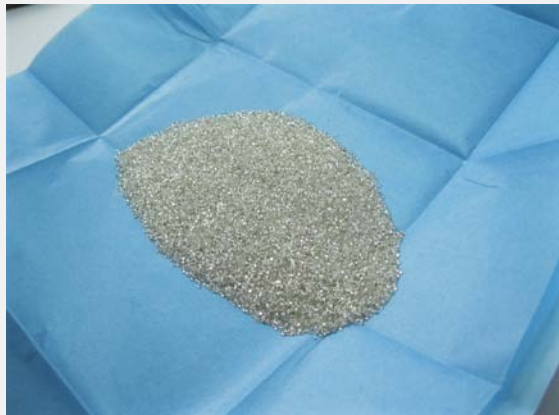
Changing fashions in the eighteenth century took men out of their doublets and tights and into the kind of suits we are familiar with today. This meant that a lot fewer men were wearing jewelry, and diamonds became a “girl’s best friend” starting at this time. The discovery of diamond mines in South America made high-quality diamonds even more accessible to the merchant classes, although changing codes of modesty meant that it was now only considered appropriate to wear diamonds at night, for fear of looking overdressed and vulgar. The bright, complicated hodge-podge of jewelry favored by the medieval monarchs was replaced by something called a parure—a matched set of diamond jewelry.



*The use of platinum allows elaborate, opulent styles like this one to be strong without being too heavy for daily wear.*

Believe it or not, the invention of the light bulb was an important moment in diamond history. In candlelight, many different kinds of gemstones sparkled equally well, but under the new electric lights, diamonds suddenly looked so much more brilliant than any other stone. White gold was developed and platinum discovered at around this time, so jewelers could make pieces that were as valuable as yellow gold but still showed off the brilliance of the new diamond cuts to their best advantage. As more and more diamonds are incorporated into the designs,

platinum becomes valued for its light weight and superior strength.



*It's hard to imagine a million carats of diamonds, never mind the millions produced today.*

The late 1800's mark a drastic shift in the role of diamonds in society. Until that point, diamonds were primarily a fashion for the upper classes, the dukes and princesses. In 1870, the discovery of huge diamond mines in South Africa make diamonds suddenly available to anyone who can afford them, not just the upper classes. In 1871, world annual production of diamonds jumps to over a million carats for the first time in history.

Also, in 1887, a French government seeking to raise funds and distance itself from monarchy sells off the French crown jewels to the new American jeweler, Tiffany and Company. Tiffany's markets the pieces and many others like them to wealthy capitalists in the United States, introducing a whole new level of opulent consumption to that newly prosperous nation. As Americans become more and more wealthy going into the twentieth century, they develop a taste for Old World elegance in the form of extravagant diamond jewelry.



*Dramatic pieces like this pendant, still popular today, are inspired by Jazz Age opulence.*



# Diamonds Today

The urban legend that diamond companies invented engagement rings has some truth to it—solitaire diamond engagement rings were not de rigeur for American couples until De Beers launched their massive “diamonds are forever” advertising campaign in 1938. With this campaign, considered one of the most successful in the history of advertising, the South African-based company, which is still hugely powerful today, indelibly linked the image of a solitaire diamond ring with

romantic images of love and commitment. However, the campaign was only successful because most Americans already had an association with diamond engagement rings, which were already popular among wealthier Americans.



*With four words, the De Beers company forever associated love and romance with this image.*

In the years since, many styles of engagement and wedding rings have been created, from sleek, futuristic styles to ornate pieces that are reminiscent of the Renaissance period. Some classics, however, have stayed around. The Tiffany-style engagement ring setting, a simple prong setting, was developed by Tiffany and Company in the 1880's and

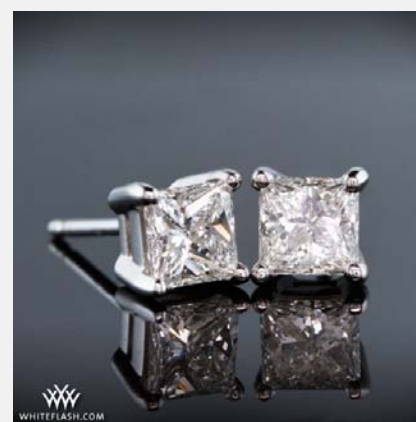
remains the most popular engagement ring style today. New styles are always being developed; the most notable new diamond setting is the tension setting, which uses advanced calibration technology to set diamonds in completely invisible settings.



*The tension-style setting is a new style that is becoming more and more popular.*

But diamonds are not used only in engagement rings. You can find every kind of jewelry, from necklaces to bracelets to hair accessories, with diamond embellishment. Diamond stud earrings have become one of the most popular gifts, and are second only to engagement rings in popularity. Men are taking back the diamond as well—incorporating it into men's wedding bands, watches, cufflinks, and other men's accessories. The men's earring is making a comeback as well. In the hip-hop community, trendsetters like Jay-Z and Kanye West have taken to wearing sizable diamond studs in one or both ears, while fashion experts like Marc Jacobs and David Beckham are seen wearing more modest diamond studs.

Diamonds have been the world's most desirable precious stone for almost as long as civilization has been around. Our view of the diamond hasn't changed much in the last three thousand years—we no longer think that Zeus turned men into diamonds out of anger, and most people no longer think a diamond is an antidote to poison, but we still have an emotional connection to the stone that goes far beyond its physical properties. It has become a symbol of love, and that's why no matter what styles come in or out, no matter how the economy is doing, people will always want diamonds in some form to celebrate the people who matter most.



*Diamond stud earrings – no longer just for women!*