



Dazzle Dutch

Mike Gerrard explores the multi-faceted diamond trade of Amsterdam, from freshly cut stones to marriage proposals

A unique mix of heritage and exquisite craftsmanship is what draws discerning jewellery buyers to Amsterdam.

Peek inside the city's splendid museums and galleries and you'll see evidence of this age-old passion for treasure-making. Among the many fine items in the silver collection of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum is a set of keys to the city, which were presented to Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte when he visited in 1811. The keys were made by Adrianus Bonebakker, a silversmith who founded his company in 1796. His work was so exquisite that Bonebakker received many prestigious commissions, including making the royal crown for the Dutch King William II in 1840.

Back to today, walk 500 metres from the Rijksmuseum and you'll find that the company of Bonebakker still exists and specialises in making bespoke jewellery – particularly diamond engagement rings – for customers all over the world. →

Keizersgracht (Emperor's Canal) in central Amsterdam. **Right:** The design of these Bonebakker diamond rings is inspired by the keys to the city handed to Napoleon in 1811



“People fly in from places like New York to discuss their engagement rings,” says Bonebakker’s owner, Jannie Iwema. “About 30 per cent of our customers are from overseas, and they come here because they want to propose in Amsterdam, with a diamond ring, and they know they’ll get the best quality here.”

According to Jannie, diamonds are graded according to a centuries-old 4C system: carat, colour, cut and clarity. All four factors affect the price, and buyers have to decide which are more important and within their budget.

Perfect diamonds are extremely rare, I learn, in an informative film at the excellent Diamond Museum Amsterdam, alongside the Rijksmuseum and established by one of the world’s leading diamond companies, Coster Diamonds. I discover that 250,000 kilos of rock have

The most popular cut has 57 facets, although Coster’s exclusive signature cut is the Royal 201, a diamond with 201 facets

to be extracted and sifted to provide one carat of diamond. About 110 million carats are mined each year, though only 1 per cent is suitable for jewellery, with the rest going for industrial use.

I’m touring the museum with Pauline Willemse, one of the most famous diamond polishers in the world. She even appears in the *Guinness Book of Records* for polishing the smallest diamond in the world, a record no one has broken in over 20 years. Today she’s got a bigger job on her hands – teaching me

the finer points of diamond cutting and polishing during an exclusive workshop.

After the tour, Pauline sits me down at her workbench and shows me the constantly spinning disc covered in diamond dust, on which she polishes her diamonds. A diamond is the hardest known natural material on Earth and can only be cut by using another diamond. The rotating wheel and the dust help smooth the rough edges down to a perfectly flat surface, as you polish each face – or facet – of the diamond in turn.

The most popular cut has 57 facets, although Coster’s exclusive signature cut is the Royal 201, a diamond with 201 facets. Given that the average diamond is smaller than a peppercorn, it’s an astonishing achievement.

Pauline hands me a holder that grips the diamond and a magnifying glass to see it with. The pinprick of

Clockwise, from top left: Crafting a ring at Gassan Diamonds; Oudezijds Kolk canal; diamond crafting tools; pretty canal houses once inhabited by wealthy merchants and traders



Amsterdam’s diamond heritage

I discovered the fascinating and often sad history of the diamond trade at Gassan Diamonds in the city’s Jewish Quarter, where the story began. During the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula, many Jews from Portugal sought refuge in Antwerp and Amsterdam, the latter which had a reputation for being a liberal city even then. It wasn’t *that* liberal, though, as most trades in the city were controlled by guilds, with Jews excluded. One trade that didn’t have a guild was the diamond business. Many Jews were skilled in diamond cutting and polishing, so they set up shop and made Amsterdam the diamond centre of the world. However, World War II had a catastrophic effect. Before the war there were thousands of diamond polishers in factories all over the city, yet the majority of these Jewish workers were to perish in the Holocaust. The few who survived the war came back first to Antwerp, and later to Amsterdam. Antwerp became the trade centre, and Amsterdam became the consumer centre where visitors still come today to buy diamonds and rings.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

[EXPERIENCE]





“The sound and the feel of the diamond tells me what’s happening”



sparkling light jumps into focus... and just as quickly disappears again.

“Don’t worry,” says Pauline, reassuring me. “It takes six months just to learn how to use the magnifier.”

The fact that the magnifier reverses the image top to bottom and left to right doesn’t help, but I do get occasional glimpses of the rough beauty of a diamond that is already cut but needs to be polished to reach its perfect shining state.

What kind of people come to the diamond workshops? “I’ve had professors, technicians, people whose family members were diamond polishers so they wanted to try it, and people

who want to consider it as a job. One couple had been married ten years but never got a ring, so they did a workshop together to make a diamond for their own ring.”

Next, Pauline shows me how to hold the diamond down against the spinning surface of diamond dust, pressing it surprisingly firmly and listening to the dull metallic grinding of diamond on disc.

“You get a feel for the diamond,” she says, “and each diamond is different. Diamond polishing is in my body. The sound and the feel of the diamond tells me what’s happening, and then you look again, and then you polish again, always polishing and looking.”



When you polish a diamond, Pauline tells me, you lose about 60 per cent of the stone, but it doubles in value. Some of what's lost can be recycled and used as dust to polish other diamonds. It is a fascinating and mesmerising process, which Pauline does for eight hours a day and has been doing at Coster for 27 years.

Passion and dedication of another kind is often what brings customers to the doors of these diamond houses, with purchases often the precursor to a proposal.

"Sometimes we work secretly with the man who wants the ring before he proposes," says Jannie Iwema of Bonebakker. "One of our local customers always came to see us wearing his tennis outfit. He told his girlfriend he would be going to practise his game, but in reality he was coming here to discuss the ring."

Not everyone's plans go smoothly, though, as Jannie explains: "One man came to us hundreds of times to discuss the ring, as he was

very particular about what he wanted. He had booked a romantic dinner where he was going to propose, but on that night his girlfriend said she didn't want to go out. He was saying, 'Please, we have to go to dinner,' but she wouldn't and they had an argument. But it all worked out and he was able to propose another time!"

Most proposals have a happy ending, Jannie says. "Of all the thousands of customers we have had, no one has ever said 'No'. We know because people keep in touch with us. When you have consulted several times over the making of the ring, then you build up a friendship and a bond. It's such an important moment for people in their lives. In fact, we are often the first to know. We'll get an excited call from the guy: 'She said yes!'"

Now that's what I'd call a truly priceless diamond. ■

Singapore Airlines flies daily to Amsterdam, and will be served by the new-generation A350.

Facing page, from top: Diamond and pearl encrusted crown at the Diamond Museum Amsterdam; holding a freshly cut stone at Gassan Diamonds. **Above:** Diamond necklace by Coster Diamonds



Treasure houses

Bonebakker

One of the country's oldest and most respected jewellery houses, its refined interiors (above) match the elegant jewellery found within. bonebakker.nl

Coster Diamonds

Get first-hand experience of the diamond-cutter's life with a tour followed by a basic diamond workshop, after which you receive your own cut and polished diamond. costerdiamonds.com

Diamond Museum Amsterdam

Learn how diamonds are formed and their journey from precious stones to intricate jewellery pieces. diamanmuseumamsterdam.nl

Gassan Diamonds

Besides customising wedding and engagement rings, you can shop for exquisite watches and other jewellery. gassan.com

Romantic settings

W Hotel Amsterdam

Looking to guard your diamond purchase during your stay? Partly set in a former bank, this luxury hotel should be a safe bet. Nothing comes more romantic than the 183sqm Extreme Wow Suite, with its splendid round bed and panoramic views of the Royal Palace. wamsterdam.nl

Restaurant La Rive

One of the most romantic dining options is a private room at the InterContinental Amstel Amsterdam, among the city's oldest and most luxurious hotels. Treat yourself to dinner at the chef's table of its one-Michelin-starred restaurant La Rive or a drink in the Wine Room preceded by a champagne cruise on the canals. amsterdam.intercontinental.com