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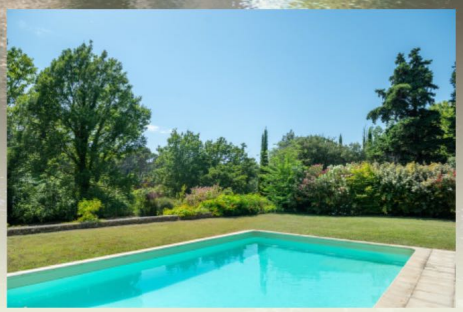

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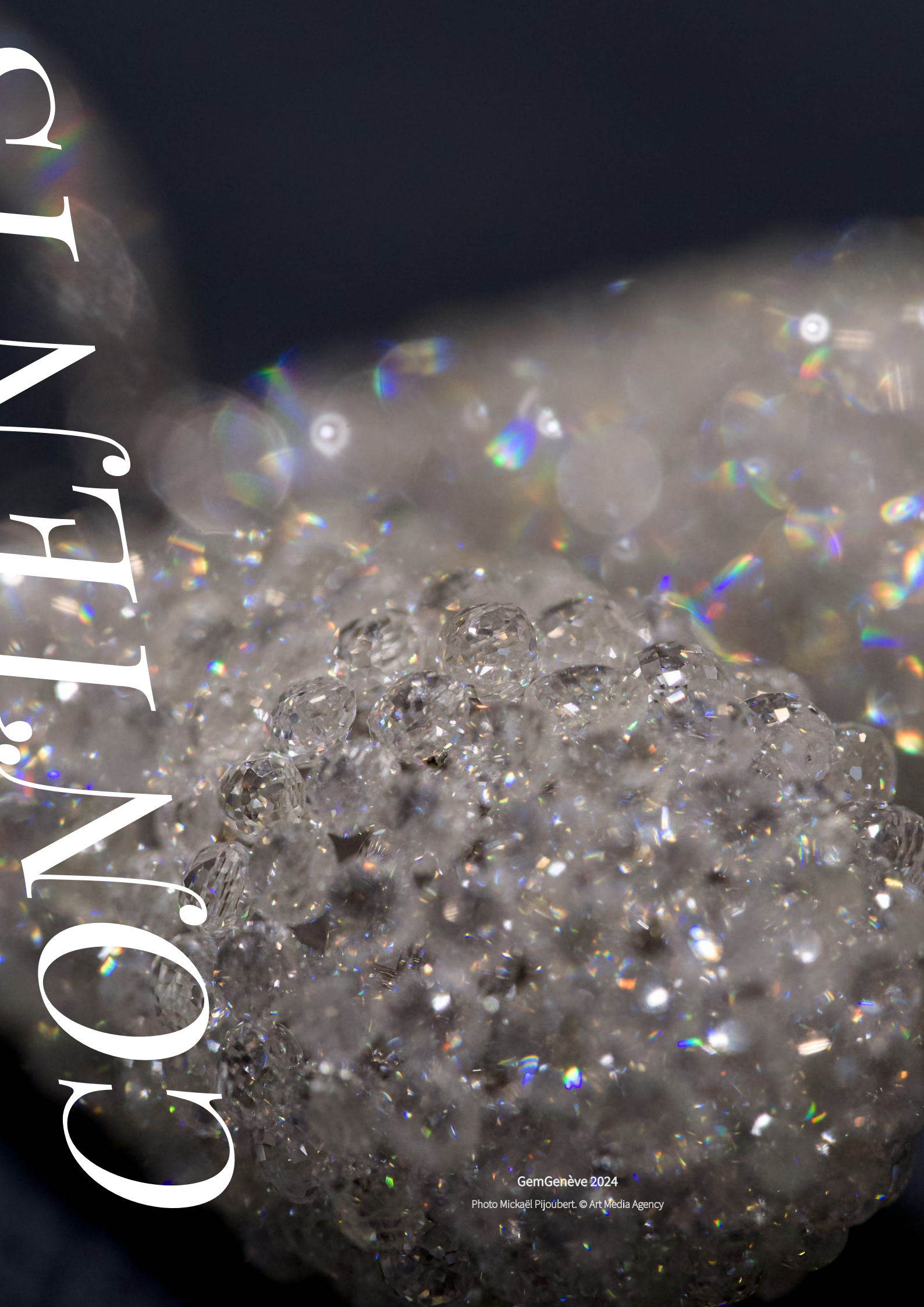


GemGenève 2024

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency

EVEN°T

Hair jewellery with pear and oval diamonds

GEMGENÈVE, 10TH EDITION: COMING OF AGE

From 7 to 10 May, under Hall 2 at Palexpo, GemGenève celebrates its 10th edition — a time to mark an unexpected adventure born of a bold gamble by a small team of enthusiasts. A fair that has taken flight without ever betraying its values or convictions.

9,445 linear metres of jewellery, diamonds and other precious stones. On the eve of its 10th edition celebrations, this striking figure is a reminder that visitors to GemGenève have discovered countless wonders behind the display cases of a fair unlike any other — geared towards professionals yet open to the general public. Far from anecdotal, it above all reflects the challenge taken up by its two founding fathers, Ronny Totah and Thomas Faerber, eminent and respected figures in the industry, who set out to create a fair "for exhibitors, by exhibitors" at the pinnacle of the jewellery arts [see p.22]. Now firmly anchored in the global calendar of major sector events, the fair is reaffirming its distinctive DNA for this 10th edition: to offer a high-value commercial platform, showcase the applied arts, celebrate craftsmanship and support creativity. A hub of innovation and transmission combining trade and culture, unlike anything else.

Launched in 2018, the fair has breathed new life into Geneva, once a major centre for diamond cutting between the 15th and 18th centuries and still synonymous today with excellence in jewellery and watchmaking. Each spring, the city becomes the world capital of fine gemstones and exceptional jewellery, thanks to its major May auctions that have shaped the market since the late 1960s. Founders of GemGenève sought to strengthen the momentum of this ecosystem — a successful bet, as evidenced by attendance of nearly 5,000 visitors last year.

Dealers from around the world

Gem traders, contemporary jewellers, craftspeople, emerging designers, experts, researchers, students, collectors and enthusiasts… To celebrate this anniversary edition, 200 leading dealers from across the globe have answered the call, alongside renowned family firms, museums and cultural institutions, schools, gemmology laboratories and specialist bookshops. From Brazil to the United Arab Emirates, *via* Australia, the 17 nationalities represented underline Geneva's strategic position as a key hub in the global jewellery market [see box p.24]. Representing nearly a quarter of exhibitors, American professionals are returning in force (46 dealers), including New York diamantaires Isaac Davidowits and Paul Fisher, a benchmark name in antique jewellery. Alongside Switzerland (23 exhibitors) and Belgium (22), nearly thirty European exhibitors will also be present: Germany (14), France (8), Italy (3), the United Kingdom (3) and Monaco (1).

— Carine Claude

Asian exhibitors likewise play a central role, with 23 from Hong Kong, 15 from Thailand, 11 from India, five from Singapore and two from Sri Lanka — not forgetting the Middle East, with three dealers from the United Arab Emirates. Finally, as every year, exhibitors from Brazil and Australia have travelled more than 10,000 km to take part. The very best of jewellery gathered for four days under Hall 2 at Palexpo.

Here, hierarchy has no place. From the outset, organisers set a maximum stand size of 60 m^2, a decision driven by the desire to strike a subtle balance between professionals presenting large volumes of goods and family-run houses showcasing their expertise. "To give smaller structures visibility comparable to that of major international dealers, stand sizes were deliberately limited to avoid significant disparities in exhibition space, explains Nadège Totah, co-organiser of GemGenève. This spirit of fairness, I believe, reflects the true DNA of GemGenève." [see box].

Once again, the approach has paid off: loyal exhibitors return year after year — its a retention rate of 43% since the fair's inception — alongside newcomers — 11 for this 10th edition — such as Belgian diamantaires Spectrum, making their debut. "Fresh blood is always welcome, and that is also why we support young people entering the profession," adds co-founder Ronny Totah.

Trend report

GemGenève is also an opportunity to spot trends, guided by the keen eye of exhibitors. Large pearls have been enjoying renewed popularity. "Whether white, grey, black or golden, pearls over 15 mm are currently highly sought-after in Asian and American markets, as well as in Eastern and Central Europe," notes Paris-based dealer Alain Boite, who will attend the 10th edition alongside his sons Thomas and Pierre.

Diamonds, meanwhile, are reinventing their aesthetic codes with unusual shapes and non-standard cuts: cabochon, old mine, vintage cuts, salt-and-pepper diamonds… Stones rich in history and character, presented by Glittering Gems, Poli Trading Company and dealer Dynamic International, which is showcasing an exceptional piece at GemGenève — the largest cabochon diamond ever cut, weighing 12 carats.

As for niche stones, they are highlighted by Belgian jeweller Jochen Leën, a passionate collector of rare gems. "We are currently seeing a significant shift towards diversity and vibrant colours in solitaire jewellery, he says. With our brand, we aim to showcase niche gemstones and minerals." Not to mention recycled stones by lapidary Herbert Stephan, who transforms offcuts of rough stones or gems with slight surface imperfections into cameos.

3 questions to… Nadège Totah

Nadège Totah is co-organiser of GemGenève.

Ten editions of GemGenève — did you imagine this at the beginning?

Honestly, yes — or at least we hoped so! From day one, we have stayed true to the same vision: making GemGenève a meeting platform for exhibitors, designers, schools and craftspeople. We had a waiting list as early as the second edition, and very quickly exhibitors expressed their support and satisfaction — which ultimately shows that we achieved our objectives.

What is the secret of this longevity?

We have never pursued novelty for novelty's sake. The real pleasure is seeing exhibitors return, happy to be there… that is when we know the mission has been accomplished. Our way of working also helps: we are a small team, with no rigid five-year targets. That gives us real agility. A stimulating conversation, and off we go without having to seek approval through multiple layers of hierarchy only to end up with a diluted version of the original idea. That freedom is invaluable.

After ten editions, GemGenève seems to have crossed a threshold, becoming a brand in its own right. What does that change in practical terms?

Yes. It is something we are gradually realising. In recent editions, when people in the jewellery world talk about GemGenève, it is no longer just the name of a fair: it is a concept, a mindset, a certain selectivity. Exhibitors themselves tell us so. And a brand opens doors. It means we can consider extending what GemGenève represents into other contexts, countries or formats — without necessarily creating another fair elsewhere. It would still be GemGenève, with everything that entails. We are only at the beginning of this reflection, but it is an exciting prospect.

GemGenève 2024

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency

Cabochon diamonds

The genius of the hand

Diversity and craftsmanship take centre stage. To celebrate the very first edition of Africa Jewellery Week™ officially launched this year, GemGenève once again welcomes the Jewellery and Gemstone Association of Africa (JGAA). Founded in 2022 by London-based Longo Mulaisho-Zinsner, originally from Zambia, the JGAA actively combats poverty and promotes economic development in Africa through training in jewellery and gemmology. Its mission is to support the African jewellery industry by training artisans, integrating them into a sustainable economic model and offering international prospects, a virtuous, responsible cycle.

3 questions to... Mathieu Dekeukelaire

Mathieu Dekeukelaire is the director of GemGenève.

The fair was conceived from the outset "by dealers, for dealers". Ten years on, is that DNA still intact?

The core concept has not changed. A dealer is not a stand designer; they should not have to think about power sockets or lighting. Their focus should be on their pieces and how to showcase them. Stands are turnkey, dealers are reshuffled each year throughout the fair, and the artistic direction remains understated. We have never veered into ostentation or excess. And even though GemGenève has achieved a certain level of success, we have always managed to remain approachable and humble. We are deeply committed to that founding spirit.

The thematic exhibition has become a highly anticipated feature. What is this year's theme?

For the past four editions, everyone has been asking about the annual theme — visitors, exhibitors, journalists. That is a good sign: it means the cultural exhibition is now firmly embedded in GemGenève. This year's theme is "Shaping matter, enhancing beauty" — raw materials, rough forms, what has been sculpted, polished, abraded or rough-cut [see p.32]. The idea is to encourage visitors to reflect upstream: what gestures, work and constraints were required to achieve such perfection? We will display both mineral materials — onyx, lapis lazuli, jade — and organic ones. With the MAH for the fourth year and the Fondation Baur as a new partner — a magnificent museum of Asian art currently closed for renovation — which is lending around forty pieces from its collection, allowing them to be shown during the works.

GemGenève has often had to adapt — changes of hall, imposed layouts. Have these constraints ultimately been an advantage?

Yes, clearly. The fact that we regularly change halls, that we are forced to rethink everything — layout, side projects — has created something unexpected: a sense of anticipation among visitors. They arrive wondering what we have done this year. It has become a real driving force. And it reflects the way we operate: we are not locked into a five-year plan. That has given us genuine agility. GemGenève has been built this way — not despite constraints, but with them. And I believe that is also why we are perceived as different.

Another new feature is a *Métiers d'art space* within the *Village des savoirs*. Designed to highlight ancestral and artisanal skills, it fosters encounters between the public and master craftspeople from diverse backgrounds. These hand-based professions — rare, little-known and sometimes forgotten — lie at the heart of luxury. Renowned feather artist Nelly Saunier, who has collaborated with Chopard, Van Cleef & Arpels, Harry Winston and Piaget, will present this infinitely delicate art in a talk. Polish artist Alicia Stanska, trained at Lesage, unveils her spectacular crystal-embroidered work with her *Masterpiece* series, while the arts of enamelling and micromosaic are the focus of two thematic exhibitions.

Live during the fair, four independent craftspeople in residence at GemGenève — Rim Bürki, Sonja Petschnig, Félicien Riondel and Matteo Stauffacher — will create a collaborative piece before visitors' eyes, revealing each stage in the making of a jewellery piece. A rare opportunity to go behind the scenes of the workshop and uncover the secrets of jewellery-making. "Celebrating applied arts, in all the diversity of their skills and techniques, has become an obvious priority over the editions, says Ronny Totah. At a time when performance and productivity are often prioritised, even in luxury industries, it seems essential to highlight those who defend another vision of exclusivity. Some jewellery pieces derive their value from the considerable time required to create them and the range of expertise involved. That, too, is what makes jewellery so dreamlike — let's not forget it."

Culture and transmission

A highlight of every edition, GemGenève's major temporary

GemGenève 2025

Photo Mickaël Pijouert. © Art Media Agency

> In a constantly accelerating world, creating spaces for transmission and meaning is, in our view, a responsibility. — *Mathieu Dekeukelaire*

cultural exhibition focuses this year on gesture and artisanal excellence with "Shaping matter, enhancing beauty", exploring how raw matter is transformed by hand into luxury objects. "The exhibition illustrates processes of transformation — materials that have been sculpted, polished, abraded or rough-shaped to understand the gestures, the work and the constraints required to achieve such perfection in the final piece," explains Mathieu Dekeukelaire, director of GemGenève [see box p.15]. He continues: "This cultural and educational ambition contributes to the credibility, longevity and identity of GemGenève. In a fast-moving world, creating spaces for transmission and meaning is, in our view, a responsibility."

In partnership with Fondation Baur – Museum of Far Eastern Art [see box p.39], the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire of Geneva (MAH) and the Geneva Museum of Natural History, the exhibition brings together around a hundred pieces from institutional and private collections, including those of exhibitors such as the Faerber Collection, Nicolas Torroni and Ernst Färber. Cameos, Qing-period nephrite vases, ceramics, intaglios, Art Deco vanity cases… Through this eclectic selection, the exhibition offers a panorama of the extraordinary diversity of organic and mineral materials shaped by skilled hands — some of which are now subject to strict regulations concerning protected species, such as horn, ivory, tortoiseshell or coral [see p.48].

This commitment to transmission is also reflected in the spotlight on schools and training institutes for the applied arts during GemGenève. Graduating students from HEAD (Geneva University of Art and Design) are taking part in the workshop "An American in Paris" in collaboration with the Grand Théâtre de Genève. Inspired by its programme, students worked under the direction of designer Valentina Brugnatelli on the theme of costume jewellery. Their mission? To reinterpret a pre-war brooch, imagine a contemporary stage jewel and produce it in the material of their choice. Visitors are then invited to vote for their favourite creation, with the winner receiving the "Public's choice award".

Expertise and education also feature in a rich programme of talks, discussions and round tables exploring practices, techniques, the jewellery ecosystem, history and the market [see box p.24]. Ivory, the valorisation of private collections, jade [see box p.34] and cameos are among the topics discussed. Leading specialists are expected, including Alice Minter, curator of the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection at London's Victoria & Albert Museum; Jean-Baptiste Clais, curator at the Louvre responsible for Asian collections and porcelain within the Department of Decorative Arts; and Pauline d'Abrigeon, curator at the Fondation Baur. Regular contributors to GemGenève, the gemmologists of the Association Gemmologie et Francophonie — who produced the identification sheets for the stones featured in the temporary exhibition — will provide scientific insight and answer questions from mineralogy enthusiasts during their talk on 8 May.

More than a fair, a brand

This 10th edition marks a milestone in the GemGenève story. From one iteration to the next, the and values championed by the small, agile organising team have earned the approval of the wider ecosystem. Some exhibitors would even welcome the event's expansion abroad. "We are not there yet, but over the past three editions, it is fair to say that GemGenève has become a brand, in the sense that people in the jewellery world understand what the name represents: a certain concept, a certain spirit, a certain selectivity and a certain quality of organisation," observes director Mathieu Dekeukelaire, before concluding: "It is a form of market recognition."

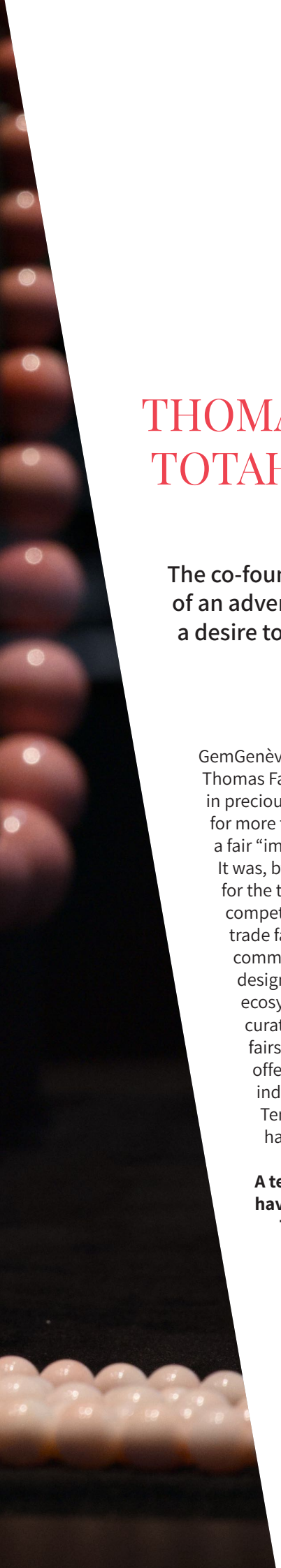
Mathieu Dekeukelaire

Photo David Fraga. Courtesy GemGenève

INTERVIEW

GemGenève 2025

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency



THOMAS FAERBER AND RONNY TOTAH: THE GEMGENÈVE SPIRIT

The co-founders of Geneva's high jewellery fair look back on ten editions of an adventure born of friendship, a passion for gemstones and a desire to open up a world long reserved for insiders.

GemGenève is, above all, the story of a challenge. In 2018, Thomas Faerber and Ronny Totah — two Geneva-based dealers in precious stones and jewellery who have known each other for more than forty years — came up with the idea of creating a fair "imagined and designed by exhibitors, for exhibitors." It was, by their own admission, "a slightly mad" undertaking for the two partners who are at once "friends, colleagues and competitors" and who had no prior experience of organising trade fairs. Their concept? To bring together a leading community — dealers, laboratories, manufacturers, designers and buyers — in dialogue with the wider cultural ecosystem of gemstones and jewellery, including experts, curators, historians and booksellers. Unlike other trade fairs, GemGenève is also open to the general public, offering a rare glimpse behind the scenes of a fascinating industry often perceived as the preserve of insiders. Ten editions on, the success and recognition their event has achieved have more than vindicated their gamble.

A tenth edition… was that something you could have imagined when you launched GemGenève?

Thomas Faerber (TF): Honestly, no… or at least, it was never the initial ambition. At the time, the Basel fair was losing momentum [the final Baselworld was held in 2019, Editor note]. My friend Ronny Totah and I decided to take the plunge, despite having never organised a fair in our lives. It was a gamble… almost madness.

Ronny Totah (RT): Not at all. The chances of success were objectively slim — our odds with a bookmaker would have been quite high! In truth, we never even stopped to ask whether it might last. We simply felt that something needed to happen, and that we had nothing to lose by giving it a go. None of it was planned or structured — we set off with the mindset that we had nothing to lose, that we wanted to create an event that reflected who we are and met our needs, without any intention of making money. That was all. It was only gradually that it took shape.

What prompted you to take the leap?

TF: There was a gap to fill. The world of high jewellery deserved a meeting place in Geneva, a city naturally connected to it. Also, Ronny and I share the same passion: for beautiful stones and the remarkable people behind them.

RT: "We began with a simple observation: first and foremost, we were exhibitors. And like all exhibitors, we had at times been frustrated by organisers' lack of understanding at the trade fairs we attended — simply because a professional organiser cannot be expected to grasp the particularities of every sector. We, on the other hand, knew exactly what exhibitors

— Carine Claude

needed, because those needs were our own. The question was not "What do others want?" but "What do we want?" If we were satisfied, others would be too. It is a straightforward logic: there is no need to second-guess others. One simply has to recall one's own frustrations — poor lighting, badly designed display cases, stifling spaces — and set about putting them right.

How does GemGenève stand out from other major fairs?

RT: We know how to listen. That also means being prepared to hear dissatisfaction and to welcome negative feedback, in order to improve what can be improved and open up new perspectives. We meet on Friday mornings to exchange views. This forum also provides an opportunity to discuss the future, to ask exhibitors about their expectations and to take the pulse of the market. The fair exists because exhibitors want it to exist… so we do our utmost, together, to make it thrive.

TF: What makes all the difference is that GemGenève is a fair created and organised by exhibitors. That changes everything. Our aim is not to generate large profits as organisers, since this is not our core business. First and foremost, we are dealers, and we wanted to design a fair that truly meets our needs and those of our peers. This philosophy is reflected at every level: in the atmosphere, the transparency and the mutual respect among participants. We know what we are talking about, because we come from the same world.

How has the market evolved since you began your careers?

RT: The major challenge has been the shift towards full disclosure. That is, the requirement for greater transparency in the market, particularly regarding treatments. Until the early 1990s, certain traditional practices were commonly used to enhance the appearance of stones, such as heating. This type of treatment, already mentioned by Pliny the Younger in Antiquity, has continued over the centuries, as evidenced by the writings of Duarte Barbosa in the 16th century. When gemological laboratories began to structure and professionalise, the demand for transparency naturally took hold. It became necessary to communicate differently with clients: to explain treatments, their impact and their value, and to establish relationships based on trust and documentation. It was a genuine cultural shift: moving from a profession in which certain knowledge was passed on orally or considered implicit, to one in which everything had to be clearly stated, documented and certified. The transition was not always straightforward but it was essential. Today, it is an integral part of our profession and forms one of the foundations of trust between dealers, gemologists and collectors.

Talks and conferences

GemGenève has become an essential cultural *rendez-vous* for lovers of art and fine gemstones. Conferences, keynote conversations, round tables, book signings… Since its launch in 2018, the fair has hosted 139 sessions dedicated to the market, gemstone expertise and their history. A veritable audiovisual encyclopaedia of the jewellery industry has been built up since the third edition and is available on digital.gemgeneve.com.

This 10th edition is no exception. Over the four days of the fair, museum curators, specialists and figures from the cultural world take turns on the GemGenève stage. Alongside the exhibition "Shaping matter, enhancing beauty", a round table on jade, moderated by Laurent Cartier of the Swiss gemological laboratory SSEF, brings together Pauline d'Abrigeon, curator at the Baur Foundation [see box p.39]; Jean-Baptiste Clais, curator specialising in Asia and Mughal jade at the Department of Decorative Arts of the Louvre; and Wenhao Yu, former Chairman of Sotheby's Jewellery and Watches Asia department.

Another round table, on the theme "Enhancing private collections: challenges and constraints", gathers leading speakers including Lorraine de Thibault, director of the Servais Collection; Laure Schwartz, director of the Baur Foundation; and Alice Minter, curator of the Gilbert Collection at the V&A Museum. In the field of contemporary design, a discussion moderated by journalist Laura Astrologo Porché on the theme "*Memento mori* in contemporary jewellery" features Lydia Courteille and Stephen Webster [see box p.53].

Numerous authors are also in attendance. Ivory takes centre stage in a conference and book signing to mark the publication of *Ivory, secrets of white gold* (Éditions des Falaises) by Brigitte Serre-Bourret. In a public discussion, Geoffray Riondet and Guilhem Merolle present their first book, *Colombian Emerald / Esmeralda Colombiana*, the result of several years of research and travel in Colombia [see p.40]. Finally, a long-standing partner of GemGenève, the Association Gemmologie et Francophonie once again brings its scientific perspective by hosting a round table on Friday 8 May [see box p.50].

GemGenève 2024

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency

Thomas Faerber

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency

> GemGenève has succeeded in maintaining Geneva's status as a key hub in the international market, while remaining a warm, human-scale event. That balance is part of our DNA, and Thomas and I are proud to have driven a project that meets the expectations of the profession. — *Ronny Totah*

Would you say GemGenève helped to democratise this world?

TF: That was certainly our intention. From the outset, we wanted to open the fair to the general public, not just professionals. High jewellery remains a very mysterious world for those unfamiliar with it. Although, in reality, our audience is still largely made up of insiders and enthusiasts, the intention to open up is there… and it is genuine.

RT: The profession has evolved considerably over the course of my career. It should not be forgotten that our trade is built above all on trust. Today, there are more players, large corporations are more present… and the landscape has changed. Even though the internet, social media and instant messaging keep us connected, relationships are no longer quite the same.

What makes a successful fair?

TF: An ideal fair is one where everyone benefits: exhibitors, visitors and buyers alike. While the primary objective is to generate sales, it is not just about figures. A fair is also an opportunity to build connections, meet new clients and suppliers, raise one's profile and demonstrate one's presence in the market. There needs to be a positive energy. When exhibitors feel understood and listened to, and leave satisfied — both with the business they have done and with the quality of the organisation — then you can say it has been a successful edition.

And in particular for GemGenève?

RT: I believe there are two. The first, as I mentioned earlier, is that we built it on our own experience. We were not organisers, merely dealers among others who wanted to create a fair for ourselves, by ourselves, and for ourselves alone. And as dealers, our priority was for the fair to succeed. That, in turn, fostered a bond of trust, because from the outset I told prospective exhibitors: "If you entrust me with your money and the fair fails, it is my reputation that will suffer, as I am a dealer just like you." The second key is that we are not trying to make money, however easy that may sound. This principle underpins everything that gives GemGenève its appeal. In practical terms, it means we are willing to invest more if it improves the comfort of the fair, even if it costs us more. We leave spaces open, whereas we could fill them with additional exhibitors as we have

Geneva, capital of luxury

A historic stronghold of fine watchmaking, headquarters to leading luxury groups and a hub of international finance, Geneva is a perfect showcase for connoisseurs of precious stones. Several luxury conglomerates have established a presence here, including Kering and Richemont, with its constellation of iconic high jewellery and watch brands — Vacheron Constantin, Piaget, Roger Dubuis, IWC Schaffhausen, Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels. Active in both watchmaking and high jewellery, Chopard is also among the major houses with its own manufacture in Geneva.

Twice a year, the city also hosts major auctions dedicated to watches and jewellery — flagship events that have shaped the sector since the 1960s. Sotheby's has sold jewels belonging to the Duchess of Windsor, Maria Callas and Gina Lollobrigida, as well as the *Blue Moon of Josephine* (US$48.5 million in November 2015, a world auction record for a diamond or more than US$4 million per carat). This year, the American house will hold its spring sale on 12 May, followed by Christie's on 13 May. Other auctioneers are present during this Luxury Week, including Phillips with "The Geneva Jewels Auction" on 11 May at Hôtel Président Wilson.

As natural complements to this rich ecosystem, other specialist fairs have long been established in Geneva, such as Watches and Wonders — formerly known as the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH) —, which has been running for 30 years. Heritage too plays its part. Home to nearly 650,000 objects, the Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève, the largest encyclopaedic museum in Switzerland, holds significant collections of horology, enamelling and jewellery. Meanwhile, the Patek Philippe Museum displays a remarkable collection of around 2,500 watches, automata, precious objects and miniature enamel portraits, offering plenty to admire without breaking the bank.

> I do not wear any jewellery or stones. What moves me is intrinsic quality: a superb emerald and a magnificent amethyst can affect me in the same way if they are exceptional. What leaves me indifferent, on the other hand, is mediocrity — whatever the stone.
>
> — *Thomas Faerber*

a strong waiting list. We also make room for young designers, schools, exhibitions and talks. We use this fair to share our passion and to help prepare the future of our professions. In a sense, we are investing in the future; it is a virtuous circle."

Who are your exhibitors today?

TF: Today, we have a very wide variety of exhibitors: diamond dealers, gemstone merchants, specialists in antique jewellery, contemporary designers… We also host schools and craftspeople. It was important for us to give emerging designers a platform, to showcase them alongside major houses. This diversity creates genuine richness. Beyond exhibitors, we also attract the press, private collectors, students and the next generation of professionals. This provides a complete and vibrant picture of our sector and helps the public better understand a craft that often remains mysterious. In that sense, yes… GemGenève truly brings together an entire ecosystem united by a shared passion.

RT: GemGenève is resolutely intergenerational and that is a strong commitment on our part. We seek to prioritise small and medium-sized entities. Of course we also welcome very large dealers but it is essential to maintain a balance and ensure they coexist with more human-scale businesses.

Do you recognise yourselves in the new generation of dealers?

RT: Fresh blood is always beneficial and that is also why we support young people as they enter the profession. In a way, I do recognise myself in this new generation. They have different ideas, a different approach and often a stronger gemmological and jewellery training, but they share the same respect for their elders. As I once did, they turn to those who are "young a little longer", seeking advice, sharing the challenges they face and asking for guidance. I was once in their position. I had mentors, allies and advisers, and that is undoubtedly what inspired me to pass on my knowledge. That said, I think we were more reserved in my day. Today's young professionals are more outgoing and better equipped than we were to enter the market.

After ten editions, is the GemGenève fair becoming established as a brand?

RT: I believe so, yes. The first time people referred to GemGenève as a brand — around the third or fourth edition — I found it somewhat overstated. But today, I can see that some are trying to use the name, even to organise their own GemGenève elsewhere. So yes, it has become a brand, even a product. Variations could be envisaged — dedicated spaces, boutiques, other fairs — but only if they truly meet our standards. However, it will not be a licensing model, as we cannot entrust our name to just anyone.

You have both written the foreword to a beautiful book on Colombian emeralds presented at the fair [see p.40]**. Tell us more.**

TF: It is a true art book. Interest in coloured stones is immense: diamond dealers, jewellers and collectors alike are all engaged. Among the great classic gemstones, there are three queens: emerald, ruby and sapphire. These gems transcend time without ever going out of fashion; from the Romans to the present day, they have remained at the very heart of the trade. Writing the foreword to this book on Colombian emeralds was a way of paying tribute to one of them.

Are there trends in gemstones or do markets follow different cycles?

TF: The three great classic stones — ruby, sapphire and emerald — as well as diamonds are immune to fashion. Their desirability is structural and timeless. For other gems, however — organic stones, pearls — fluctuations are more pronounced. Fine pearls, which are particularly close to my heart since my grandfather already traded in them, have become extremely rare. They are mainly fished in Bahrain and the Persian Gulf, requiring deep dives and the opening of thousands of oysters before anything noteworthy is found. Pearls of significant size are, in turn, extraordinarily rare. The exceptional nature of these natural beauties has made them objects of royal and imperial desire for centuries. Catherine of Russia was, quite rightly, an avid collector.

Is jewellery a work of art?

TF: There are clear similarities between the world of jewellery and that of art. A beautiful piece of jewellery can be a sculpture one wears. The major exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, marking its centenary, illustrated this brilliantly by juxtaposing high

Matching pair of Rubies from Mozambique

> Some jewellery pieces derive their value from the considerable time required to create them and from the wide range of skills they call upon. That, too, is what makes jewellery so dreamlike — let us not forget it. — *Ronny Totah*

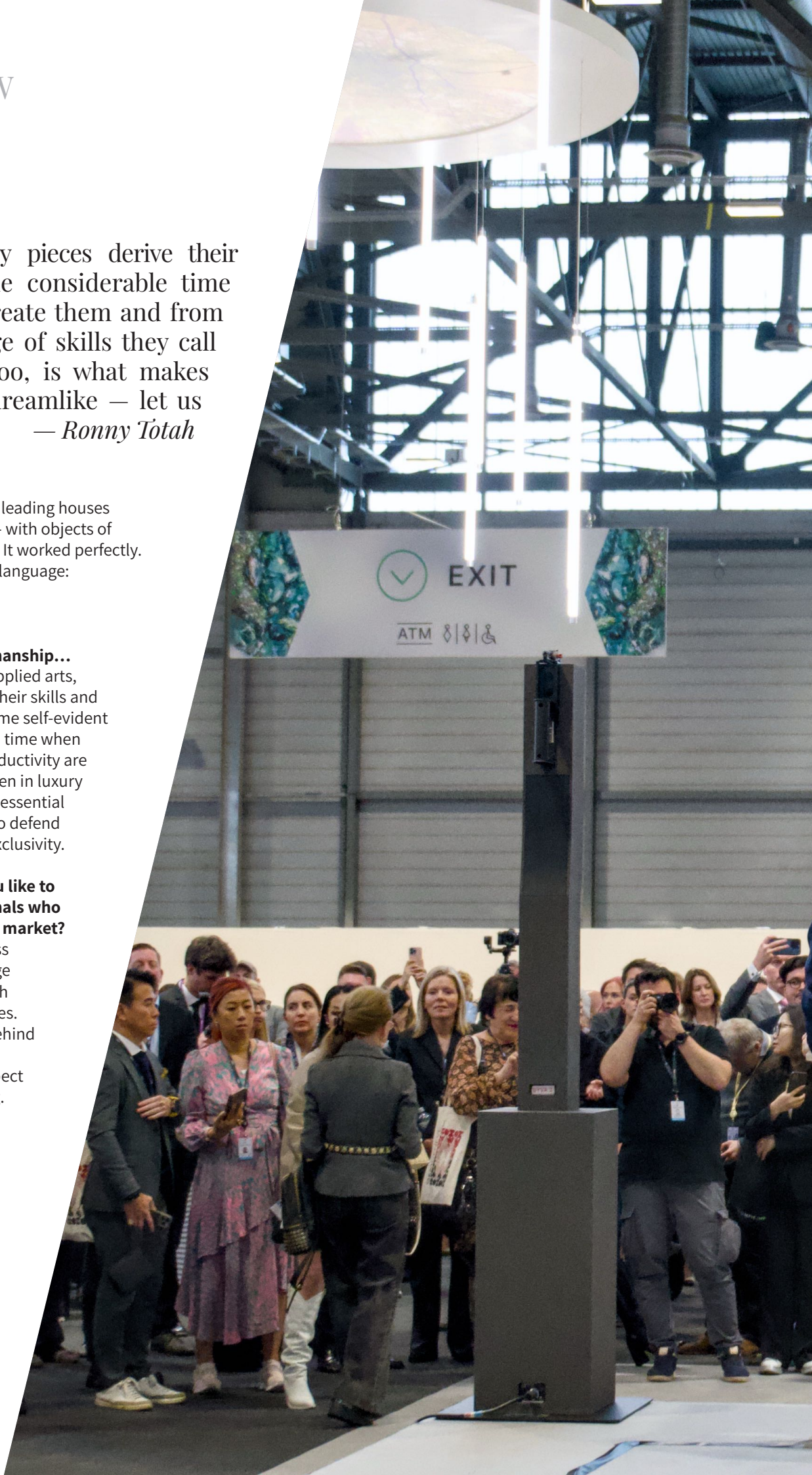
jewellery pieces from leading houses — Cartier, Van Cleef — with objects of design and sculpture. It worked perfectly. Both speak the same language: that of beauty.

You also place great importance on craftsmanship…

RT: Celebrating the applied arts, in all the diversity of their skills and techniques, has become self-evident over the editions. At a time when performance and productivity are often prioritised — even in luxury industries — it seems essential to highlight those who defend a different vision of exclusivity.

What legacy would you like to leave to the professionals who will shape tomorrow's market?

RT: I would like to pass on as much knowledge as possible, along with a set of essential values. My hope is to leave behind a healthy, benevolent market driven by respect and a spirit of sharing. And I sincerely hope that, in turn, they will continue to extend a helping hand to those in need and give opportunities to those who deserve them. That is how our profession will endure, in the best possible spirit.



Ronny Totah

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency

EXHIBITION

Hervé Obligi

GESTURE AND MATERIAL

“Shaping matter, enhancing beauty” highlights the encounter between gesture and material at the core of the creative process. From raw material to crafted objects, it focuses on manual practices and the expertise that transforms matter.

From 7 to 10 May 2026, GemGenève presents its 8th *in situ* exhibition, “Shaping matter, enhancing beauty”, dedicated to artisanal gesture and the transformation of materials. Initiated by Mathieu Dekeukelaire, director of GemGenève, and realised with the support of the Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art and the Museum of Art and History of Geneva, the exhibition brings together nearly 100 pieces from institutional and private collections. Pauline d’Abrigeon, curator at the Baur Foundation and Estelle Fallet, curator at MAH Geneva, serve as co-curators.

The exhibition route focuses on the moment when the hand intervenes in the material. Cutting, polishing, engraving and chasing mark the stages of a process where technique, tradition and experience converge. “Behind every stone and every jewel, there is a story, a hand, a technique, a culture,” recalls Mathieu Dekeukelaire. The exhibition presents cameos, nephrite vases from the Qing dynasty, ceramics, intaglios and Art Deco *nécessaires*. Jade, horn, onyx, agate, coral and amber reflect the diversity of materials, drawn from mineral and organic resources, some of which are now subject to regulation.

A Geneva collaboration

The project is based on collaboration between institutions and private collectors. The Baur Foundation, the Museum of Art and History of Geneva, the Natural History Museum of Geneva, as well as private collections such as the Faerber Collection, Nicolas Torroni and Ernst Färber are among the lenders. The selection of works developed progressively through dialogue between partners in order to establish correspondences between the pieces. Objects in coral [see p.48] from Western traditions are shown alongside Chinese works. Agate is also approached through a variety of uses, notably Chinese snuff bottles, which appear at the end of the 17th century and spread among scholarly circles. “There is a dialogue that emerges around the diversity of uses of the same material across very different cultural contexts,” explains Pauline d’Abrigeon.

Baur Foundation

Founded in 1964 and entirely dedicated to the arts of East Asia, the Baur Foundation presents nearly 40 objects in the exhibition. “The museum mainly holds Chinese and Japanese collections, with very few Korean objects. It is the only museum in Switzerland exclusively devoted to these fields, which gives it a particular place within the museum landscape,” explains Laure Schwartz, director of the foundation. Established by Alfred

— Céline Lesage

Baur from 1906 onwards, the collection is characterised by a consistent interest in objects of high quality, regardless of period. "This attention to material and craftsmanship remains at the core of the museum's identity," she adds. The collections notably include Chinese ceramics, jade and hard-stone objects.

Jade occupies a central place within the selection. "We selected pieces with a wide range of tones in order to allow visitors to appreciate the remarkable chromatic diversity of this material, which extends from milky white to the most intense greens of so-called 'spinach' jade, extracted from the shores of Lake Baikal before being worked in China," notes Pauline d'Abrigeon [see box p.39].

of Art and History of Geneva (MAH Geneva) is one of the largest museums in Switzerland, with around 650,000 objects spanning 15,000 years of history. A partner of GemGenève since 2023, it renews its commitment this year by presenting more than 20 works from its collections. Among them, an 18th century pocket *nécessaire* in gold, agate and ivory illustrates the English production of objects combining use and ornament. Acquired in 1909 by the Archaeological Museum of Geneva and transferred in 1929 to the Museum of Art and History, this *nécessaire*, containing ivory writing tablets and small toiletry instruments, is both functional and prestigious. It belongs to a type produced around 1750-1760, characterised by flat, faceted cases often made of hard-stone such as agate or jasper. Its chased and *repoussé* gold mount with *rocaille* motifs, combining garlands and scrolls, reflects the ornamental vocabulary of London workshops.

Shaping matter

At the centre of the exhibition a space dedicated to craft practices presents demonstrations throughout the fair. Across more than 130 m², two workshops allow visitors to observe techniques related to opal, tortoiseshell and ornamental stones. "The space dedicated to craft practices is fundamental: they embody excellence, often in the shadow of major houses. Placing them at the centre helps rebalance the narrative," notes Dekeukelaire.

> Behind every stone and every jewel, there is a story, a hand, a technique, a culture.
> — *Mathieu Dekeukelaire.*

Nicolas Torroni

Among private lenders, Nicolas Torroni presents several works from his collection, including a malachite bowl exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1930. A specialist in exceptional stones, pearls and antique jewellery, he takes part in the fair for the fifth consecutive year. He is recognised for his expertise in the work of Alfredo Ravasco and Giacomo Ravasco, Milanese jewellers active in the 20th century and also creates jewellery pieces himself.

MAH Geneva

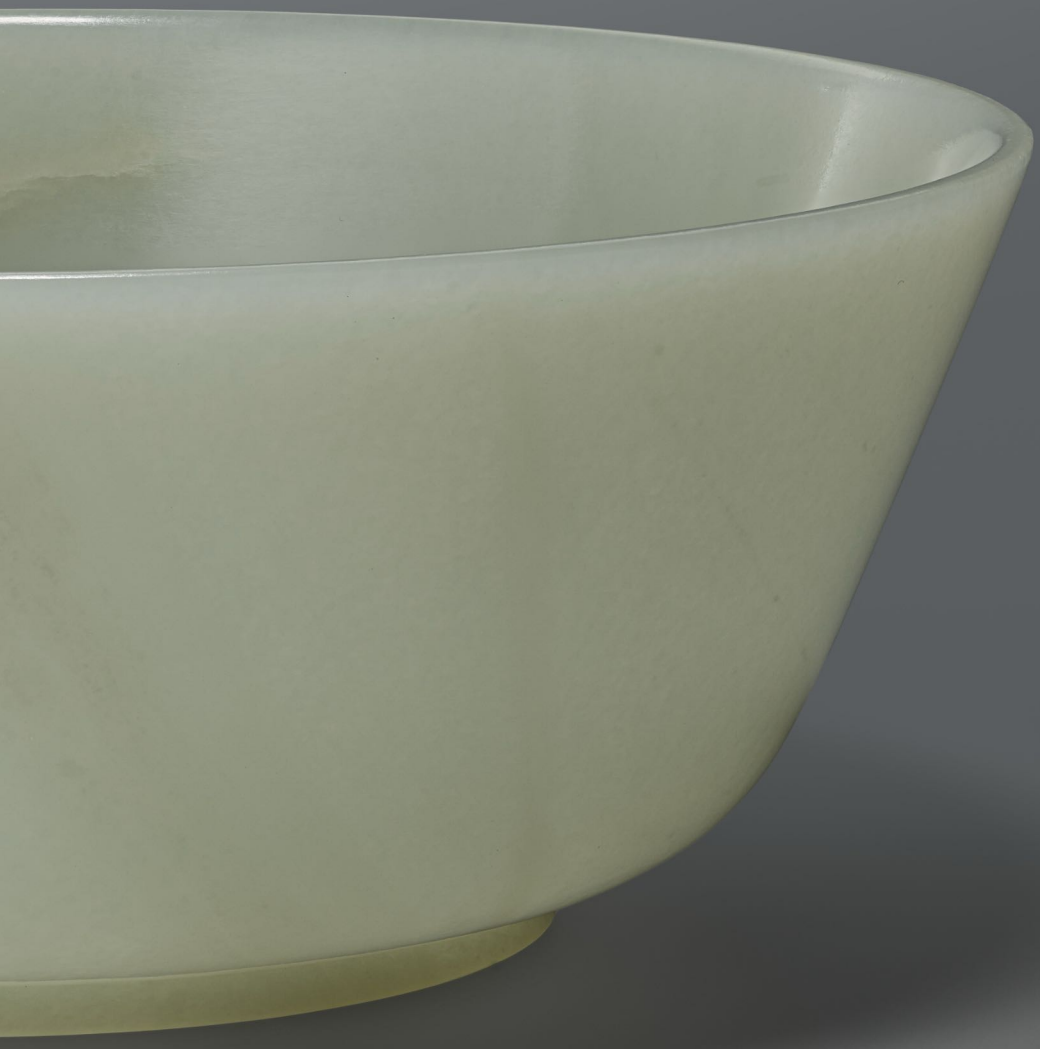
A major institution within the Swiss cultural landscape, the Museum

Jade

Jade is a particularly hard and tough ornamental stone, used for millennia in decoration and jewellery. The term "jade" actually refers to several minerals with similar properties, mainly nephrite (more common) and jadeite (rarer) — scientifically distinguished in the 19th century by the mineralogist Alexis Damour —, as well as kosmochlor, which is related to jadeite. Jade can display a range of colours depending on its chemical composition: white when pure, green due to chromium, blue-green with cobalt, black with titanium or pink owing to iron and manganese. Introduced into Europe in the 16th century by Portuguese merchants from China, jade was known for its supposed medicinal properties, particularly in treating kidney disorders, which explains its nickname as the "flank stone". In Asian cultures, it also holds strong symbolic significance and is associated with purity, virtue and power. In China, where it has been worked since the Neolithic period in the Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures, it becomes a material of prestige linked to elites and ritual practices, a symbol of imperial authority and sometimes placed in tombs as a sign of immortality. A finely grained and difficult stone to work, jade was long shaped using natural abrasives before the development of more efficient tools, giving rise to a refined sculptural tradition that remains highly valued.

Rectangular vases in the shape of an archaic zun

Courtesy Baur Foundation



Bowl

Courtesy Baur Foundation

Hervé Obligi

"This cultural and educational commitment contributes to the credibility, longevity and identity of GemGenève. In a fast-moving world, creating spaces for transmission and meaning is, in our view, a responsibility. — *Mathieu Dekeukelaire.*

3 questions to... the Baur Foundation

What motivated your participation in GemGenève?

Laure Schwartz: This was a project we have been discussing for several years with Mathieu Dekeukelaire [see box p.17]. This year proved to be the right moment, particularly due to the museum's closure for works linked to preventive conservation requirements. It was important for us to keep the Foundation active and to re-establish a connection with our audience. GemGenève felt like an obvious choice, both because of its Geneva roots and the content of its exhibitions. There is a clear coherence with our identity and collections, particularly in its attention to finely crafted objects and technical virtuosity. This is not a circumstantial decision, but a project that makes sense. We develop off-site activities, such as participation in cultural events like the Salon du Livre or Japan Impact. However, these events are mainly focused on mediation or the presentation of our publications. GemGenève is different, as it is the only event where we present objects from our collections, allowing us to show works that have not been accessible since August, while maintaining a direct link with the public.

What is the place of the Baur Foundation's works within the exhibition?

Pauline d'Abrigeon: The Foundation's participation is primarily based on loans of works. This includes a range of materials, largely centred on jade, which accounts for more than 50% of the loans, or around forty objects. It is from this material that the exhibition's curatorial reflection developed. Jade is an exceptionally hard stone, requiring a patient process of abrasion using sands of varying fineness. This engagement with the material informed a broader reflection on the transition from raw substance to form shaped by the artisan's gesture.

Which works are presented?

Pauline d'Abrigeon: Pieces span different periods and functions, some decorative, others utilitarian. Among the key works is a brush pot associated with Chinese scholarly culture and the practice of calligraphy. Produced in the imperial workshops in the 18th century, it demonstrates a high level of quality, visible in the material, finish and polish. Some pieces bear a reign mark engraved on the base, indicating their link to an emperor. Beyond jade, the selection highlights a wide variety of materials. Works in ivory, coral and agate make it possible to explore different approaches to working with matter. A "Canton ball" illustrates a technical *tour de force*, with multiple concentric spheres carved and decorated within a single piece of ivory. Other works retain the natural form of the material, such as sculptures carved from elephant tusks, whose inclination follows that of the ivory itself.

Lapidary sculptor Hervé Obligi sets up his workshop on site. Active for more than forty years, he works stone across fields ranging from jewellery to sculpture, collaborating with institutions and houses such as Cartier, Piaget, the Palace of Versailles and the Louvre Museum. Ulli Freyer, a specialised restorer, presents Boulle marquetry techniques as well as work on organic materials such as tortoiseshell, horn and ivory.

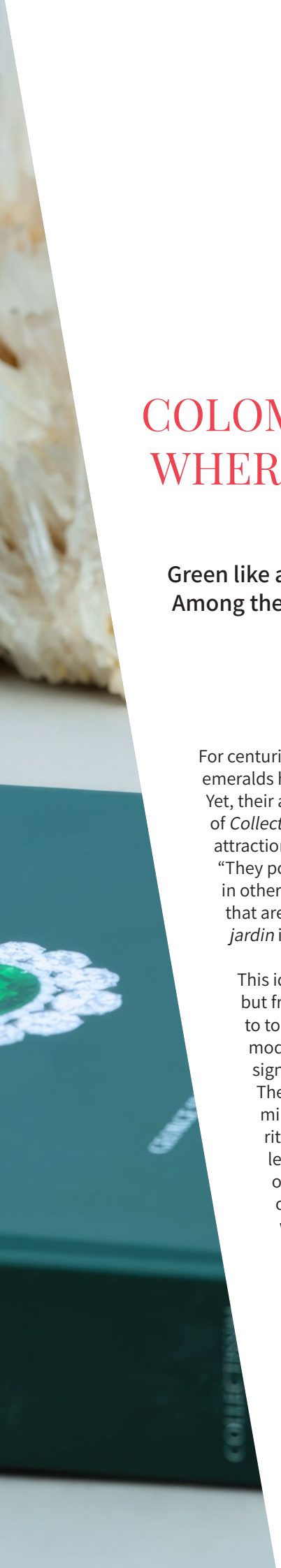
"The emphasis on gesture primarily comes through the works themselves," says Pauline d'Abrigeon. Raw materials, notably on loan from the Natural History Museum, are displayed alongside finished objects in order to establish a direct dialogue between material and transformation. For jade, for example, both jadeite and nephrite are shown, while other cases present minerals such as agate or quartz. The aim is to make the transformation process legible by showing both the origin of materials and the result of artisanal work.

By bringing together historical objects, craftsmanship and contemporary approaches, "Shaping matter, enhancing beauty" highlights the role of gesture in the transformation of materials. The exhibition underscores the continuity of techniques and their transmission in relation to present-day practices. It offers a perspective on craftsmanship and its role in understanding objects.

BOOKS

Colombian emerald

Courtesy *Collectissim*



COLOMBIAN EMERALDS: WHERE THE EARTH TURNS GREEN

Green like a forest, few gemstones inspire as much fascination as the emerald. Among them, those originating from Colombia occupy a singular place.

For centuries, the deep and luminous green of Colombian emeralds has symbolised rarity, prestige and natural beauty. Yet, their appeal is not only visual. As gemologist and founder of *Collectissim*, Guilhem Merolle [see box p.45] observes, attractionto emeralds often begins with a feeling: "They possessa depth and intensity that I do not find in other gemstones. Their green is unique and, unlike stones that are almosttoo perfect, emeralds have character. Their *jardin* is part of their identity and tells their story."

This idea that emeralds are not merely precious stones but fragments of history runs from ancient civilisations to today's global gem market. Long before they captivated modern collectors, Colombian emeralds held cultural significance for the indigenous peoples of the region. The Muisca civilisation, which controlled the ancient mines of Somondoco (now Chivor), used emeralds in rituals and spiritual practices. One of the most enduring legends associated with these stones is the story of El Dorado, in which a ruler covered in gold dust offered treasures — including emeralds — to sacred waters. Such myths fuelled the imagination of Spanish conquistadors, who began exploiting mines during the 16th century. Over the following centuries, Colombian emeralds travelled along global trade routes to royal courts in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Their vivid colour made them particularly prized in Mughal jewellery and later in European royal collections. Still today, part of their allure lies in this blend of science, legend and geography, making them gemstones whose origins feel almost mythical.

A geological exception

From a scientific perspective, emeralds are the green variety of beryl, coloured primarily by trace amounts of chromium and vanadium. While deposits exist in several parts of the world — including Zambia, Brazil, Afghanistan and Madagascar — Colombia stands apart for the quality and the geological origin of its stones. Unlike most emerald deposits, which are associated with magmatic or metamorphic rocks, Colombian emeralds formed in sedimentary environments through hydrothermal processes, a rare geological model for this gemstone. Mineral-rich fluids circulated through layers of rock, carrying beryllium that reacted with chromium- and vanadium-bearing formations to crystallise emerald. This geological configuration produced stones with a distinctive chemical balance. One key factor is their typically low iron content. As Merolle explains, this absence of iron contributes directly to the gemstone's celebrated colour: "This reduced presence of iron allows for a purer, brighter green,

— Nahir Fuente

without an overly bluish or dark tone." The result is a colour that collectors often describe as vivid yet velvety.

Legendary mines

The reputation of Colombian emeralds is closely tied to several legendary mining districts located in the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes, near Bogota. In this rugged landscape, gems appear unexpectedly, sometimes in tiny pockets, embedded within rock that looks entirely ordinary. It is this unpredictability that has always made emerald mining thrilling and uncertain. Among the most famous ones are the regions of Muzo, Chivor and Coscuez, which have become synonymous with some of the finest emeralds ever discovered. Each deposit produces stones with subtly different characteristics.

The Muzo district, perhaps the most renowned, is often associated with deep and warm green tones. Emeralds from this area are celebrated for their colour, clarity and luminosity. Many of the finest emeralds ever discovered have emerged from this region.

Chivor, historically known as the Somondoco mines, produces emeralds with slightly cooler hues, occasionally showing delicate bluish nuances. Coscuez emeralds frequently display a balance between saturation and brightness, combining vivid colours with luminous transparency.

For Merolle, these distinctions are best understood through direct experience: "Seeing emeralds as they come out of the ground allows you to understand the subtle differences that define each origin." Although the designation "Colombian emerald" is globally recognised, professionals know that each mining district carries its own geological signature.

Flaws, colour and clarity

Emeralds are famous for their inclusions, often referred to poetically as the *jardin* — the French word for "garden." These internal features consist of tiny fractures, mineral crystals and fluid inclusions that formed during the stone's crystallisation. Among the most famous are three-phase inclusions containing liquid, gas and a tiny crystal within the same cavity.

Merolle emphasises that collectors should understand these features differently than they would in diamonds: "In emeralds, inclusions should not be seen merely as flaws. They are part of the stone's nature and testimony to its formation."

Merolle also notes that some inclusions are even sought after, as these internal landscapes contribute to the natural signature and individuality of each stone. "No two emeralds possess exactly the same internal structure, reinforcing their uniqueness."

But these flaws are not the only characteristic that makes them unique. When evaluating emeralds, professionals consider colour, clarity, cut, carat weight, origin and treatments. Yet colour remains the decisive factor. A top-quality emerald exhibits an intense, pure green with balanced saturation and brightness. Stones that appear too dark, too pale or overly bluish are generally considered less desirable. Merolle summarises the hierarchy clearly: "If one must rank the criteria, colour remains the number one factor. It is what creates emotion and ultimately defines the true quality of an emerald." Clarity plays a secondary role. "Because emeralds naturally contain inclusions, the goal is not absolute transparency but rather a harmonious balance between internal structure and visual beauty", explains Merolle.

Occasionally, exceptional stones display the rare optical phenomenon known as "gota de aceite" or "drop of oil." This effect produces a soft diffusion of light within the gem, giving it an almost velvety appearance. When combined with remarkable colour and fine transparency, it can elevate an emerald to the highest category of rarity.

Science and nature

There has long been a tendency to stigmatise treatments of Colombian emeralds. Most emeralds on the market have undergone some form of treatment intended to improve their clarity. The most common practice is oiling, in which a colourless oil, either natural or synthetic, is used. After cutting and polishing, the emerald is typically placed under a vacuum to remove air trapped within its microscopic fissures. It is then immersed in oil so that the liquid can penetrate these tiny fractures. Unlike the heat treatment commonly applied to sapphires or rubies, oiling does not alter the emerald's colour; instead, it reduces the visibility of internal fractures by allowing light to pass through the gem more evenly. The quantity of oil introduced is microscopic and does not add any meaningful weight to the stone. Rather than transforming the gem, the treatment simply allows its natural qualities to be seen more clearly. When properly disclosed and carried out in accordance with rigorous standards, oiling is widely accepted within the industry. Merolle notes that this technique should not be misunderstood: "The goal is not to change the colour, but to improve clarity and transparency… When properly declared and carried out according to rigorous standards, it does not conceal the nature of the stone but reveals its potential."

Guilhem Merolle

Courtesy *Collectissim*

Las Pavas Muzo mine

Courtoisie *Collectissim*

Today, gemological laboratories carefully assess the level of treatment present in a stone, which can significantly influence its value. Advances in gemological science have transformed the analysis of emeralds in recent decades. Techniques such as Raman spectroscopy and laser ablation inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS) allow laboratories to determine a stone's chemical fingerprint with remarkable precision. These technologies make it possible to detect treatments, analyse trace elements and even determine geographic origin, thereby strengthening transparency in the market. Artificial intelligence systems are also beginning to analyse large databases of gemstone characteristics, further improving origin determination. Yet even with these sophisticated tools, the experienced eye of a gemologist remains indispensable. The subtle balance between colour, transparency and internal structure still requires expert interpretation, reminding us that the evaluation of emeralds lies at the intersection of science, craftsmanship and tradition.

3 questions to... Guilhem Merolle

Guilhem Merolle is a gemologist, content creator and the founder of *Collectissim*, a magazine focused on jewellery, gemstones and the market.

What surprised you most about the people working in the emerald trade when you began visiting the mines?

It was the contrast between the harshness of the environment and the quality of human relationships. Working conditions in some areas can be demanding, isolated and quite rudimentary. Yet we met generous people, proud of their work and strongly attached to their land. We were also struck by the level of expertise. Many miners and traders, without formal academic training in gemology, possess an exceptionally trained eye. Their ability to assess a stone within seconds is the result of years of experience. Finally, we were impressed by the role of trust. The emerald trade still relies heavily on word of honour, reputation and long-term relationships. This human dimension is fundamental and often underestimated from the outside.

Your upcoming book explores Colombian emeralds in depth. What new perspective do you hope readers will gain from it?

Too often, Colombian emeralds are approached from a single angle, whether aesthetic, commercial, or historical. Our goal was to connect these dimensions and show how geology explains colour, how history shapes the market and how human realities influence the industry today. We also wanted to bring greater nuance. Colombian emeralds are sometimes surrounded by myths, both positive and negative. By combining scientific data, historical archives and field testimony, we sought to move beyond simplistic narratives. Ultimately, we hope readers understand that an emerald is not only an exceptional gemstone but a true ecosystem. If the book encourages a more informed, respectful and complete view of Colombian emeralds, then we will have achieved our goal.

What do emeralds represent to you personally beyond their gemological value?

Beyond their gemological value, emeralds represent a connection between nature and history. They are crystals formed millions of years ago, yet their destiny unfolds within contemporary stories of miners, families, traders and collectors. They also represent travel: Colombia and its remote regions, encounters in the field, archival research in Europe and historic trade routes. Each stone becomes a point of connection between different places and eras. For me, they also symbolise complexity. Nothing about emeralds is entirely simple. Beyond science, emeralds have become a way to understand a country, a culture and a heritage.

Modern industry

The modern emerald industry in Colombia has undergone profound transformations. Historically, control of the mines shifted between colonial authorities, private enterprises and local groups. The 20th century also witnessed periods of violence, particularly during the so-called "Green wars" in the 1980s, when rival factions fought for control of mining territories in the Boyacá region. Peace agreements reached in the early 1990s gradually restored stability. Today, the industry is entering a more structured and professional phase. Modern mining companies operate alongside artisanal miners known as *guaqueros*, who search for emeralds through small-scale digging or by exploring discarded rock from larger operations. Despite technological advances, the human element remains central to the emerald trade. Merolle asserts that "trust, reputation and personal relationships still play an essential role in transactions."

At the same time, the expectations of the global market have evolved significantly. Buyers are now more attentive to the origin of stones, the conditions under which they are extracted and their traceability.

“The question is no longer only whether a stone is beautiful, but also where it comes from and under what circumstances it was mined”, explains Merolle. This shift reflects a broader awareness of environmental, social and governance concerns within the luxury sector. Modern laboratories can now verify geographic origin, evaluate treatments and provide detailed reports that accompany stones throughout the supply chain. “The market, however, remains nuanced. At the very high end, traceability and documented origin have become value drivers. In other segments of the market, price and visual beauty may still take precedence,” explains Merolle.

A gem of emotion

Beyond their scientific and commercial value, emeralds hold a powerful emotional appeal. According to Merolle, this emotional connection is partly explained by the stone’s imperfections: “Emeralds create a unique emotional bond because they are never entirely perfect. They embrace their inclusions and variations, giving each stone a distinct personality.” Today, Colombian emeralds continue to represent the pinnacle of gemstones’ beauty. Their colour, unique geological origin and deep cultural heritage ensure their place in the world of high jewellery and gemstone collecting. For gemologists and collectors alike, each emerald is more than a crystal; it is a fragment of geological history and a witness to centuries of human stories.

As Merolle reflects after years of studying and travelling through the emerald regions of Colombia: “Beyond their gemological value, emeralds represent a connection between nature and history, between geology and humanity.” It is precisely this connection that continues to make Colombian emeralds among the most fascinating gemstones on Earth.

Colombian emerald

Courtesy *Collectissim*

ZOOM

Immortals carved from a coral branch

Courtesy Baur Foundation

CORAL: LEGACY AND RESPONSIBILITY

From prehistoric beads to contemporary high jewellery, coral reflects the beauty of the natural world and the responsibility that comes with transforming it into art.

Neither fully mineral nor plant, coral has long occupied a liminal space. It has long been perceived as a living substance that, from its earliest uses to the present day, has been transformed into an ornament. Estelle Fallet, art historian and curator at the Museum of Art and History of Geneva, sheds light on the cultural and historical significance of coral in jewellery. From its earliest uses, coral was valued not only for its beauty and rarity but also for the meanings attributed to it. As Fallet explains, "coral was used for its supposed medicinal virtues, but also to embellish objects and adornments," revealing how deeply intertwined function and symbolism were. Archaeological discoveries confirm this: coral beads appear alongside materials such as glazed ceramics and ostrich eggshell, suggesting that even in ancient contexts, it was appreciated for the vivid contrast it brought to ornaments. This enduring appeal is echoed by the French luxury jewellery house Van Cleef & Arpels, which notes that "coral has been used in jewellery-making since Antiquity and can be found in the beads and protective amulets of various civilisations across the globe." Across cultures, its significance has been richly varied. For instance, Celtic warriors would go into battle with coral-set helmets and swords, China transformed the material into miniature talismans and African kings incorporated it into majestic finery.

Art historian Pauline d'Abrigeon [see box p.39] explains: "in the Chinese world — where coral is known as shanhu — the material carried strong symbolic meaning, comparable in prestige to jade," [see box p.34]. Associated with immortality and endowed with protective virtues, it became deeply embedded in artistic and courtly traditions. Its use intensified under the Qing dynasty, when coral functioned as a marker of rank and authority. The most prized variety was Mediterranean red coral (*Corallium rubrum*), imported by sea in raw or worked forms, sometimes as entire natural branches resembling miniature trees, among the most luxurious objects. These exchanges highlight coral's role not only as an adornment but also as an element of cross-cultural dialogue. On the occasion of GemGenève, the Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, illustrates this diversity by lending a group of coral works [see p.32]. Among them are two snuff bottles entirely carved from coral: one with a refined triangular form, delicately decorated with floral motifs, the other — likely produced in imperial workshops — combining vivid red coral with enamelled copper medallions. These objects highlight the technical and symbolic richness associated with the material.

— Nahir Fuente

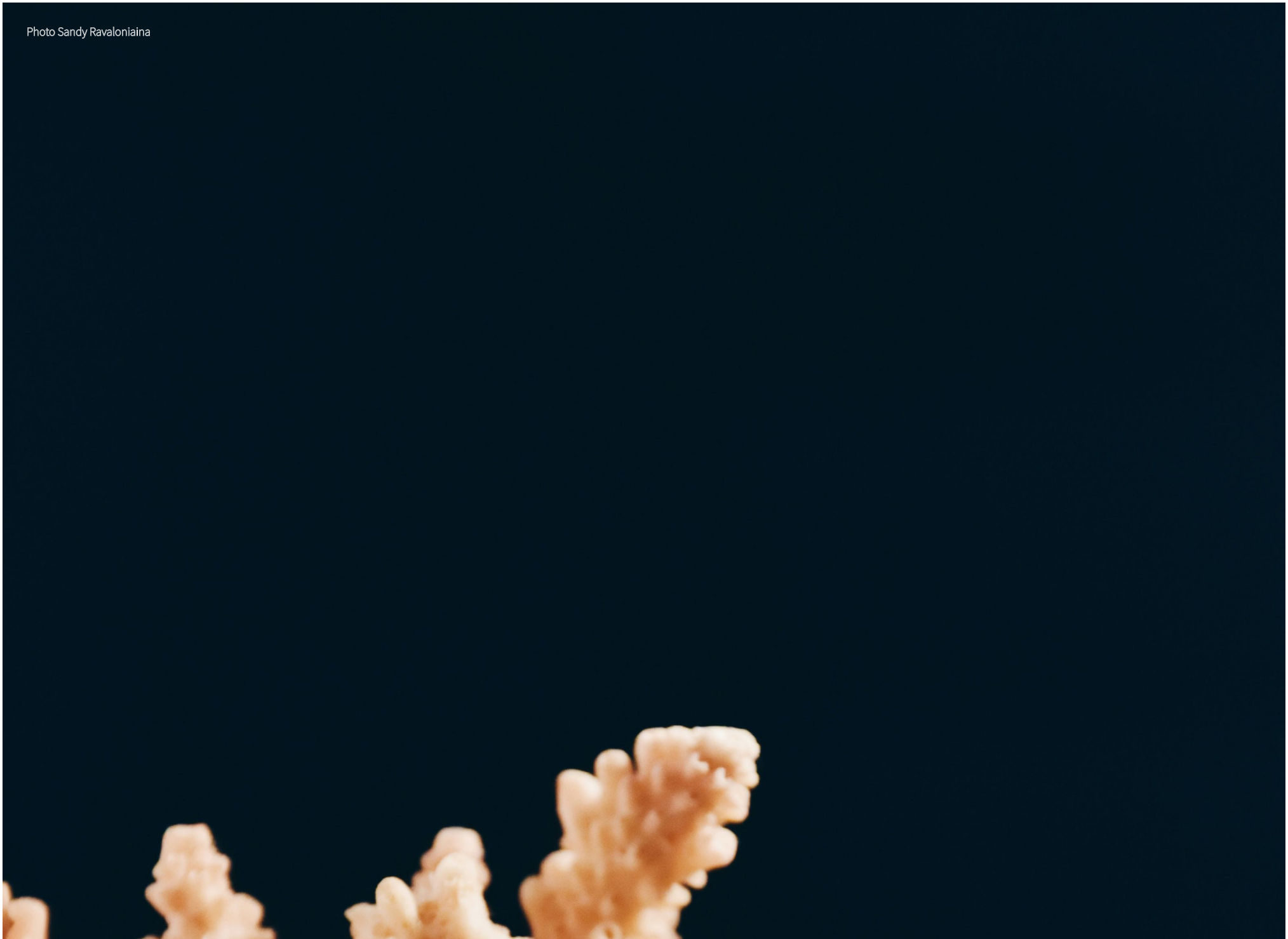


Photo Sandy Ravaloniaina

Power of nature

But coral's visual power is inseparable from its colour. Red Mediterranean coral, in particular, carried strong symbolic weight. Fallet notes that "coral was associated with blood, a symbol of life or death," and was therefore believed to protect against harmful forces. This symbolic intensity was not limited to Europe. According to d'Abrigeon, "in China, colour red reinforced coral's association with power and auspiciousness." The emperor, the empress and the empress dowager wore long coral necklaces, while high-ranking officials adorned their court hats (*chao guan*) with coral beads, peacock feathers and sable tails. Coral also played a role in imperial ceremonies, particularly those held at the Temple of the Sun, where red was the symbolic colour. This protective dimension persisted through time, especially in the Middle Ages, when coral became closely linked to Christian iconography. It appeared in depictions of the Christ Child and was incorporated into objects given to children, such as coral-adorned rattles intended to shield them from evil. Rosaries, pendants and devotional objects further extended this association. Marie Chabrol [see box] reinforces this framework: "Coral has historically been credited with the ability to protect the blood, the spirit, guard against the evil eye and promote strength and vitality." Yet she also introduces an important nuance: while these meanings were once central, they are not always retained today. "Contemporary designers may be drawn less by symbolism than by the material's intense colour and visual presence."

Yet coral's appeal was not limited to protective uses and powerful colour. Beyond its symbolism, coral's aesthetic and material qualities have always inspired artisans, ensuring its place in artistic production. As techniques developed, artists and jewellers became increasingly attentive to the material itself. As Fallet describes, "certain styles favoured the shaping of objects that evoke raw nature, with lively, minimally altered forms." Rather than imposing strict geometries, craftsmen often chose to highlight coral's organic structure, allowing nature to guide the final design. Coral branches, in particular, were often preserved in their natural state, and their irregularity became a defining feature rather than a flaw. This sensitivity to natural form remains central to coral jewellery. Fallet emphasises that "it is the natural forms of the material that are valued, whether through branches worn as pendants or strands arranged with minimal

3 questions to... Marie Chabrol

Marie Chabrol is a gemologist, jewelry historian, lecturer and co-founder of Gemmologie & Francophonie.

Do you think scientific advances will play a greater role in how coral is traded and valued in the future?

Yes, absolutely. Scientific analysis is already becoming essential. Today, laboratories can identify coral to the exact species, sometimes even using DNA analysis. This has direct implications for trade, because regulations often depend on the specific species involved. Being able to name a coral precisely — rather than simply calling it "coral" — is increasingly important for certification, import and export, and ultimately for determining its legal and commercial value.

How might the growing gap between antique coral pieces and newly sourced material reshape the market for collectors and auction houses?

This gap is already very visible. Antique pieces may contain coral species that are now restricted or even banned from trade, creating complex legal issues. In some cases, these objects cannot be sold without extensive documentation proving their age and origin. As a result, many actors in the market, especially auction houses, are reluctant to handle them unless the piece is exceptionally valuable. This could lead to a situation where antique coral objects become increasingly difficult to circulate, even as they gain historical importance.

Beyond high jewellery, coral is also present in lower-value objects. How important is it to include these uses in discussions about sustainability and regulation?

It is extremely important. Coral is not only used in high jewellery; it appears in a wide range of objects, including costume jewellery and decorative items that may have little financial value. Yet these uses also involve harvesting natural resources. Often, people do not even know what type of coral they are buying or handling. Ignoring these segments would mean overlooking a significant part of the impact on coral ecosystems. A broader understanding of all uses is essential if we want to address sustainability in a meaningful way.

Marie Chabrol

Photo Wlad Simitch

Snuff bottle with bat and Buddha’s hand fruit

Courtesy Baur Foundation

intervention." Chabrol echoes this idea, by highlighting the technical dimension: "coral is generally quite pliable, but requires significant expertise in cutting, polishing and carving, skills that have been preserved in regions such as Italy and across the Mediterranean." This duality between organic form and skilled craftsmanship, "contributes to coral's enduring fascination, as it balances technical mastery with respect for the material's natural form."

Sustainability

However, the history of coral is not only one of admiration; it is also marked by scarcity and environmental concern. Intensive harvesting led to depletion as early as the 18th century, a reality that continues to shape its use today. Fallet points out that coral is now "rarely exploited in the arts, protected by regulations against overfishing" which has reinforced its status as both a precious and fragile material. For Chabrol, this scarcity is not only ecological but also practical. She notes that high-quality coral has become "increasingly rare and very expensive" and that strict regulations and trade restrictions make it "not the most obvious material for designers today, particularly for pieces intended for international distribution." As a result, coral is often reserved for exceptional creations rather than large-scale production.

At the same time, regulation is tightening. Some coral species are already banned from trade, while others are subject to quotas and strict controls. Chabrol reflects uncertainty about the future: "At

3 questions to... Laura Astrologo Porché

Laura Astrologo Porché is a Senior jewellery journalist and founder of *Journal des Bijoux*.

Why do you think *memento mori* jewellery continues to resonate?

Historically, *memento mori* jewellery operated within a symbolic and spiritual framework. It was not simply about death, but a way of structuring one's relationship to time, value and existence. Today, that codified framework has dissolved. What remains is the question itself, perhaps even more urgent in a culture defined by speed, dematerialisation and a certain loss of permanence. As a result, the meaning of symbols has been internalised and designers are no longer reiterating a moral message; they are using the same vocabulary to construct personal narratives. For instance, across practices, one can observe how the skull becomes a vital symbol, not of death, but of love and belonging. *Memento mori* jewellery occupies a unique position in that it sustains a productive tension, acknowledging fragility while giving form to what endures, whether memory, identity, or love.

Are there any contemporary designers or *maisons* you feel are reinterpreting *memento mori* in compelling ways?

Maisons like Codognato and Dogale in Venice maintain a strong continuity with the historical *vanitas* tradition, preserving its depth and symbolic rigour. Others reinterpret it through more contemporary lenses. Gaetano Chiavetta, for instance, approaches the theme with a refined, almost introspective sensibility, while Renato Cipullo, with his *Memento Amori* collection, shifts the focus from death to love, reframing the narrative entirely. There are also more cross-disciplinary approaches. Enzo Liverino's collaborations with Jan Fabre, using coral to sculpt skulls, bring together material, art and symbolism in an ancient and radically contemporary way. Similarly, Giovanni Raspini's *Vanitas Mundi* collection translates the theme into a more accessible aesthetic language without losing its conceptual core. All these designers are not simply repeating a motif; they are reactivating it.

Have you observed an increasing interest in *memento mori* jewellery among younger collectors in symbolic jewellery?

What we are seeing is not just a renewed interest but a shift in how younger generations engage with symbolism. Among Millennials first, and now with Gen Z and younger audiences, the skull has become a widely shared visual code, almost a form of tribal language. It appears everywhere, from low-cost rings and streetwear to digital culture. This diffusion reflects a shift in how identity and belonging are expressed. For Millennials, the skull was already re-contextualised through fashion and subculture, from punk and rock to designers such as Alexander McQueen and Stephen Webster. It carried connotations of rebellion, individuality and a certain aesthetic of darkness. With Gen Z, that logic becomes more fluid and democratised. The symbol is no longer tied to a specific subculture, but circulates freely across styles and platforms. It is less about opposition and more about self-definition.

> What interests me is to show *memento mori* not as a closed iconography, but as an open language. With distinct voices such as Lydia Courteille, Stephen Webster and Amedeo Scognamiglio, the discussion can reveal how the same symbolic territory generates very different approaches to memory, material and meaning in contemporary jewellery. — *Laura Astrologo*

some point, we will have to ask whether we can continue to use this material in jewellery." This growing awareness aligns with global conservation efforts such as those led by CITES, which aim to protect vulnerable species while regulating their trade.

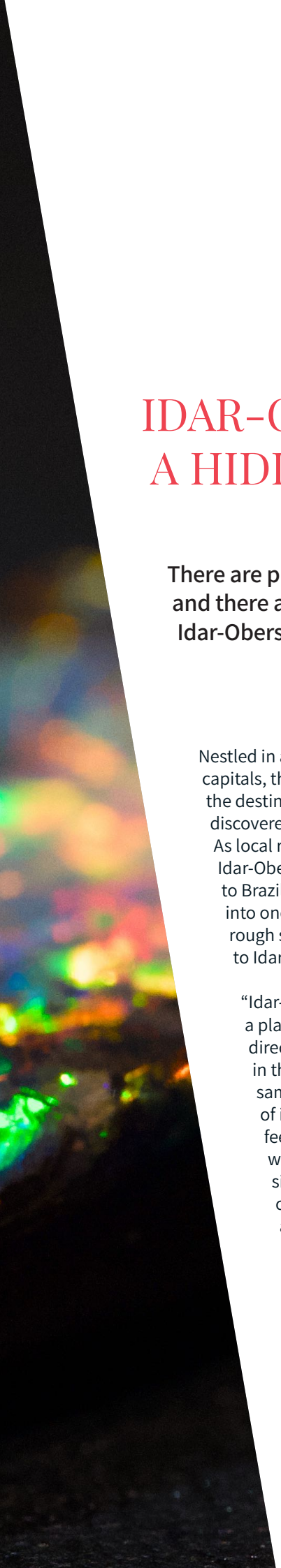
Ultimately, coral's enduring significance may lie in this tension between abundance and vulnerability, nature and craftsmanship. As Fallet summarises, jewellery serves to "highlight textures and colours, showcasing materials shaped by nature itself, discreetly assisted by the human hand." This delicate balance continues to define coral's place in historical and contemporary design. Chabrol adds another layer to this reflection, reminding us that coral remains "an extremely fragile resource and one we do not fully understand." Its future, therefore, depends not only on artistic appreciation but also on scientific knowledge and responsible stewardship.


Photo David Clode

VIDEAJOUR

Emil Weis Opals KG stand on GemGenève 2024

Photo Mickaël Pijoubert. © Art Media Agency



IDAR-OBERSTEIN: A HIDDEN HEARTBEAT

There are places in the world where gemstones are traded, and there are places where they are transformed. Idar-Oberstein belongs to the second one.

Nestled in a quiet valley, far from the spectacle of global luxury capitals, this small German town has for centuries shaped the destiny of gemstones. Its story begins with agate deposits discovered in the surrounding hills, but it did not end there. As local resources diminished in the 19th century, traders from Idar-Oberstein looked outward — establishing supply routes to Brazil, Sri Lanka and later Africa — transforming the village into one of the earliest global gemstone hubs. Today, while rough stones may travel across continents, many still return to Idar-Oberstein to be cut, refined and given character.

"Idar-Oberstein is not a place you simply visit; it is a place you feel," says Constantin Wild, managing director of his own company. "There is a quiet intensity in the air, shaped by centuries of craftsmanship. That same sentiment is echoed by Andreas Engler, the head of international sales at Heinz Mayer: "Idar-Oberstein feels less like a pure trading hub and more like a place where geology, craft and memory still live side by side." Unlike other gemstone centres that are purely commercial, Idar-Oberstein carries a deep emotional and historical layer." This is perhaps what defines the village most clearly: its discretion. The gemstone tradition is not always immediately visible. There are no grand displays on every corner, no overt spectacle. Instead, it exists behind doors; in workshops, ateliers and family-run studios where techniques are passed down with precision and patience. "It is like a hidden heartbeat, Wild explains. If you know where to look, you feel it everywhere."

From industry to excellence

Historically, Idar-Oberstein was a production powerhouse. Water-powered cutting mills lined the Nahe River and the town thrived on volume. But globalisation shifted that balance. Large-scale cutting moved to lower-cost regions, forcing the village to redefine itself. What emerged was something far more rare: a centre of excellence. "What has disappeared is volume, Wild notes. What remains — and has become even stronger — is expertise at the highest level. Precision cutting, special shapes, unique stones and creative layouts." Engler reinforces this transformation: "Idar-Oberstein has moved away from large-scale production toward high-skill, high-knowledge and high-differentiation work." Thomas Petsch, of Wild & Petsch, adds another layer: "Today, clients come to Idar-Oberstein not for standard goods but for solutions; special stones, difficult materials, and a level of trust that comes from long-term relationships." Nowadays, the village is less about mass production and more

— Nahir Fuente

about understanding a stone's inner life and revealing its highest potential through precision, creativity and restraint.

The stage and the soul

This quiet yet powerful heritage travels far beyond Germany. At GemGenève, Idar-Oberstein is not represented by a single voice, but by a constellation of exhibitors who embody its diversity and excellence. Companies such as Wild & Petsch and Gustav Caesar reflect the town's deep trading roots, built on trust and long-standing relationships. "Our role has always been to connect sources, cutters and clients. That network is part of Idar-Oberstein's DNA," as Petsch notes. Meanwhile, Paul Wild and Constantin Wild. continue a legacy of family-driven expertise in coloured stones. This shared heritage is not lost on the audience at GemGenève. "At GemGenève, clients absolutely recognise it, says Wild. Sophisticated buyers — designers, collectors, high-end maisons — understand that an Idar-Oberstein cut is not just technical. It carries a signature. A feeling."

At the intersection of jewellery and innovation, Heinz Mayer brings technical mastery to contemporary design, most notably through concepts such as Rolling Diamonds®, where movement and craftsmanship converge. Other specialists, such as HC Arnoldi, Arnoldi International and Karl Faller represent the precision and trust associated with Idar-Oberstein's trading network, while Emil Weis Opals highlights niche expertise in exceptional materials.

Meanwhile, Atelier Munsteiner stands as a symbol of the town's artistic dimension, known for redefining gemstone cutting as an expressive art form. Companies like Global Gems and Herbert Stephan further reinforce the breadth of Idar-Oberstein's presence, spanning from rare stones to refined sourcing.

Together, they illustrate not a single style, but a shared philosophy: excellence over volume, individuality over standardisation. If Idar-Oberstein is where gemstones acquire their identity, then GemGenève is where that identity is revealed. The fair becomes a stage where craftsmanship meets connoisseurship, where stones shaped in quiet German workshops are presented to a global audience attuned to nuance and excellence.

This alignment is no coincidence. As Andreas Engler explains, "GemGenève positions itself strongly around connoisseurship, provenance, craftsmanship and unusual stones, which aligns naturally with what Idar-Oberstein does best." Looking ahead, this relationship is only set to deepen. "Idar-Oberstein's strength at fairs like GemGenève lies in its credibility, Petsch adds. It represents consistency and expertise in a market that is constantly changing." "The fair is the stage — the world comes together there, Wild reflects. But the soul of the gemstone is still created in places like Idar-Oberstein."

La mêlée

Melee diamonds — tiny gems under 0.20 carats — rarely take centre stage, but they are the reason so much jewellery shines the way it does. Used primarily as accent stones in *pavé*, halos and intricate designs, these small stones add brilliance and visual impact at a relatively low cost. Often referred to by consumers as "diamond chips", *mêlée* takes its name from the French word for "mixed", reflecting how these stones are traded in parcels, making them indispensable to large-scale jewellery production.

At the heart of this segment is India. With its blend of skilled labour, advanced cutting technology and competitive costs, the country has become the industry's central hub. Demand and prices for melee remain consistent, supported by the evolution of jewellery design toward more elaborate yet price-conscious pieces. *Mêlée* enables bigger, more intricate looks at accessible price points, playing a key role in the popularity of halo engagement rings and *pavé* settings. As Dinesh Navadia notes, "*Mêlée* fits in perfectly with trendy designs."

Beneath this steady demand, however, the segment faces growing pressure. Profitability remains a concern, particularly for smaller manufacturers. As Sanjay Shah explains, "it is a major concern and the main reason being that small manufacturers are not able to make a profit from polishing natural diamonds." Adding further complexity is the rise of lab-grown diamonds. Their presence in the *mêlée* category is especially challenging because their small size makes them harder to detect. In response, the industry is investing in stricter controls and detection technologies to prevent the mixing of synthetic and natural stones in *mêlée* parcels.

Constantin Wild

Courtesy Constantin Wild

Melee diamonds

ARR

> Idar-Oberstein is like a jewel itself, nestled between mountains, with many little treasures waiting to be discovered. — *Emil Weis*

> Idar-Oberstein is not a place you simply visit; it is a place you feel. There is a quiet intensity in the air, shaped by centuries of craftsmanship. — *Constantine Wild*

A global village

For a town of its size, Idar-Oberstein has always been outward-looking. Long before globalisation became a defining feature of the gemstone trade, its merchants were travelling the world. Today, that network remains essential. Rough stones sourced from Africa, South America and Asia are often brought to Idar-Oberstein for quality — for the kind of cutting that elevates a gemstone beyond its material value.

At companies like Heinz Mayer, this translates into a balance between global sourcing and local craftsmanship: "We work with stones and clients from all over the world, Engler explains, but the craftsmanship remains rooted in Idar-Oberstein."

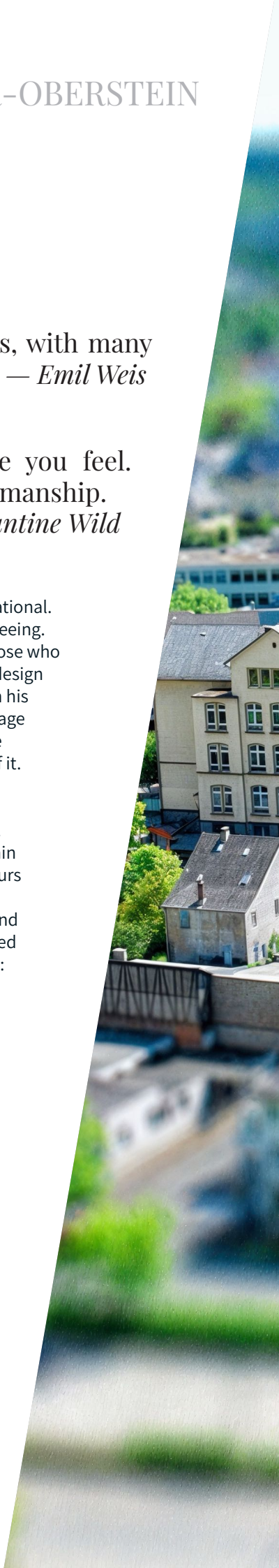
This dialogue between the global and the local is at the very core of the town's identity, and it finds its natural expression at GemGenève. As Thomas Petsch puts it: "It is a town where tradition and global trade meet in a very quiet, almost understated way. You do not see everything immediately, but the knowledge and the network are there."

Despite the changes, the village has not lost its cultural identity. Events such as local open workshop days and gemstone markets continue to celebrate the craft, but the real tradition lies elsewhere: in transmission. Knowledge in Idar-Oberstein is generational. Families pass down not just techniques, but a way of seeing. And while fewer young people may enter the trade, those who do bring a new dimension — combining gemmology, design and digital fluency. Wild points to this evolution within his own company, where the next generation blends heritage with modern tools, from branding to e-commerce. The result is not a break from tradition, but a refinement of it.

The future

As the gemstone market evolves, so too does its focus. While diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds remain pillars, a new wave of interest is rising — one that favours rarity, individuality and colour. "The biggest trend is individuality, Engler explains. We see increasing demand for unique cuts and rare stones rather than standardised material." Paraíba tourmalines, spinels, imperial topaz: stones once considered niche are now at the forefront of collecting. This shift aligns naturally with Idar-Oberstein's strengths. Its expertise lies not only in cutting, but in storytelling — in revealing the uniqueness of each gem. "Clients do not just buy a gem, Wild says. They buy its story."

If one gemstone were to represent Idar-Oberstein, both voices converge on the same answer: agate. "Not because it is the most valuable, Wild reflects, but because it tells the true story of Idar-Oberstein." Engler expands: "Agate represents endurance, craftsmanship and ingenuity — it reflects the town's ability to transform something modest into something extraordinary." And as Petsch concludes: "Agate is where everything started. Without it, Idar-Oberstein would not be what it is today." From these layered stones, a global legacy was built. And from that legacy, a quiet authority still shapes the highest levels of the gemstone world today.



Idar-Oberstein

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TESTIMONY

Shappiro Gem

Courtesy Shappiro Gem

GEMGENÈVE #10

In occasion of the 10th edition of GemGenève, organisers, exhibitors and collectors alike appear united in their appreciation of the fair.

Set against the refined backdrop of Geneva, the 10th edition of GemGenève marks a quiet assertion that true luxury lies in intimacy, expertise and storytelling. Over the past decade, the fair has evolved into a distinguished international gathering in the world of high jewellery and gemstones, one that privileges depth and dialogue over spectacle.

For long-time exhibitors, GemGenève is not simply another date on the global calendar but a pause from the noise of larger commercial fairs. Based in Antwerp, Shappiro Gem, a participant since the early editions, captures this distinction: "Unlike larger commercial fairs, GemGenève creates an environment where meaningful conversations can happen with serious collectors, connoisseurs and fellow professionals. It allows us to step into a more curated, relationship-driven space where storytelling and rarity take centre stage."

This emphasis on dialogue over display has become the fair's defining signature. Visitors do not rush; they linger, question and engage. The result is a marketplace shaped less by transaction and more by trust. For newer participants like Australian house Cody Opal, that atmosphere is promising: "What stood out is the depth of engagement. Visitors take their time, ask considered questions and genuinely appreciate the story behind each gemstone." Returning for their second year, Cody Opal [see box p.68] arrives not as newcomers but as contributors to an evolving narrative, building on continuity and connection. For other exhibitors, GemGenève offers an international stage on which to present one of nature's most elusive creations. Sourced from Australia's remote desert landscapes, each opal arrives bearing the marks of its origin: raw, unpredictable and utterly unique. "For many collectors, seeing such a comprehensive and high-quality selection in one place is a revelation. It allows them to fully appreciate not only the beauty, but also the diversity and individuality that define Australian opal."

Collector's eye

Precision. Provenance. Perfection. Today's buyers are not merely acquiring beauty; they are curating meaning. Across the fair, exhibitors note a growing insistence on excellence: "There is a strong demand for near-perfect stones, with collectors placing greater value on refinement and excellence than ever before." But beyond perfection lies something deeper: provenance. The journey of a gemstone — from remote mine to master cutter — has become as valuable as its physical attributes. Stones are no longer judged solely by colour or clarity, but by the narrative they carry. However, this perfection

— Nahir Fuente

is a natural extension of a lifelong philosophy for industry veterans such as A. Kleiman. Since 1983, their approach has remained unwavering: "My original philosophy was to source the very finest gemstones available on the market and recut them so as to create a uniquely rare and beautiful end product… This philosophy has only become more appropriate as the world's desire for the most beautiful examples… has increased."

A decade of trust

Over ten editions, GemGenève has grown — but carefully. Expansion has never come at the expense of experience. The fair remains deliberately navigable, allowing visitors to move with intention rather than urgency. This balance — between growth and restraint — is perhaps its greatest achievement. As one exhibitor reflects: "It is very nice… to keep it a very manageable show for clients to walk and view booths that maintain exceptional offerings." Behind this lies a curatorial philosophy that prioritises quality over quantity, ensuring that every exhibitor contributes to the overall narrative of excellence.

If the early years of GemGenève were about establishing credibility, the present moment is about deepening relationships. Exhibitors return not to introduce themselves, but to continue a conversation already in motion. As Shappiro Gem puts it: "Today, it is about strengthening long-term relationships, reconnecting with returning clients, and presenting a highly curated selection that reflects our identity." And therein lies the essence of the fair for most of the exhibitors. GemGenève is sustained by trust; between dealer and collector, between object and story, between past and future. In a world defined by speed, this fair offers something: the luxury of time, attention and genuine appreciation. At its 10th edition, GemGenève does not simply celebrate a milestone. It affirms a philosophy that the true value of a gemstone lies not only in its brilliance but in the conversations it inspires.

3 questions to... Damien Cody

What motivates you to return from Australia each year?

After more than 50 years of exporting to and servicing our European clientele, returning to Geneva feels both natural and rewarding. GemGenève has established itself as a carefully curated showcase of the world's finest gems and jewellery. The organisers bring together an exceptional calibre of exhibitors, which in turn attracts knowledgeable and discerning buyers. For us, it is not only an opportunity to exhibit but also to reconnect with long-standing clients and introduce Australian opal to a global audience that truly appreciates rarity and quality.

Have you seen a shift in collectors' appreciation for opal?

There has been a clear and growing appreciation for opal in recent years. This can be partly attributed to the influence of major fashion houses, which have embraced Australian opal in contemporary jewellery collections, bringing it into a modern and international spotlight. At the same time, broader public awareness has been fuelled by the success of the television series *Outback Opal Hunters*. Broadcast in over 100 countries, it has offered audiences an authentic glimpse into the lives of opal miners and the challenges of sourcing these extraordinary gems. Opal has also appeared on the red carpet, worn by high-profile figures such as Taylor Swift, further cementing its place as both a collectable gemstone and a statement of individuality.

What do you hope visitors discover about Australian opal at GemGenève?

We hope visitors leave with a deeper appreciation of just how unique Australian opal truly is. Beyond the distinctions between Black, Light and Boulder Opal, each individual piece carries its own character — no two are ever alike. In many ways, opal is less like a traditional gemstone and more like a miniature work of art, where colour and pattern unfold in ways that feel almost painterly. It is that sense of individuality that continues to captivate collectors around the world.

Mining at Lightning Ridge

Courtesy Cody Opal

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