

The Hope

A friend of mine has recently asked me to help authenticate a piece of jewellery for him: an ornate brooch with a dark gemstone set into it. It was supposedly once worn by Louis Quatorze, the Sun King. I tried to trace it back to him through historic documents and there are some clues that support this story. However, there are some rather gaping holes in the documentation so it is rather difficult to tell for sure. Since it was not possible to trace back the jewel to a satisfactory degree, it felt natural to move on to another approach. Luckily, back at university, I attended a fascinating course called Fakes and Forgeries. It really got me an understanding of the principles of forensic and scientific investigations into art objects. I cannot not recall all the details, but I distinctly remember how the professor made the point that a rough assessment of jewellery can be done by taking a closer look at how the stones are cut. So I thought I had better read up on classic gemstone cut styles and began to go through my old notes. This is when a photograph fell out of one of the files.

The fire softly crackled on and flashes of light danced within the jewel lying on the coffee table. I however sat in the comfortable embrace of one of the armchairs in the foyer like a rock and stared down into two genuinely happy faces beaming back at me from under black graduation caps. It was Sam and me. Something about this picture made an uneasy sensation form in my stomach. After about a minute, I was able to put my finger on what it was about that image of us that had me sit there as if in a trance. The knot in my stomach slowly gave way to a feeling that there was something in that picture

that I could no longer relate to, did no longer recognise about me. Anyway, it was getting late and I still had work to do. Bowing forward, I snatched the picture from the floor, put it on the table next to the jewel, and returned to reading my notes.

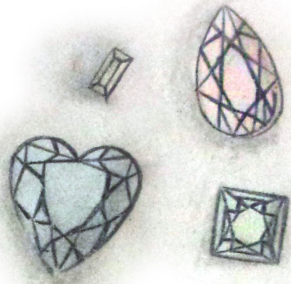


If what I learned back then is still true, the taste of the person who would wear a gemstone had little weight in deciding on the stone cut. Factors like the original shape of the rough stone, location of internal flaws or inclusions were much more formative. In general, a cut gemstone would reduce the mass by roughly fifty percent. This means the sparkly dark gem sitting on the table would have half the caratage of its precursor. The other half was lost in

the process of giving it its present shape. As I thought about this, my eyes drifted back to the photograph of Sam and me.

I remember the day this picture was taken quite vividly: the stress of waiting for our theses to be marked finally was gone. Cheery fellow students were making their way across campus in academic dress that seemed to make everyone move just a bit more gracefully. Although, Sam said it made her feel a bit like Darth Vader whenever a summer breeze got caught in her black robe on our way to assembly hall. During the ceremony, the dean gave a well-

rehearsed, very wordy graduation address and there is one thing in particular that rings true with me now: He said that our graduation was about more than receiving an academic degree, but also constituted a rite of passage. And so I believe it did. So much has happened since that day that has shaped me in a way that makes me look at this picture today and almost see a stranger, or an old friend I have not seen in years. I take a closer look at the picture trying to read in my expression what it is that I had back then that seems to be missing now. The tunes of the hall clock striking midnight bring me back to the present moment. A new day has begun but I decide to read through one more topic before calling it a night.



There is a remarkable example in my notes about a stone that has made history in many ways: The French Blue, or Hope Diamond, as it is called today. The French Blue was a diamond of 23 g cut from a rough stone originating in India. It was among the favourites of the Sun King and his successors until the reign of his grandson, Louis Seize, and Marie

Antoinette was overthrown. After the French Revolution, the diamond was recut to disguise its identity, somehow made its way to London, and finally reappeared in the gem collection of Henry Philip Hope as the centre piece of a necklace. It remained in that banking family for many years, giving the stone that now weighed only 9 g its modern name. Of course, the cut material of the French Blue would be too valuable to simply dispose of it, I believe. Smaller pieces of that diamond must still be scattered here and there, their origin unbeknownst to their owners. Maybe this is even some sort of a lead that

could help me with the piece I was asked to validate. Anyway, my eyelids are getting heavier by the minute now, so I decide to pack up for the night.

The flames in the hearth have grown smaller and in the warmth of the now dimly lit room my eyes lock with the hazel irises in the photograph once more. They radiate with something that I realise I haven't felt in a long time. I pick up the picture and put it in the file as a bookmark before I shut it and place it on the table next to the shimmery broach. Sleepily climbing the stairs, my mind stays occupied with that last thing I read.

The story of the French Blue raises the question of identity, really, doesn't it? What is the true Blue Hope? Was it the central piece in the luxurious jewel ensemble of Louis Quatorze, or the gem framed by small clear crystals and a necklace, or the stone in its curved modern embrace of gold? This gem needed to change and change again over time to become what it is today, namely, the Hope. Likewise, I believe I have changed a lot over the past few years. The door to my room makes a little creaking noise as I open it. I take a look around and decide to leave the lights turned off. The moon paints shapes and patterns in light and shadow on the walls. I use them for orientation as I walk into the room. My thoughts still on the picture, I slip into bed a few moments later. My past has made me who I am today, I think as I close my eyes. Maybe I had to leave some things behind to make it to this point, but nothing is lost forever, and my identity is not set in stone.

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