

Preface

In his 1942 book *The Imperial Treasury of the Indian Mughuls*, Abd al-Azīz commented, “It constitutes one of the facile paradoxes of economists that while the most essentially useful things like air and water seldom have a price in the market, the utterly useless things like rubies or diamonds command incredibly high prices. But we are not all economists or dealers in paradox.” My interest in the history of “utterly useless” jewelry and gems, diamonds included, dates back half a century but for much of that period was focused on the ancient world. As far as being enticed into the field of more recent diamond history is concerned, I can place the epiphany precisely. In 2000 I read Giles Milton’s wonderful book *Nathaniel’s Nutmeg*, about Nathaniel Courthope’s role in the struggle between the English and Dutch for control of the world supply of nutmeg in the early seventeenth century. This book included a passing mention of the East India Company’s trade in diamonds from Borneo. A few hours leafing through volumes in the old India Office Library, now housed as part of the British Library in London, unearthed more of this often forgotten chapter in diamond history (Ogden 2005). A by-product of this research was a glimpse of the Indian diamond trade at that same period. Serendipity reared its head when a conversation with my friend Benjamin Zucker revealed that my eagerness for embarking on a fuller study of Indian diamonds in the seventeenth century meshed with his enthusiasm for writing a book about Elihu Yale, founder of Yale University, who, as governor of the East India Company in Fort St. George—now Chennai—in the later seventeenth century, had had a close if not always scrupulously correct relationship with the diamond trade. The happily embraced plan was a joint book on Yale and the Indian diamond trade. However, the project took on a life, or rather two lives, of its own. In one direction lay the history

of the diamond trade from India and the development of diamond cutting; in the other Yale, his career, and the fate of his huge collection of paintings and other possessions sold by auction after his death. The amicable outcome was two books. One is *Elihu Yale* by Diana Scarisbrick and Benjamin Zucker (2014); the other is the present volume.

The aim of this book is to consider the history of the trade in diamonds from India to Europe and the Near East, from its roots some two and a half thousand years ago until the early 1700s, when the diamond deposits in Brazil displaced India as the world's primary supplier. This is not the first study of the history of diamonds or their cutting—there is Godehard Lenzen's 1970 study—but new research means that we can supplement or suggest some reconsideration of the findings of his and other older works. More recent studies have tended to have had a different focus than the present volume. Alois Haas, Ludwig Hödl, Horst Schneider, and Ekkehard Fluck concentrated on literary mentions in their 2004 study *Diamant: Zauber und Geschichte eines Wunders der Natur*, while Gedalia Yogev, Edgar Samuel, and Tijn Vanneste have individually looked in detail at the diamond trade in the eighteenth century. Then, of course, there is Herbert Tillander's groundbreaking 1995 *Diamond Cuts in Historic Jewellery, 1381–1910*, a huge repository of his expertise and meticulous observation. I have not sought to duplicate what Tillander did and offer the present work as more of a supplement than a competitor. I have not always followed Tillander's classifications and subdivisions, however, especially where they seem to suggest too much predetermination regarding early cut forms. I believe the shapes of many diamonds in the early days of cutting are the fortuitous result of cutters of varying experience being confronted with rough diamonds in all manner of shapes from which they had to cut gems to best

delight the eye of their patrons while minimizing any reduction in weight.

This book has been interesting and enjoyable to research and write, but its scope, in terms of both chronology and geography, naturally brings to the fore my limitations. There will always be further archives, inventories, and collections that could shed light on this subject, and there is much of relevance out there in myriad languages—from the many European tongues to Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and beyond—that will have to await consideration by those with the relevant skills. As with any book, this work had to be brought to an end, and so what is presented is a foundation that others with more specialized knowledge of individual aspects can supplement or refute until a clearer picture of the history of this extraordinary gem is built up.

Over the many years during which I was mulling over the history of diamonds, from mental back-burner to all-consuming preoccupation, many have provided useful and stimulating input. It is impossible to mention them all, but top of the list is my good friend Benjamin Zucker, whose infectious enthusiasm and confidence in this project, and its predecessors, over some forty years have been an incredible source of support. This has been supplemented by his generous help with providing photographs and facilitating the production of the book in this copiously illustrated form. In addition to those individuals and institutions named in the captions to the figures, those deserving special thanks include Riaz Barbur, Osmund Bopearachchi, Hratch Kaspar, Susan Stronge, Scott Sucher, Andrej Šumbera, Yasukazu Suwa, David Warren, Slava Yevdayev, Farlang.com's Rare & Antique Book Library, and The Prints Collector. Diamond expert extraordinaire Michael Hing answered technical questions and made useful comments and Navina Haidar,

curator of Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, read an early draft and made many useful suggestions. Mary Burland cast her expert editorial eyes over an early draft, spotting the myriad spelling and punctuation errors to which I am prone, and also made many helpful suggestions. Yale University Press gathered some impressive readers of the text, all anonymous except gemologist Çiğdem Lüle, all being both hugely encouraging and very useful.

At Yale University Press, my sincerest gratitude goes to Jean E. Thomson Black for her enthusiasm and support for this book, and to her team. In particular, I thank production editor Jeffrey Schier for managing the project, Jean's assistant Michael Deneen for his patience, Sonia Shannon for her brilliant design skills, and Joyce Ippolito for her meticulous editing, suggestions, and comments.

My partner Sara Abey has put up with my preoccupations with getting this work completed with extraordinary patience and support. I don't think I'll ever persuade her that diamonds are as beautiful as sapphires, but this book is dedicated to her with my love and appreciation.

Diamonds



