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Stuck between a diamond and a hard place

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As a symbol of status, tragedy, luxury and greed, for the non-purveyor, picking the right diamond may seem a tad overwhelming. Is the color white enough, is it a conflict diamond or is it just plain ole cubic zirconium?

Some experts say picking out the perfect stone can be a simple process, and knowing what to look for can curtail unnecessary qualms.

Certified gemologist and jewelry expert Susan Eisen, owner of Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry and Watches in El Paso, is a Senior Appraiser of the Accredited Gemologist Association and Master Gemologist Appraiser of the American Society of Appraisers.

The 27-year diamond veteran recently penned "Crazy About Jewelry! The Expert Guide to Buying, Selling, and Caring for Your Jewelry."

"The craze began 4,000 years ago in India, which was a major source of diamonds until 1725 when they were found in South Africa," Eisen said. "They are now mined on every continent except Europe and Antarctica."

Making the grade

Since the obsession began in India, jewelers have perfected their methods. The Gemological Institute of America developed a widely used system that allows them to compare diamonds and determine what each gem's color, clarity and cut.

"No two diamonds are the same, just like snowflakes and just like human beings," Eisen said. "So even though there is a grading system, it's still a bit subjective."

Eisen suggests looking at as many diamonds as possible, learning how to use a loupe, a magnifying glasses used by jewelers that fit in the eye socket, and seeing the stone in person instead of on a computer browser.

"You can shoot a beam through a diamond," Eisen said, "but the computer can't tell you how beautiful it is, and it can't compare two diamonds."

Consumers who buy jewelry online grade and shop by looking at certificates instead of using their eyes, she said, judge the diamonds on properties instead of appearance.

"If a diamond has a lot of special characteristics, then they'll jump out at you," Eisen said. "Trust yourself as a consumer."

Tying the knot

Jorden Perrett, General Manager of Robbins Bros. Willowbrook, said as an engagement ring store, picking out the right diamond is their focus. Because they sell the diamond and the ring separately, there are about 300,000 combinations to choose from.

"There is a huge amount of choice when it comes to diamonds," Perrett said, which he said sets Robbins Bros. apart from other jewelers. "There are so many different shapes of diamonds, there's the princess, the round, the asscher cut, the pear."

Robbins Bros. has gem scopes, which show the diamonds with more clarity than a loupe, so the customer can see the difference between the stones. Within each of the shapes there is a wide range of color, cut and clarity, giving the customer control of the uniqueness of the ring, he said.

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The color and the shape

Clarity and cut are important qualities which affect the diamond's brilliance. They can be shallow, deep, or thick around the girdle.

The round has always been the most popular and the princess cut is also a favorite among consumers, Eisen said. Others fade in and out of popularity.

Though a wide variety of cuts are available, people are inventing new ones. Eisen researched the market and found what she considered to be the most brilliant diamond at the best price and dubbed it "The Eisen Ideal."

The Robbins Bros. recently acquired rights to carry the MISD, or "Mr. Smith's Incredible Diamond," a diamond cut with certain specifications that they say makes it appear bigger and brighter.

Rock knowledge

Eisen said finding a respectable jeweler is an important part of the stone-picking process. She recommended acquiring the assistance of a graduate gemologist, who is required to pass examinations over hundreds of stones.

Even better for consultation are appraisers, who are always in tune with the market and keeping up with the trends. She said they have the most stringent requirements for certification.

"Can you get an appraisal when you buy it, will they do the sizing and setting for free, will they clean it on a regular basis for you?" Eisen said. "A reputable jeweler takes care of you for the duration of your relationship. Check the mounting later on to make sure the diamond's tight.

Consumers should ask that they company guarantee that the diamond is conflict-free.



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