

Discussing an Iconic Setting with a

Tiffany Legend

BY JILLIAN DARA

Celebrating the 130th Anniversary of The Tiffany 6-Prong Engagement Ring with Chief Gemologist, Melvyn Kirtley

Tiffany & Co.'s Chief Gemologist, Melvyn Kirtley is a dapper Englishman who grew up with a passion for the luxury world of Tiffany. Ever since his first trips to the U.S., Kirtley remembers peeking into Tiffany windows to catch a glimpse of the jewelry that wasn't so prevalent in the U.K. In the early 80s, Kirtley pursued his passion by moving to San Francisco to look for a sales job at, none other than, Tiffany & Co. Upon hire, he began selling silver and key rings but was intrigued by gemstones; recognizing a connection to them he hadn't noticed before. Once again, he took initiative and began studying gemology at the Gemological Institute of America, in California, whilst continuing to work for Tiffany in the sales department.

Once he graduated, Kirtley began selling diamonds, along with colored gemstones, before moving to the New York City store to specialize further in the gemstone world. His passion never died and he's been with Tiffany ever since. Today, he sits in front of me, sapphire eyes sparkling just as bright as the diamonds I came to see as part of the 130th Anniversary of the Tiffany 6-Prong setting, and I can very much see his passion is still alive.

After being with the company for over 30 years, you have quite the resume at Tiffany. How would you describe your current position as Chief Gemologist to someone you just met? My role is really divided into three. One is the selection aspect and the finding of polished gemstones, colored gemstones, the finding of important diamonds for our statement collections. The other is working with the press to really talk about our heritage and our history in gemology and how important Tiffany has been in the world of gemology. I mean we've been crucial, and have introduced some incredible gemstones, for the first time throughout our history, so representing that. And also, working with customers on acquisitions. Putting those three things together, that's the fullness of the role and there's certainly a lot there.

Do you have any outstanding memories in helping customers pick out a certain piece of jewelry? There's many. It's always hard to try and categorize importance because everyone is important. I always feel difficult about that in a sense because I don't want to ever shortchange anyone.

But you know, we had a beautiful, beautiful blue diamond, which we called the 'Tiffany Anniversary Blue.' It's one of the most important greenish-blue diamonds that we have ever found. The color was just incredible, almost indescribable. It was absolutely beautiful; I just fell in love with it. To take that through — to find a customer who was equally as passionate about it and wanted it to be a surprise engagement ring — and to follow that all the way through to the engagement, that was quite remarkable to me.

With so many special moments like that, I can truly understand how the rest of the staff here, today, described an engagement ring to me saying, "We sell happiness." We do. We're an incredibly inclusionary company in every way and that makes us so special. Every single moment, for every single thing that happens here, is an important one, in one way or another — whether someone is buying a gift or whether someone is purchasing something for themselves, it's often the beginning of a long journey with us. So, you can never diminish any of these things that happen along our spectrum.

I'm really here to help everyone. I'm supporting sometimes that rarified heir of our world, which is our statement jewelry, and that's a very important thing for us but I'm as equally passionate about our silver 'Return to Tiffany' bracelet that might be the first thing a 12-year-old might have; and they'll wear it maybe forever. The breadth of it to me is the magnitude of it.

I can see your passion coming through as you speak about these moments but a big moment for you this year is the 130th Anniversary of the Tiffany setting, so what does that mean to you? So, the Tiffany 6-prong setting, designed in 1886 by our founder, Charles Lewis Tiffany —when you put it in context of the world of design and jewelry design — it's one of the most quintessential settings that's ever been designed and ever been made and always will be. It's sort of set that standard; that benchmark that everyone else tries to



reach. The simplicity of it, the beauty of it, all of these elements and of course the simplest things are the hardest things to design. You can't hide behind anything in designing or manufacturing or creating a Tiffany 6-prong diamond solitaire because everything is exposed. The simplicity of it is so incredibly brilliant. It's the most classic setting that will never go out of style.

What's the process in rejecting 99.96 percent of diamonds? We have a Tiffany, gemological laboratory where we're looking at all the diamonds — which are gem-quality diamonds — that are available in the world. There's a lot [of diamonds] that we don't even look at, that don't meet any of our parameters. But those diamonds that we are polishing, we're making sure that they all fall within incredibly strict criteria. Not only in the four Cs [cut, carat weight, color and clarity] but in this fifth C we call presence, which is really examining the facet alignment, the facet junctions, the overall polish, the symmetry, all of these extra, exceptional elements that often others overlook. So, when you take all of that together and you look at, ultimately, what we end up putting into our inventory, it's 0.04 percent of what's out there in the world.

What's it like to see that kind of 'diamond in a rough' to a 'diamond in a ring' transition? It's an incredible process that, we use the word fastidiously, passionately control throughout every step. They say that counting up the times that a diamond is examined through our process — from beginning, to cut, to final polish — it's got to be more than 1300 times for these points of contact of determining quality. It's remarkable. And of course, a woman will look at her diamond, throughout her lifetime, more than a million times, many more.

It's wonderful that you want the customer to truly understand your jewelry and the history of Tiffany before a purchase. We don't want to be boring but we want to educate, we want to make sure people understand our company and the history and the heritage aspects that maybe people don't know at all, and once they do know, then it becomes meaningful. I think we're all like that with certain brands, I certainly am. I want to know the depth. Then once I've dived into it, then I want to know more and I want to learn more because those are the critical things you're buying. That's the investment, that's what makes it so special.