



BLACK MAGIC

From black diamonds and Tahitian pearls to deep, dark tourmaline and pyrite crystals, jewellery designers are falling for the midnight mystique of black stones. By SHAWNA COHEN

WHEN ENGLAND'S PRINCE ALBERT DIED IN 1861, a devastated Queen Victoria mourned him by wearing black for the remaining 40 years of her reign. So devoted was she that even her jewellery was made of jet, a type of fossilized coal that resembles black glass. And though she was simply mourning her husband, the queen managed to bring black stones into mainstream fashion. Now, history is clearly repeating itself. A whole new generation of jewellers are using black stones in their designs—onyx, spinel, diamonds and sapphires among them—and creating dramatic looks that are a far cry from grandma's pearls.

"Black is definitely a palette that appeals to people—it has a mystery to it," says Myles Mindham, owner of Mindham Fine Jewellery in Toronto. "It's neutral, it's easy, yet it also holds a certain elegance." Mindham, whose client list includes Uma Thurman and soprano Measha Brueggergosman, is using black like never before, often mixing it with white diamonds, gold and coloured stones. His latest collection features chandelier earrings with a pear-shaped peridot surrounded by black diamonds, as well as a statement-making cuff that combines black and white diamonds with stingray.

According to Duncan Parker, gemologist and vice-president of Dupuis Auctioneers, a leading jewellery auction house in Toronto, black diamond is one of the most common black gemstones to go mainstream. "Twenty years ago, nobody was wearing them," he says, recalling the time a diamond jeweller walked into his office and, spotting the black diamonds on his desk, asked incredulously, "Those are diamonds? Why didn't they turn them into

drill bits?" Parker shrugs. "He said they were nothing but junk. He was a traditionalist."

But nowadays, even purists are turning to the dark side. Retailer Maison Birks, which is celebrating its 135th anniversary in 2014 and is best known for classic pieces like diamond earrings and engagement rings, has a slew of black stones on offer, including a teardrop pendant in black onyx with a rose-gold mesh cap and a Tahitian pearl drop pendant accented with white diamonds. "Black stones, and black onyx in particular, have been used since the early years of jewellery-making—they can be traced all the way back to ancient Roman cameos," says Grace Reagh, high jewellery specialist at Maison Birks. "The trend of using black stones in jewellery has resurfaced pretty much once every decade for over 200 years now."

According to Eva Hartling, the company's director of marketing and communications, black really is the new black when it comes to reaching a younger demographic. "In the past, fine jewellers would never mix a semi-precious material like onyx with diamonds," she says. Today, it's a common sight. Hartling attributes the surge in black stones in part to their modest price tag (a black diamond is around 10 per cent of the price of a white diamond), especially when compared to more traditional materials like gold, whose cost has been on the rise over the past few years.

Fortunately, the craze is about more than just cost analysis. Jewellers and consumers alike are attracted to the versatility of black and the way it contrasts with more traditional stones. Los Angeles- >



FROM LEFT: TIFFANY & CO. TEARDROP BLACK ONYX AND DIAMOND EARRINGS; ERDEM RUTHENIUM-PLATED SWAROVSKI CRYSTAL BROOCH AT NET-A-PORTER.COM; MAISON BIRKS TAHITIAN PEARL EARRINGS; DAVID YURMAN WAVELY BRACELET WITH BLACK DIAMONDS AND BLACK ONYX; PAMELA LOVE SILVER AGATE NECKLACE; BELOW: DAVID YURMAN ANJOU EARRINGS WITH HEMATITE; TIFFANY & CO. ZIEGFELD RING WITH FRESHWATER PEARLS AND BLACK ONYX

based fine jewellery designer Lizzie Mandler, who counts Kate Hudson and Rihanna among her supporters, has an entire collection devoted to black and white diamonds. “For the person who’s a little edgier, black diamonds are the way to go. They make a stronger statement and are less ostentatious [than traditional stones],” she says. “My wardrobe is very black and white, so I couldn’t imagine committing to a larger coloured stone for an everyday piece of jewellery. Neutral options are basically white diamonds, topaz and crystal—or black. It’s much more versatile, and people are starting to see that.”

Some of Mandler’s standout pieces include the Pavé 5 Day Ring, a stack of five gold bands with tiny black diamonds held together by a simple white-diamond bar, and a pair of gold hoop earrings with white diamonds on the outside and black diamonds on the inside. The look is powerful yet effortless. “There’s something really nice about the contrast of black and yellow gold. It makes jewellery more everyday,” she says.

At jewellery e-tailer Stone & Strand, founder Nadine McCarthy Kahane says onyx is the hot stone on the scene, pointing to Elizabeth and James’s fall collection, which combines black onyx with white topaz-studded crosses to create a bold graphic look. Renowned jeweller David Yurman is also a fan of onyx, as evidenced in some of his newest pieces,

including a classic sterling silver Waverly bracelet featuring a combination of black pavé diamonds and faceted black onyx. At Tiffany & Co., art deco goes dark in a breathtaking ring featuring an 8.2-carat, cushion-cut black onyx stone surrounded by bezel-set white diamonds. “Jewellery no longer needs to sparkle,” Kahane explains. “It’s all about the statement and design.”

The rise of black stones brings with it a modern edge that’s still a rarity in fine jewellery. And, according to Claire Foster, head of accessories and footwear at Worth Global Style Network, an online trend analysis and research service, it’s a trend that’s continuing to gain momentum. “Texture plays a big part in the rise of black stones, as these opaque and sometimes matte-finish stones create a much bolder contrast to the polished metals we are seeing used as settings,” she says, pointing to natural tourmaline and pyrite as the latest in buzzy black stones. “They add a depth that looks new compared to the more brilliant, transparent stones.”

And while the diamond will always be a coveted classic, its black counterpart and dark cohorts are hypermodern and unapologetically cool, the representation of a turn of tastes for a younger generation looking to stand out in an unexpected way. They’re at once alluring and edgy, but it’s their subtlety that makes the biggest and baddest statement of all. □

SCHOOL OF ROCK

Black-stone jewellery is one of the season’s hottest trends, but the gems themselves have been around forever. We caught up with gemologist Duncan Parker, vice-president of Dupuis Auctioneers, for a breakdown of the most stylish stones of the bunch.



BLACK DIAMOND

A naturally occurring gemstone, found primarily in Australia. “Black diamonds are the most valuable of all the black stones,” says Parker. “When polished, the surfaces are more reflective than other gems. They are also miraculously flat, unlike other gemstones that might be rounded.”



BLACK ONYX

A variety of chalcedony quartz, black onyx is the most commonly encountered black gemstone in the world and, until recently, was most often used in men’s jewellery (probably because of its subtlety). “Its lustre is noticeably lower than diamonds,” says Parker.



BLACK SPINEL

This rare gem is extremely robust. “Because spinel is so hard and durable, you can turn it into beads—they don’t tend to suffer any damage from drilling,” says Parker. “And they won’t scratch except by the few stones that are harder than they are [such as sapphires, rubies and diamonds].”



BLACK STAR SAPPHIRE

A form of aluminum oxide known as corundum, black sapphire often appears to have a star in it, which is really just a reflection of light. “It’s an unusual and mystical element,” says Parker. Occasionally, when the crystal is formed it projects a 12-point star. “That’s a rare and collectible thing.”



BLACK PEARL

Conventionally from Tahiti, black pearls (also known as Tahitian pearls) come from the black-lipped pearl oyster. “They often have a greenish overtone to the black, so they have this background rainbow of colours,” says Parker of the rare ocean gems.



BLACK TOURMALINE

These crystals are long and narrow, which means they’re usually cut into square or rectangular shapes. “It has what we refer to as vitreous lustre, meaning it has a shiny, glass-like appearance,” says Parker. “It’s brighter than onyx but less than diamonds in terms of reflectivity.”