

# "We make temptation here." *Graff*

by Joanna Hardy

**Entering the world of Graff is a privilege.** As I wound my way down the stairs beneath the pavements of Albemarle Street I was aware that I was about to be introduced to some of the UK's most talented craftsmen, who are making history every day by creating incredible treasures that will grace the windows in one of Graff's 50 stores around the world.

The extraordinary Graff legacy is down to one man: Mr Laurence Graff. It is very rare to meet a person who is not only born with an exceptional eye for detail, proportion and craftsmanship, but who also has an inbuilt capacity to understand how to transform a diamond crystal into a magnificent spectacle of perfection. To quote Suzy Menkes, "The greatest jewellers, it seems to me, are born, not trained," and I could not agree more.

Laurence Graff was not born into the jewellery world. His humble beginnings in the unforgiving environment of the East End of London during the war years taught him how to be street smart and savvy. It was a question of survival, and the young Graff had wonderful role models in both his grandparents and parents. His Orthodox Jewish paternal grandparents were from Russia and they ran a kosher butcher's shop in Stepney; they gave his father a newsagent cum sweetshop to start him off in business. His grandmother, Katie Graff, was the business brains of the family and greatly influenced the young Laurence. His maternal grandparents were emigrants from Bucharest in Romania and his grandfather was a bootmaker who had a shoe shop in Brick Lane, The East End of London, tough as it was, gave Laurence the invaluable education of how to read people; winning was about trying to anticipate and be one step ahead of the others.

Graff was introduced to the world of jewellery at the age of 15 when he became an apprentice to a jeweller in Hatton Garden. His ambition was thwarted when, after only three months of scrubbing floors and fetching sandwiches, he was told "you'll never make the grade", and lost his job.

His determination meant that he got a job with another jeweller while studying at the Sir John Cass College of Arts and later at the Central School (now Central Saint Martins). But that job ended too and at the age of 17 he joined forces with another jeweller, repairing and making Victorian-inspired jewellery, which was the fashion at the time because of the high luxury purchase tax imposed on all new jewellery. At the age of 22 Graff took over the running of the company, including an accrued debt of £3,000, and turned the business around.

In 1960 Graff Diamonds was established and his first shop in Hatton Garden opened two years later. At the age of 28 he won the prestigious Diamond International Award with a diamond and amethyst bracelet. Fuelled by this success he travelled extensively to Asia and the Middle East, always on the look-out for opportunities and aiming to be one step ahead of his contemporaries. All the time, his incredible affinity with diamonds was growing.

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One example of Graff being a crucial step ahead was in his use of coloured diamonds. Fifty years ago, to be of maximum value, a diamond had to be white; few people appreciated diamonds that were blue, pink or yellow.

"No one wanted them," remembers Graff. One day in the early 1970s a diamond-cutter in New York showed him a 31ct yellow diamond he had polished as a radiant cut. "It was a beautiful stone," Graff recalls. He instantly saw the potential in these yellow diamonds: not only would he be able to improve the cutting to maximize the fire and life but there were more yellow crystals that came in larger sizes. Graff knew that these stones could make an impact and he began to seek them out. The turning point came in 1974 when he had the opportunity to buy an old, poorly polished yellow stone from an aristocratic Indian family. Graff re-cut the stone: the 47.39ct *Star of Bombay* was born and from then on yellow diamonds saw a dramatic surge in popularity.

Graff has always been fascinated by diamonds. "I truly believe that working with diamonds is what I was born to do," he says, and this passion means he has handled more important diamonds than any other dealer of our time. I recently showed him the newly-printed timeline of all the important diamonds that he has handled which amounted to a total of 76 significant stones including *The Idol's Eye*, *The Wittlesbach-Graff*, *The Graff Pink* as well as cutting some of the world's largest rough, the 603ct *Lesotho Promise*, the 493ct *Let'song Legacy* and the 550ct *Let'song Star*. As Graff proudly looked along the line up, pausing at a few of the images, you could sense he was remembering the stories attached to each stone. Then he quietly said he thought there were a few missing.

Laurence Graff has always relied on his wits and his sixth sense. I asked him when he developed his confidence and he looked at me with his steely eyes and quietly replied, "I was born confident". Growing up surrounded by his family's solid work ethic and values has undoubtedly helped mould him into the shrewd businessman that he is today. His zest for life is enviable. "Every day I wake up with anticipation and an excitement at what the day may bring, maybe I will get that phone call saying that a large piece of rough has been found and then there is the excitement of deciding what you're going to get out of it." Being a perfectionist, he only works with the best cutters in the business, and on special stones Graff will sit with the polishers discussing, assessing and analyzing what may be achievable from a piece of rough. Even though there are scanners and computerized machines to help, initially the rough is still assessed by the naked eye. It is not often that Graff is surprised at an outcome. Many of the diamonds sold by Graff have been cut by Sotilco, one of the world's leading diamond manufacturing and trading companies, part of the Graff group of businesses.

Graff is a truly British brand as every piece of jewellery that is made for the global business is manufactured in their workshops in Albemarle Street, London. Raymond Graff, Laurence's brother, has been production manager for more than 50 years. He has the same insatiable Graff quest for only producing the finest jewellery that will showcase the Graff stones to maximum benefit. In his words, "We make temptation here and there is only one chance to make it special."

A large diamond rough, set in a Graff Pink ring, is surrounded by traditional tools, such as cutting blocks, punches and square blocks to form the basic structure of the diamond. The rough is placed in a special machine.

Image: Graff



The pristine workshop is the pride of Raymond Graff. It employs approximately 70 craftsmen, including the few lucky apprentices who sit next to their masters to learn the skills that will one day allow them to become masters of the industry. The days of watching over the shoulder of your master are long gone, for Graff's 'state of the art' workshops have overhead plasma screens where the apprentice can watch his or her master in real time and see how a particular technique is applied. The company wants to make only the best, but its exacting standards cannot be achieved unless there is investment in the next generation of the UK's craftsmen. Raymond Graff is always looking for aspiring young craftsmen to join his specialized team and at the time of writing three apprentices have come from The Goldsmiths' Centre, two for diamond mounting and one for gemstone setting.

### Some of the world's most important stones will be set in Albemarle Street before they are presented to the world

Graff's values are rooted in family traditions which are reflected in all aspects of his empire: in the workshop there are three generations of craftsmen from the same family and one craftsman has worked there for 39 years. The apprentices who begin training as diamond mounters must be committed to Graff for five years; diamond setters for four years; while polishing apprentices are indentured for three. More importantly they must have a real passion for their craft.

Making *The Fascination*, a transformable jewel set with 152.96 carats of white diamonds. The master setters prepare the mount in order to set the diamonds securely. Image: Graff



Graff's necklace. Machines (60,000) and diamonds (152,966) set in platinum. Image: Graff

Some of the world's most important stones will be set in Albemarle Street before they are presented to the world. Modern technology mingles with the traditional skills of the craftsmen. Such is the attention to detail, there is a team of seven diamond mounters who only make the Graff single stone engagement ring, with its unique angles on the shanks and the setting. Proportion is central to Graff's enterprise. As Laurence Graff says, "If the angles are not right it immediately hurts my eyes and I don't feel comfortable." He will have no qualms about sending a piece back to be re-made or the diamond re-cut if it is not perfect. "I am always trying to teach people to look hard and understand what they are looking at. So many people don't really look and listen."

Graff is a hugely important export brand for the UK, and this was recognized when Laurence Graff was presented with a prestigious Queen's Award for International Trade in 1973, 1977, 1994, 2006 and 2014. A pioneering collaboration between Graff and the Goldsmiths' Company's Assay Office has meant that from November last year a London hallmark, so important for this British brand, has been applied within the Graff workshop itself.

The assay office within the Albemarle Street workshop is the first hallmarking facility located within a retail jeweller and Raymond Graff very proudly showed me the sealed-off area which only a member of the Goldsmiths' Company Assay Office can enter. It is equipped with the latest X-ray and laser machines and can even be remotely accessed by the laboratory chemist within Goldsmiths' Hall if required. About 30-40 pieces are hallmarked per day and each will receive the GD sponsor mark representing Graff Diamonds, along with the metal fineness mark, the Common Control mark and the town mark (the leopard's head for London) all combining to form a convention mark. The UK convention mark is recognised by 19 European countries, which benefits Graff's cross-border trade. Today with the help of modern technology it is no longer necessary to take physical samples of the metal to check the quality as XRF machines can assess the metal through X-rays and the hallmarks are lasered, as opposed to being struck, which means that all of Graff's pieces can be tested and hallmarked in their finished state.



The young Laurence Graff studies a jewel (1970s). Image: Graff

Setting a diamond within its mount. Image: Graff

This exciting venture is an important landmark for the British jewellery industry: Graff, the world's most prestigious retail jeweller, is sending a strong message that it is proud to be British. The fact that so much of Graff's production is carried out in London is to be celebrated, but this is becoming a luxury, as most workshops can no longer compete with the Far East. It is therefore of paramount importance that British craftsmanship is supported through funding and apprenticeship schemes which the Goldsmiths' Centre and Graff both support. Our workshops need to pass on the skills of the goldsmith to future generations so that the British jewellery industry can flourish. But this will not happen without educating the consumer about the importance of good craftsmanship. It is the responsibility of us all to make sure that these skills are appreciated and understood so they do not become a chapter in the history books, for we would all be the poorer for it.