



A Girl's best friend

Tiffany diamond engagement rings in platinum, from left: Tiffany Legacy, Tiffany Bezet, Lucida, and Tiffany Novo

Think cut, clarity and colour when choosing an engagement ring

"It looks like it should have a highball around it."

Dorothy (Jane Russell) commenting on a diamond, from the film Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

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When it comes to diamonds, especially those set into engagement rings, size is a big talking point. But carat size is only one consideration when choosing a ring. No piece of jewelry is more symbolic of emotion and expectation than the engagement ring. It's a big-ticket item, so it's wise to take care and do some research when navigating the diamond retail landscape.

"People sometimes think that you compromise on quality with a smaller stone, but I would argue that it's almost the opposite," says Rob Ferguson, Western Director for Tiffany & Co.

Cut, clarity and colour, says Ferguson, determine the brilliance of the stone not the size. He says that the cut alone can affect the stone's value up to 30 per cent and how the surface (facets) are finished and aligned is the single most important factor for brilliance.

High quality white diamonds have the greatest clarity and the least amount of colour. A little yellow is not a good thing. A lot of yellow, when it's a true yellow diamond, is a good thing as it's rarer than a white diamond. Colour grading runs on a scale from D to Z. (The old A-C system is no longer used.) D-F is colourless, while G-J is near colourless. To put in perspective how unusual colourless diamonds are, Tiffany starts at "I" working toward "D."

Clarity is measured by the number of inclusions, or marks, in the stone. That scale ranges from flawless to imperfect eye-visible inclusions. Those graded flawless to very-slightly-included are the top three per cent of stones.

Charles Lewis Tiffany is credited with creating the contemporary engagement ring in 1886 when the classic Tiffany setting was introduced.

"It was really quite revolutionary and it's something that we think of as commonplace now, but, before then, stones were always set into the band," Ferguson explains. "You basically just saw the surface, or the table, of the diamond. The Tiffany designer raised it up so you see the entire stone. And by having the claws radiate out, even from the side the diamond still maintains that diamond shape."

The Tiffany setting, as it is known, remains the most copied diamond setting in the world. It has six claws that Ferguson says make for a secure setting and allow for each claw to be smaller.

"This is our most popular setting for the simple reason that it isn't something that you'll look at in 10 or 15 years and say 'gee, what was I thinking?' It really is a classic style."

In the last 15 years, there's been a subtle shift in ring styling. Though the classic solitaire setting remains essentially unchanged, there has been a move toward white metals for ring bands, white gold and platinum, easing yellow gold into the background.

Selina Ladak, managing director at Stittgen Fine Jewelry in West Vancouver, says their custom-designed rings are crafted in 19k white gold because of its strength.

"The weight of the ring is very substantial," Ladak says, adding that the white hue remains true.

Heritage silhouettes are a strong trend in contemporary design. Think Great Gatsby influences.

"People are looking at Renaissance-inspired filigree," Ladak says. "Styles are more feminine and delicate than before."

A big part of that trend are settings adorned with a "halo" or border of smaller diamonds surrounding the central stone — a more affordable way to introduce the coveted but much rarer coloured diamonds.

Ferguson concurs saying "the coloured diamond surround is a nice way to introduce a pink diamond, for instance, without the extreme expense of a pink diamond solitaire. Pink diamonds can fetch well over half a million dollars a carat."

He explains that for every 10,000 perfect white diamonds, there is one pink diamond mined.

Ladak says another trend is diamond sourcing.

With all the controversy over dirty (read unethically sourced) diamonds, many people are seeking out Canadian diamonds which, by virtue of their national provenance, seem less fraught with risk.

Finding an ethically sourced diamond ring can be a simple process. Search out a retailer that guarantees not only their rings' quality but also can trace provenance.

Tiffany & Co. has direct mine relationships that make the provenance transparent. Stittgen buys Canadian diamonds and has known the same supplier for 30 years.

Canada's historic jeweller Birks, now rebranded as Maison Birks, also has a stringent policy in place for sourcing.

"Maison Birks guarantees the origin, pedigree and provenance of all its Canadian diamonds," says Francis Guindon, the company's public relations manager. "Engraved with the Maison Birks name, a maple leaf and its own diamond identification number, each gem is tracked from the moment it is mined to the moment it is placed inside the distinctive Maison Birks Blue Box."

De Beers, Vancouver's newest luxury jeweller, also guarantees that their jewelry has been ethically sourced and responsibly crafted.

"Our stringent conflict diamond policy and its certification is our confident declaration that every single piece of De Beers jewelry is ethically crafted and 100 per cent conflict-free," says Jennie Farmer, De Beers Brand Director.

Deciding on the perfect ring might seem straight forward, but both Ladak and Ferguson have found that buyers often think they want one thing and then leave with something different.

Both advise that it's best to try on different styles, cuts and sizes of stones to discover which one suits both the bride's personal style and lifestyle.

Ultimately, an engagement ring is not just about beauty but lasting wearability.



Stittgen's hand-crafted Fleur-de-lis ring, with Canadian centre diamond, recently won the Canadian Jewellers' Excellence in Design award.