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A Toast to
CHAMPAGNE
DIAMONDS

Curtis Australia's Colours of Australia

BY NANCY OLSON







Rio Tinto, one of the world's leading mining and exploration companies, recently invited Curtis Australia to design and create an objet d'art highlighting champagne diamonds. The result is the Colours of Australia, an amazing feat of artistry that showcases the many talents of Curtis Australia. The one-of-a-kind pen features a fluid design evocative of the Australian outback, with likenesses of animals native to Australia engraved on the body of the pen and three kangaroos frolicking below the clip. The Southern Cross constellation is depicted on the cap, and the clip conjures imagery from the Sydney Opera House. The interplay of the champagne, cognac and white diamonds painstakingly set against the silver background of the pen creates a stunning effect.

Glenn Curtis, CEO of Curtis Australia, talks about the pen and its provenance.

Nancy Olson: *How would you, as a master jeweler, describe the color of a champagne diamond?*

Glenn Curtis: I think a champagne diamond has a warmth and richness like the depth of colors you see when looking at amber. I feel it's comparable to a smooth aged bourbon poured over ice in the evening twilight. I appreciate the

colors of almost every gem, from rubies and emeralds to diamonds. But what I like about champagne diamonds in particular is the range of color subtleties and how they act as a contrast to the metal we set them in.

NO: *What was your biggest challenge in designing this pen to best accentuate these diamonds?*

GC: There were two main challenges when designing the pen. Firstly, we had to overcome how to design a piece wherein such a large quantity of diamonds (over 500) could be accommodated. The other challenge was to ensure that the design integrity was maintained whilst giving the diamonds movement and fluidity, so they could capture and reflect light in a dramatic way.

NO: *How many drawings and prototypes did you produce before you settled upon the final design?*

GC: Accepting the commission in the second week of December, we were under a very tight schedule to produce the design ready for the Nomad Two Worlds Exhibition in New York in January. To ensure the piece would be ready for this prestigious event, we developed a streamlined de-



The Nomad Two Worlds Exhibition, held in New York last January, took place in Donna Karan's Urban Zen Center in Manhattan, the event featured photographic art works by Russell James and introduced the Rio Tinto Diamonds 2009 Argyle Diamond Design competition. The launch was hosted by Hugh Jackman and his wife Deborah Lee-Furness. The exhibition included a presentation of Australian art based on a cause with profound impact: the reconciliation of the Australian government with its indigenous citizens. The Curtis Australia Colours of Australia was part of the exhibition. At right, Heather and Glenn Curtis with Nancy Olson at G-Day USA in NYC

sign concept-to-reality strategy. We were given a high degree of design freedom that helped during the conceptual stage. After about five design concepts, we quickly came up with the final design and from this made one prototype prior to making the actual pen.

NO: Which other designers were approached by Rio Tinto to produce a unique product with an Australian theme?

GC: Rio Tinto Diamonds commissioned several designers to create one-of-a-kind pieces using Argyle diamonds [from the Kimberley region of western Australia]. These included Aurora Lopez Mejia, who created the sterling silver and diamond Infinite Echo pendant; Kimberley Fine Diamonds, whose diamond-set pendant features the boab tree and the Southern Cross constellation; and me, with the Colours of Australia diamond-set pen.

NO: How many pens will be produced?

GC: This pen is strictly one-of-a-kind. We are currently designing a simplified version using fewer diamonds in

combination with our Prestige Mark II body shape. This will be ready later in the year, with a limited release of a maximum of 200 pens, each retailing under \$5,000. The price of the Colours of Australia pen is \$69,000.

NO: How long does it take to produce each piece, and how many artisans are involved?

GC: In total, the exclusive piece took several weeks to produce. The process of creating and refining the wax model, casting, polishing and setting involved around six artisans for various periods of time.

NO: Why did you choose sterling silver rather than white gold?

GC: The main reason for using sterling silver for the body of the pen was the ease of creating grains for the gem-setting process. Each diamond is individually secured with four small claws (grains) carved out of the surrounding metal. The process is extremely exacting and requires over twelve individual hand movements

for each gem—from creating a bed in the metal, tailoring the bed to fit each diamond, sculpting the grains and pushing the grains over the diamond's edge, to then beading each grain into a ball. When this procedure is multiplied by over 500 gems, you can see why silver was an advantage.

Incidentally, many of the highly gem-encrusted Crown Jewels throughout history have been fashioned from silver, then gilded.

NO: *How does this pen further stretch the imaginations and expertise of the Curtis Australia artisans?*

GC: Incorporating the remarkably beautiful and unusual champagne diamonds into a fountain pen was a wonderful challenge. And to be provided with such a broad design brief and a relatively unlimited budget to work within was liberating. We have been creating high-end jewelry for many years, and our team really enjoyed putting these skills into the pen. The colored titanium inlay on the clip, which represents the striking sails of the Sydney Opera House, was an example of the fun we had with the pen.

NO: *Where might our readers view the pen?*

GC: The pen is a part of a showcase traveling throughout the U.S.A. It will be on display at various prestigious jewelers and other events arranged by Rio Tinto Diamonds to highlight champagne diamonds. It will be exhibited in Las Vegas in June, and after that the Colours of Australia pen will be offered for sale. There have been expressions of interest from a couple of collectors for this one-of-a-kind pen.

NO: *Is there anything you would like to add?*

GC: Nancy, I found this pen a real pleasure to work on. Although this is not the first time I have been able to put some of our indigenous culture into the design of a pen, I did several subtle things—like the hidden intaglio patterns under the pen clip, and the representations of the dreamtime dot painting [mythological representation of what Aboriginal people carry in their minds] and animal silhouettes. We pride ourselves in the hand-finished and crafted feel of our pens and jewelry. We put the same efforts into our everyday pens—it is the same team that works on all our pens. 

