Uncut gems

by James Panero


On the evening of October 29, 1964, a trio of beach boys sidled their white Cadillac up to the American Museum of Natural History. By the next morning, they had pulled off the biggest jewelry heist in U.S. history. Allan Kuhn, Roger Clark, and Jack Roland Murphy—a champion wave-rider known as “Murph the Surf”—had that rare combination of talents. By the time they targeted the museum, they were accomplished swimmers, aerialists, and burglars. Living in Miami, Murphy had helped popularize California surf culture on the East Coast. He had also used his aquatic skills to swim away from the many mansions he looted along the Intracoastal Waterway. Flush from these capers, the gang lived large in New York. They took up an expensive penthouse suite at an Upper West Side hotel as they patronized jazz clubs and passed around a copy of The Story of the Gems by Herbert P. Whitlock (who had been the curator of mineralogy at the museum from 1918 to 1941), all the while searching for targets. The museum’s J. P. Morgan Hall of Gems and Minerals, at the time an antiquated fourth-floor room of open windows and unalarmed cases, was an easy mark.
Scaling a fence at West Eighty-first Street, then an exterior staircase, then sidestepping along a hundred-foot-high ledge, at around 9 p.m. Kuhn and Murphy entered the fifth-floor office window of Colin Turnbull, a curator of African ethnology, who kept a harpsichord by his desk to play at lunchtime. As Clark stayed behind in the getaway car and communicated by walkie-talkie, Kuhn and Murphy timed the rounds of the museum guards. They then descended by rope through an open window into the Hall of Gems a floor below.

Through the gifts of J. P. Morgan and other Gilded Age benefactors, the collection of the American Museum of Natural History included some of the rarest gems in the world. Using a glass cutter, duct tape, and a hammer, the thieves took two dozen of the most valuable of them. Their haul included the 100-carat star ruby donated by Edith Haggin De-Long and the 116-carat Midnight Sapphire. They also carted away two en-graved emeralds, two aquamarines, a number of uncut diamonds, and several bracelets, brooches, and rings. Their biggest prize was the Star of India, a 563-carat sapphire, the largest gem-quality star sapphire ever discovered, which had been donated by Morgan himself. After the two made their late-night escape, they brought their loot along in a bag to the Metropole Cafe in Midtown as they went to listen to Gene Krupa’s band.

Thanks to their high-flying lifestyle, the three were soon tracked down and apprehended, but not before fencing the jewels in Miami. A New York prosecutor named Maurice Nadjari made a deal with the thieves and escorted Kuhn from his New York jail cell as they tracked down the jewels in Florida. While the uncut Eagle Diamond was never found, the prosecutor remarkably recovered over half the goods. A friend of the museum paid a hefty ransom for the De-Long ruby. The Star of
India eventually returned as the jewel in the crown of the museum’s collection. A 1975 film called *Murph the Surf* was made about the caper.

"God sleeps in the minerals, awakens in plants, walks in animals, and thinks in man," observed the nineteenth-century agriculturalist Arthur Young. Like some space-age mine dappled in prismatic light, the 1976 hall inspired more than a generation of museumgoers with its mysterious appeal. Its sensory approach epitomized a style of museum design that saw specimens elevated out of their cases into theatrical, immersive displays—a method pioneered by Carl Akeley fifty years before through his animal dioramas.

For this critic, first as a child and then adult, the 1976 hall was a favorite piece of museum culture. It was also a dated specimen that revealed more about the crystalline obsessions of the 1970s than the crystals themselves. For the latest generation of earth scientists who just want to tell the story of rocks, however, the hall had become a ridiculed romper room for the museum’s underage visitors. George E. Harlow, the museum’s curator for the physical sciences, says his staff called it “Nanny Hall.”
Shuttered in October 2017, the Guggenheim and Morgan halls have been gutted and replaced, after some delays this past June, with the Allison and Roberto Mignone Halls of Gems and Minerals. Museum practices often swing like a pendulum. Curated by Harlow and designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates along with Lauri Halderman of the museum’s exhibition department, the new hall blasts out any remnants of that indoor-outdoor carpeting. In its place it presents an open, 11,000-square-foot room of labels and display cases that more resembles the gem hall of 1964 than 1976. What the presentation loses in immersive appeal it makes up for in the miraculous forms it displays and the often interesting stories they tell.

The completion of the Allison and Roberto Mignone Halls of Gems and Minerals is but the first stage of a larger project to turn the unfinished western side of the museum facing Columbus Avenue into the Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation, a new wing designed by Jeanne Gang with exhibition spaces again by Ralph Appelbaum Associates. No longer a cul-de-sac, the Mignone Halls will eventually connect into this new space.

Rocks “are books,” claimed John McPhee, who wrote more than a few clunkers about them himself. “They have a different vocabulary, a different alphabet, but you learn how to read them.” While it is true that every rock tells a story, you don’t necessarily need to hear the story of every rock. The new halls of gems and minerals now tell many stories, certainly too many for a single viewing. A theory of evolution concerning not just animals and vegetables but also minerals has lately gained currency among geologists and now takes up much of the storytelling. “The diversity of minerals on our dynamic planet is directly connected to the evolution of life,” says Harlow—turning the “diversity” key even in the cylinder of this hard science. Fortunately, the presentation of these minerals and gems, aided by artful lighting and unobtrusive stands, nevertheless keeps the natural world mostly front and center. The information provided, about
both their evolution and their discovery, also largely adds to their interest and appeal.

The new halls open with two amethyst geodes that, at nine- and twelve-feet tall, are among the largest on public display. New to the museum, these “giant geodes” from the Bolsa Mine in Artigas, Uruguay, began forming 135 million years ago. Gas escaping between the separating South American and African continental plates opened up cavities in the hardening magma like rising bread. Groundwater then flowed through the spaces, depositing silica that crystallized into quartz. Over millions of years, high energy radiation from the surrounding rocks turned the colorless quartz a deep purple. Out of the ground and no longer exposed to this radiant energy, the amethyst will slowly lose its purple hue.
It seems quite a fanciful story—Middle Earth stuff—but the crystals are there to prove otherwise. Interspersed among display cases are similarly captivating crystals in what the museum calls its
new “crystal garden”: stibnite from China; a double-ended dravite from Australia; fluorite from Spain; beryls from the American Northeast; elbaite and fluorapophyllite from Brazil; rhodonite from New Jersey; labradorite from Madagascar; petrified redwood from Oregon; grape agate from Indonesia; and calcite, aragonite, and a massive block of blue azurite and green malachite known as the “Singing Stone” from Arizona. From rounded to prismatic, textured to smooth, red to green and creamy to black, the variety of colors and textures here reveal the great sculptural powers of the natural world.

While the display cases are now abundant, their dark appearance and the metallic armatures within (crafted in the same way as the supports for dinosaur bones three floors up) largely allow the stones to stay in the foreground. The smaller specimens are then grouped in ways that illustrate the stories of their creation and discovery. Some examples: the difference between simple and complex pegmatites; “the many colors of fluorite”; the hydrothermal environments of mineral development; “the fabulous tourmaline family”; how light affects the perception of minerals; “the Tin Islands and the Bronze Age in Europe”; the zinc deposits of New Jersey; the minerals employed in the modern world; “How Do We Use Different Salts?”; and the extensively excavated mineralogy of New York City. A wide-ranging selection of minerals from the “Copper Hills of Arizona,” all from mines around the town of Bisbee, reveals the remarkable forms of copper, gold, and silver buried below the Mule Mountains.

As a display for both minerals and gems (which are simply polished minerals), the new Mignone halls divide up the two in much the same way as the old Guggenheim–Morgan footprint. Alcoves along the right wall serve as specialty galleries. One small space reveals the fluorescence and phosphorescence of a stone slab from the Sterling Hill Mining Museum in Ogdensburg, New Jersey, that glows in ultraviolet light. Another serves as a temporary gallery, now used for an exhibition on “Beautiful Creatures: Jewelry Inspired by the Animal Kingdom.” The most sought-after space in the hall, this new gallery is just a half-step away from a Cartier showroom. Marion
Fasel, the guest curator, is otherwise a commercial consultant with a “passion of telling jewelry and watch adventure stories,” according to her biography. This opening show’s connection to the specimens of flora and fauna elsewhere in the museum barely saves it from commercial oblivion as naturalistic pieces are divided in cases dedicated to mammal, insect, and aquatic forms. The stand-out examples are the pieces that bring out the concurrences of nature: in particular, Paula Crevoshay’s 2014 brooch of a Portuguese man o’ war, inspired by the resemblance of the 33-carat Mexican water opal at its center to the pneumatophore, or “float,” of that dreaded hydrozoan.

Between these two alcoves is the central, permanent showcase of gems, one that is surprisingly reserved in its display. One suspects that the designers of this gallery, unlike the special exhibition with its illuminated Fifth Avenue-like stands, wanted to undercut the sparkle of the spectacular. In deadpan fashion, wall-mounted displays present the museum’s rich collection of opal, topaz, garnet, quartz, ruby, emerald, sapphire, diamond, tourmaline, and other precious gems. Located in a standalone case in front of this alcove are those collection highlights that spent some unwanted time away from the museum back in 1964. For all of the stories told in this new hall, the tale of Murph the Surf is notably, but understandably, absent.

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