

## Diamonds and Emotions in the Minerals Gallery: Civilizing Emodities in the Age of Liberal Empire

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### Abstract

This article examines discourse about diamonds and affect in London's major geological and mineralogical galleries in the nineteenth century. While these institutions offered services to industries built around mineral extraction, their exhibition galleries also did important cultural work to promote the value of specific minerals to consumer publics. The metropolitan space of mineralogical exhibits was understood to create an emotional experience that was at once tempered, masculinized, middling-class, and 'civilized'. In consumer culture, diamonds were considered emotional commodities (emodities) that derived value from eliciting heightened emotions, particularly in women; the mineral galleries trustees offered both men and women a place to engage with diamonds in a 'sobering' manner. Gallery designers encouraged visitors to trade their whimsically romantic feelings about diamonds with 'interested', patriotic ones. Galleries did this by promoting the idea that diamonds were intrinsically interesting and objectively superior minerals that deserved special scientific attention for the good of the nation-empire. By extension, diamonds also merited their high market value and national-imperial investment. Mineral galleries rationalized the diamond market for both male and female consumers by scientifically validating diamonds as emodities; diamonds also worked to animate mineral galleries as spaces of heritage-making in London. That legacy continues today.

**Keywords:** commodity fetishism; consumerism; emotion; geology; Natural History Museum

### Introduction

What emotions are visitors to a mineralogical exhibit supposed to feel? In 1895, Lazarus Fletcher, the Keeper of Mineralogy at the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London, England, was certain that romance – never explicitly defined but perhaps meaning excitement, emotional entanglement, and transcendence of the everyday – should be out of the question. He had been queried for a *Strand* magazine article about 'The Romance of the Museums'. The piece would detail affective artefacts from museums around London, including Napoleon's carriage in Madame Tussaud's waxworks and a child's neck restraint in the Congo-Baloto Mission museum. Did Fletcher know of anything in the mineralogy collection that might fit this brief? Dryly, the Keeper replied,

I grieve to say there is nothing romantic about mineral specimens. People come into the Min[erals] Gall[ery] occasionally in a more or less romantic frame of mind, but there is no record of any visitor having left the Minerals and the Gallery and indulged in Romance again: minerals have a wonderfully sobering effect on all that have to do with them. If you find yourself in the neighbourhood... I shall be happy to show you what we do for the Visitors of the Museum, if it would not depress you too much.<sup>1</sup>

Fletcher was rebuking the journalist for not familiarizing himself with the museum's exhibits before asking for assistance; he may also have been expressing impatience with the reporter's

request for the romantically affective over the scientifically significant. It seems that *The Strand* assumed that its readers went to museums to 'feel', and not solely for dispassionate education.<sup>2</sup> This carried no weight with Fletcher. The Keeper described the Minerals Gallery as not only romance-free but actively sobering in ways that lasted beyond the museum. The experience of both minerals and their arrangement in the gallery could, it seems, cut through anything fanciful in the visitor, leaving the impression of a temperate, 'civilized' scientific empiricism in its place.

If the divide between minerals and romance, or museums and emotion, was as complete as Fletcher implied, the correspondence should have ended there. Instead, the Keeper recommended two minerals that made it into the article: the first was the 'Welcome Stranger' from Australia, the largest alluvial gold nugget ever found; the second was the Colenso Diamond, a rough 133-carat stone from South Africa that had been donated by John Ruskin (FitzGerald 1896; Pointon 2009: 347-8).<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Fletcher's bravado, romance was to be found in the gallery after all, and it came in the form of dramatizing colonial produce and the role the NHM played as a hub of scientific authority within the British Empire.

Focusing on displays of crystallized carbon – diamonds – in the British Museum, the Museum of Economic Geology, the Museum of Practical Geology, and the Natural History Museum, this article argues that such exhibits worked to 'civilize' emotions about diamonds not by deadening all feeling, as Fletcher argued, but channelling it into imperially-inflected patriotism, awe at nature as revealed by the natural sciences, and the sentiment that diamonds were innately fascinating, scientifically significant, and somehow objectively worthy of their high cost and exploitative market. Instead of creating an unemotional space, these exhibits and the men who curated and published on them, exchanged one kind of romance with another. They took a commodity thought to incur uncontrollable, irrational emotion in women and placed it in a masculinizing context to recommend diamonds and mineralogy to 'respectable' men and women. In doing so, they bolstered the growing middling-class market for diamonds, one in which Britain was heavily involved even before the discovery of diamonds in South Africa in 1867. Moreover, they revealed the minerals gallery to be a site of what museum studies scholar Laurajane Smith has called 'heritage-making', or 'an embodied set of practices or performances in which cultural meaning is continually... remade, and... in which people invest emotionally in certain understandings of the past and what they mean for contemporary identity and sense of place' (Smith 2015: 459-60). 'Civilized' emotional experiences associated with diamonds and mineral museums became part of the performance of heritage in London in the nineteenth century in ways that continue in the NHM today.

Methodologically, this article is influenced by sociologist Tony Bennett's concept of the mid-Victorian 'exhibitionary complex' in which museums, exhibitions, and department stores were part of an assemblage of 'educative and civilizing' spectacles that created a 'voluntarily self-regulating citizenry' through cultural instruction about proper consumerism and good taste (Bennett 2018: 25). While Fletcher may have imagined the 'sobering' space of the minerals gallery to operate as an antidote to mainstream modes of thought, I argue that at best mineral galleries offered a difference in degree, not kind, and as such were in league with how diamonds were staged in jewellery stores and print culture. Consequently, this article uses evidence from a variety of sources both inside and outside museums, including Fletcher's and Nevil Story-Maskelyne's papers in the Natural History Museum archives, Victorian periodicals and newspapers, museum handbooks, mineralogical treatises, travel guides, and institutional histories. It follows the work of Susan Pearce and Kate Hill who have shown how museums were mutually constitutive with larger networks, movements, markets, and collecting practices (Pearce 1995: 387-92; Hill 2016: 5). Hill makes an argument for museums as 'distributed' institutions where agency in meaning-making is distributed through a wide range of people and objects, including visitors (Hill 2016: 6). This article argues for a diffuse understanding of agency, but it does not attend to visitor experience, particularly to how Victorian women experienced the mineral galleries. Hill describes how Beatrix Potter still found pleasure in what she considered to be the 'overly masculine' space of natural history museums but, perhaps tellingly, minerals did not draw her interest (Hill 2016: 115).

## Emodities

Sociologist Eva Illouz has coined the term 'emodities' to refer to commodities whose value is especially bound up in the emotions they mark and/or elicit (Illouz 2018: 7). She argues that as capitalism has intensified, so has the emotionality of modern life, where emotion and political economy are never separate but mutually constitutive. Emodities both drive this condition and typify it. Understanding the development of emodities gives us analytical leverage over the question of commodity fetishism as Karl Marx described it – not as an empty, irrational perfidy of capitalism that dupes the consumer and alienates the worker (its own kind of deeply emotional condition), but as a rational engagement for emotional purposes that has become integral to the experience of the modern condition. As capitalist political economy has intensified in the last two to three hundred years to transform us into beings obsessed with our own emotions, historians of emotion have argued that the ability to control or harness one's emotions has simultaneously become a marker of civilization and respectability in the West (Seymour 2020: 9-11; Barclay and Stearns 2022: 2). Mineral galleries were part of this trend, regardless of Fletcher's denial.

In 1800, diamonds were already understood as emotional commodities but not in a way that was conducive to heritage-making for the modern science museum-goer. Diamonds were associated with feminized, foreign, passionate excess like Marie Antoinette's consumption habits or tales from the *Arabian Nights* (Pointon 1997). These meanings persisted throughout the Victorian period. An 1892 article in the periodical *Fashionable London* began, 'Diamonds and pearls. What volumes of romance do not these words convey, and what pictures do they not call up to the mind of the dreamer of the dear dead days of yore!' (Anon 1892). Not only were diamonds synonymous with romance, but the love of them was connected with gender differences: 'It seems to be part of a woman's nature to love diamonds...' Of course, the magazine was designed to advertise products to middling class ladies, either through advertisements or editorial commentary: the article went on to suggest that if a consumer could not afford her own diamond, reasonably priced imitations from the Parisian Diamond Company were available. The emotional quality of the commodity was never in doubt and, indeed, it was this that compelled economic thinkers like Adam Smith and Marx to decry diamond consumption as essentially irrational, the ultimate example of commodity fetishism in Marx's case (Smith 1781: 200; Marx 1867).

Scientific discussion of diamonds in popular periodicals in the nineteenth century did not shy away from emotional entanglements because they were so integral to the market. Geologist William Pole wrote in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1860, 'Who does not love diamonds?' and, 'Where is there a mind in which the bare mention of them does not excite a pleasant emotion?' (Pole 1860: 179). While for Pole emotional attachment to crystallized carbon was universal despite gender, his article emphasized the appeal of diamonds to the presumably masculine, civilized 'domain of intellect': 'The diamond offers to the philosopher one of the most recondite and subtle problems that have ever engaged the human mind; while the merest tyro in science may find it the most instructive topics of study'. Diamonds, for Pole, were endlessly instructive and thus endlessly fascinating. The feeling of being interested or fascinated is itself an emotion, but Pole framed this as scientifically productive. Moreover, being fascinated in a tempered way was a respectable emotion to have about diamonds and one that eluded women, who, it seemed, lost themselves to romantic fascination:

For one half of the human race diamonds are delirium – the true eyes of the basilisk: their power over the sex we dare not do more than hint at, and the woman who would profess herself indifferent to their fascination simply belies her feminine nature. One of the most extraordinary romances in the history of the world was all about a diamond necklace and who would venture to number the true romances occurring every year of our life in which diamonds take part? (Pole 1860: 180).

From this hyperbole, Pole's article pivoted to more scientific description: 'The minerals we call gems, jewels, "precious" stones, *par excellence*, are the most noble objects of inorganic creation; and the diamond is the queen of them all. Let us then have a chat about Diamonds,

which will interest everybody'. The 'chat' began with the localities where diamonds had been found, including Central India, Australia, and 'the Brazils' – places where Britain maintained an imperial presence, formally in India and Australia, informally in Brazil. He described the different crystalline formations of stones and noted the route diamonds took to London (Pole 1860: 180). Then came a rundown of diamond cutting, 'almost exclusively done by Jews at Amsterdam', followed by a discussion of the 'chemical nature' of the diamond (Pole 1860: 182-4). The piece ended with biographies of famous diamonds: the Braganza and the 'Star of the South', both from Brazil, and the plethora of Indian diamonds brought to Europe, including the Pitt (named after the former Governor of Chennai), the Sancy, the Nassack, and the Kohinoor, which had been absorbed into Victoria's crown jewels following the Second Anglo-Sikh War. Pole discussed how in 1852 the Kohinoor had been recut to 'form a regular brilliant' and though reduced in weight, it 'has become what it never was before, a most splendid jewel worthy of its royal mistress, whose unsullied diadem may it long adorn!' (Pole 1860: 189).

Pole's article moved from delirium and romance about diamonds to tempered imperialist triumphalism, cementing the connections between love of diamonds, love of queen, interest in diamonds, interest in the market (in which London played a central role), interest in the chemistry of crystallized carbon, and interest in the history of specific artefacts (as opposed to specimens). All of these concerned European colonialism, circling back to veneration of diamond, veneration of queen. Although most of the article was not about geology, chemistry, or crystallography, Pole as popular scientist built into what was 'interesting' about diamonds artefact biographies, rags-to-riches stories of 'mulatto workers' who found stones in Bahia and were rewarded by mine owners, the drama of a closed caste of diamond cutters, and patriotic devotion to the monarch. Nineteenth-century London mineralogical exhibits worked alongside discourse such as Pole's to 'civilize' the idea of diamonds as romantic. In what follows, I demonstrate that mineral galleries played a role in transforming diamonds from a feminized 'romantic' emodity into a tempered, masculinized, heritage-making one. In so doing, they reveal the museum as a site deeply engaged in generating 'modern' emotions as well as modern consumerism.

### **Diamond Science Romance Begins: The British Museum**

The British Museum's minerals collection began with Hans Sloane's bequest in 1753. Renowned as the most extensive British collection at the time, the bequest consisted of ten thousand specimens of minerals, fossils, meteorites, and manufactured jewellery and gemstones. The first display divided them into closed cabinets off to the side with two tables showing 'attractive' specimens (Smith 1969: 238). Invariably those were uncut gemstones and jewellery, some of which visitors were invited to pick up and engage with haptically as well as visually (Classen 2012: 140-2). The main attraction was a large sapphire 'set with (small) rubies, emeralds and gold in a hemisphere of rock-crystal and mounted in silver' (Smith 1969: 246). The educational payoff was not about understanding the mineral kingdom so much as learning to evaluate gems' authenticity, a concern for the privileged classes who were allowed into the museum at that time.

Mineralogy developed as an academic and public science in Britain only after 1801, and in the first half of the nineteenth century, distinctions between gems, mineral specimens and jewellery were routinely blurred. Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, petitioned parliament for funds to enlarge the minerals collection at the British Museum during the Napoleonic Wars, with the justification that whatever mineralogical inquiry could do for 'Science', it would without a doubt 'materially [affect] the best interests of the Empire' (Dolan 1998: 276). Patriotic political economy came first, and minerals were arranged and displayed according to their provenance (Smith 1969: 241). The gemstone and jewellery cases remained as their own category within the room, and they continued to be the major attraction. Londoners frequented the British Museum's minerals gallery to see diamonds and other gemstones outside of the jewellery shop, though handling the pieces became much rarer.

Charles Konig, head of mineralogy and geology at the museum, eagerly sought out more gemstones, acquiring in 1825 and 1826 hundreds of cut and polished stones. He particularly wanted diamonds in as many colours as possible to add to 'the otherwise very

instructive and valuable assemblage of crystallized diamonds that constitute a part of the great collection of minerals...’ as well as ‘a series of models of the various crystal forms of precious stones cut in glass imitating their respective colours’ (Smith 1969: 246). In 1849, König purchased 62 diamonds from James Tennant, inheritor of John and Sarah Mawe’s famed Strand minerals dealership and professor of mineralogy at King’s College London. Tennant and the Mawes contributed to the nationalist narrative. Through Tennant, the museum also acquired glass replicas of several famous diamonds, including the Kohinoor and the Hope Blue. Scientifically, these ‘specimens’ were not that significant, as renowned crystallographer David Brewster admitted about the Kohinoor. They did not need to be so overrepresented in the collection (Kinsey 2009: 413). However, art historian Stefanie Jovanovic-Kruspel argues that models in displays influenced collective visual understandings of scientific topics; for diamonds, the constant modelling of post-cut famous diamonds cemented the vision of the ‘brilliant’ cut stone as a ‘real’ and, indeed, natural diamond (Jovanovic-Kruspel 2019: 405). The stories of diamond cutting and jewellery manufacture (not natural processes), romantic biographies of big diamonds, and the visual sparkle of hundreds of diamonds drew in visitors to the minerals section.

This burgeoning classification of the minerals collection at the British Museum received a major overhaul beginning in 1857, with the appointment of Oxford professor Nevil Story-Maskelyne as Keeper of Mineralogy (Smith 1969: 256). Story-Maskelyne made clear demarcations but leaned into the romance of diamonds in both his mineralogical classification and public lecturing as a way of piquing visitor interest.<sup>4</sup> He redistributed artefacts in the gem cases according to a version of the mineralogical classification scheme devised by Gustav Rose, which was based on chemical and crystallographic qualities instead of provenance or market categories like ‘precious stones’ (Hovey 1898: 712; Rucker 2004). Story-Maskelyne kept cut stones and glass replicas alongside natural specimens, foregrounding the manufacturing process as well as physical properties.

While this could have been an opportunity to rethink the place of crystallized carbon in a mineralogical hierarchy, Story-Maskelyne preferred to validate cultural and economic ideas about diamonds and give them scientific weight. Diamonds would lead as the proverbial monarchs of the mineral kingdom, representing moral as well as scientific qualities: purity (in terms of being pure carbon crystal), the goodness of nature and light (in terms of their reflectivity), and indomitability regarding their hardness, a measure of mineral worth that dated back to ancient and medieval conversations. Moral, cultural, and scientific qualities became mutually constitutive, recalling medieval meanings of gemstones as denoting and perhaps even engendering virtue (Buettner 2022: 14).

Story-Maskelyne revelled in mineralogical classification as art and science, claiming for mineralogy topics detailed in ancient, medieval, and early modern Arabic, Persian, and Vedic texts about the histories of gemstones, their hierarchy, places of origin, and meaning. Vedic traditions informed Pliny the Elder’s mineralogical sections in *Naturalis Historia*, in which ‘precious stones’ had their own book (Book 37). In the Islamic world, diamonds were precious but ranked lower than emeralds, rubies, and turquoise; in Vedic belief alive in Buddhism and Hinduism, diamonds were sometimes described as ‘the best of gems’ as decided by ‘the Gods’ (Tagore 1879: 91; Abul Huda 1998: 117-21, 207). Story-Maskelyne instead drew a line backwards from Victorian gem veneration to the ancient Romans, reasoning that ‘The Minerals known to the ancients and valued by them as gems must be the same as these we possess now. Our task therefore consists in assigning to them the right names given to them in antiquity’.<sup>5</sup> For many Victorians, imperial culture was ancient Roman imperial culture and vice-versa; mineralogy was a way through which the Keeper worked to manifest this sameness. Moreover, gemstone veneration in both antiquity and modern Britain was integral, for Story-Maskelyne, to how ‘commerce’ sustained ‘civilization’: ‘the supply of luxuries [is] no less [important] than necessities’, he wrote.<sup>6</sup> Contemporaneous with Story-Maskelyne’s public lectures on ‘mineralogy in antiquity’ and his arrangement of the Minerals Room at the British Museum, Karl Marx, in Volume One of *Capital* argued that diamond value had nothing to do with scientific empiricism: ‘So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond’ (Marx 1867). Story-Maskelyne used mineralogy to justify British imperial political economy, i.e. the status quo, in unspoken ways. His politics were reflected in the



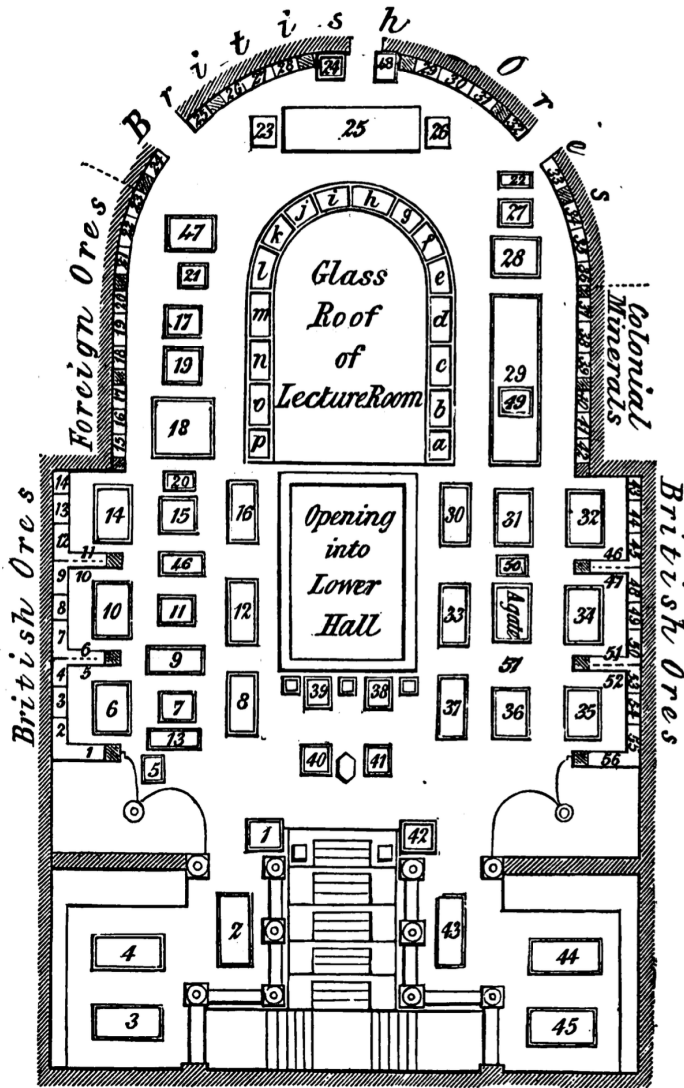
museum, with his displays suggesting that visitors feel emotions inflected with pride in Roman and, by extension, British imperial accomplishment.

Story-Maskelyne developed a passion for researching famous diamond histories, especially the Kohinoor.<sup>7</sup> He gave dramatic public lectures at the Royal Institute and published articles in scientific periodicals like *Chemical News* that only briefly discussed the physical properties of crystallized carbon before launching into diamond biographies: 'You will now allow me at once to plunge to 320 years ago, into the centre of India and Indian history...' The lectures would mention how the Keeper's work sprang from the minerals collection in the British Museum, with gratitude to diamond donors, as if these displays generated scientific discovery.<sup>8</sup> In 1881, against Story-Maskelyne's wishes, the minerals were moved to the newly built Natural History Museum in South Kensington, where Lazarus Fletcher took over their direction.<sup>9</sup> Under Fletcher, the Minerals Room increased its exhibition of replicas of famous diamonds, dramatizing the industrialization of the Kohinoor with 'before' and 'after' models and other pieces that emphasized the manufacturing process for diamond gemstones.<sup>10</sup> It traded on the romance of diamond celebrity.

### **Diamonds at the Periphery in the Museum of Economic Geology and the Museum of Practical Geology**

The minerals collection at the British Museum was never a priority before Story-Maskelyne's tenure. Previous curators, almost never mineralogists, were overwhelmed by the task of identifying, organizing, and cataloguing the unwieldy, random collections bequeathed to the institution. As the *Observer* noted, there was no 'public establishment... for the analysis of ores or chemical examination of metals, and other mineral substances employed in the arts and manufactures' (Anon 1839). Geologist Henry De la Beche, along with members of the Royal Geological Society of London, petitioned the government to found the Museum of Economic Geology (MEG) in 1835, to support De la Beche's larger project, the Geological Survey of Britain, also begun in that year. Whereas the British Museum placed a premium on displaying curious artefacts from around the world, MEG was designed to support and highlight United Kingdom products and industries. It deprioritized academic discussion of mineralogical hierarchy and geological theories of time and instead worked to exhibit for 'architects, engineers, and builders' the 'various kinds of building materials found in Great Britain and Ireland'. This included innovations in mining machinery, metallurgical processes, and all things in applied science (Anon 1839). In 1851, the museum was moved to a new building on Jermyn Street and became the Museum of Practical Geology (MPG). It included main, lower, and upper floors for exhibits as well as a massive 600-person lecture theatre (Yanni 1999: 51-61). Its mandate was enlarged to support not only the Geological Survey, but what would become the Royal School of Mines (affiliated with Imperial College London), the Mining Record Office, and public exhibits.

The design of the museum encouraged visitors to be affected by British produce, first and foremost, and to leave with a distinct map in their heads about which minerals and metals were 'British, colonial, and foreign' (Anon 1851). The façade of the building was Anston dolomite from South Yorkshire, designed to look like a gentleman's club. The effect was to give the museum and its contents an air of respectability, business acumen, and 'rational recreation' (Yanni 1999: 53).<sup>11</sup> The entrance was packed with ornamental architectural pieces from various parts of the United Kingdom before opening up into the principal floor of cases of 'British Ores', 'Foreign Ores', and 'Colonial Minerals' (See Figure 1). It was not until the visitor had ventured into the back third of the principal floor, past 'British' and 'Colonial' specimens, that they would have come across diamonds, in the non-metallic minerals cases labelled 'a' to 'p' around the lecture room (across from Colonial Minerals) (as in Bristow 1861: xlii). They were displayed in Case 'a' as 'Crystallized Carbon' and exhibited alongside graphite to highlight the profound physical difference crystallization makes to carbon structures mineralogically.



GROUND PLAN OF PRINCIPAL FLOOR OF THE MUSEUM OF PRACTICAL GEOLOGY, LONDON.

Figure 1: Ground Plan of the Museum of Practical Geology circa 1861. The 'Diamond' case is across from the Colonial Minerals wall cases, labelled 'a'.

The plan of the museum somewhat mimicked scientific illustrator James Sowerby's early opus on mineralogy, in which volume 1, published in 1811, featured 'British Mineralogy' and, consequently, no precious gemstones. The publisher persuaded Sowerby to publish a Volume 2 on 'Exotic Mineralogy' principally to cash in on interest in precious stones (Sowerby 1811: iv; Sowerby 1817: 39). Likewise for the MPG, precious stones were only contained within their chemically-defined place in the non-metallic mineralogical cases.

This deprioritizing of diamonds and other precious stones also translated into the public lectures offered by the MPG. The first series of lectures highlighted coal (the true exemplar of carbon) and glass (the more clever medium of light), as the British industries of note about which the 'working man' should be educated (Anon 1852). Professor Lyon Playfair gave the early lecture on glass to a packed house of working class male artisans in 1852 and later clarified his teaching philosophy for 'scientific institutions', when he urged workers to be able to stop thinking of diamonds as 'the fancy of the poet, when he looks upon them as angel's tears' and reconsider them instead as 'mere lumps of coal'. Coal, he argued, was the more 'wonderful and bountiful benevolence', as it allowed humans

to warm and light ourselves by those solar emanations which gladdened the world some millions of years since.... Would not the knowledge of these beneficent provisions for the well-being of the human race, cast a new light upon the gloomy passages in which the miner works when he excavates coal for our use? It would ennoble his work and elevate his mind to feel that he was an agent to an infinitely wise benevolence, which was providing for the well-being of the whole world (Playfair 1857: 26).

The political economy of diamonds could not compete with this romance. It must be noted that the working-class audience pushed back against the School of Mines professors' paternalistic drive to present only utilitarian topics: they wanted the lectures to be more interesting, less about finding romance in one's worker status, and more about 'how to get gold' (Gay 1997: 176).

Though subsumed within a narrative of British industrial and mineralogical might, diamonds and the diamond market were still explicated and rationalized for the museum's visitors. The diamond case featured natural and cut gemstones, pieces of finished jewellery (such as a large snuff box with 16 brilliant cut stones given to the museum by Nicholas I of Russia), and glass replicas of famous diamonds – indeed, another case was devoted to glass (paste) diamond replicas in the British manufactures section at the back of the museum, linking the two industries (McLintock 1912: 37). Labels indicated the provenance of each specimen, and visitors could purchase descriptive museum guides for a fuller background. Robert Hunt's *Descriptive Guide to the Museum of Practical Geology* in the 1850s, for example, detailed diamond producing regions in India (whose production was negligible by 1820), mining practices in Brazil (which commanded the global market from 1730 to 1870), and a full history of the Kohinoor; he indicated how glass models in the museum dramatized the crystallographic reasoning behind the recutting process of the famous stone (Hunt 1867: 133). The museum's impressive amount of Brazilian objects brought up knowledge of its (and its benefactors') ties to the Brazilian diamond trade, a touchy subject given that Brazilian mining was predicated upon enslaved labour and British investment, even after slavery was made illegal in Britain and its empire after 1833. Indeed, outside of international exhibitions, which came to London maybe twice a decade, the MPG was one of the only places Londoners could view material culture from Brazilian mining and think about its place within the British political economy.

The museum urged visitors to think of diamonds as useful – not as useful as coal or glass, of course, but somehow useful enough to warrant space within a building devoted to the practical. Moreover, science was understood as integral to unlocking that usefulness. *The Geologist*, a popular monthly magazine in the 1850s and 1860s, and available for purchase alongside the visitor handbooks, carried articles about Brazilian mining, famous diamonds, diamond cutting, and the 'Usefulness of Diamonds' in the 'practical arts' (see Anon 1858; Anon 1861; Anon 1863-4). The effect was to rationalize the diamond market for visitors; one guidebook, reminiscent of Pole's gendered understanding of the 'interest' in diamonds, went so far as to imply that the industrial and mineralogical information in the museum could be for male visitors, while 'ladies will be interested in the collection of gems' and other items of 'beauty' (Dickens Jr 1879: 146).

Meanwhile, the role academic science played in the everyday workings of the diamond market was minimal. One letter to the editor complained that the public had become so seemingly well-educated about the science of diamond cutting that it was generally assumed that the process was based upon 'a very perfect knowledge of the crystallography of the diamond... The fact is [diamond cutters] know nothing whatever of crystallography... and only cleave



the crystals by experience' (Gregory 1862). The mineral displays at the British Museum and the Museum of Practical Geology needed diamonds, it appears, but the diamond market did not need mineralogy.

Diamonds at the Museums of Economic and Practical Geology were not relegated upstairs because curators were intent on critiques of diamond veneration alive in the mid-Victorian period. The ethos of the museums was about linking socio-cultural and industrial meaning to scientific inquiry and as such, it was intent upon supporting the market. Diamonds were sidelined because they were understood to be of foreign or 'exotic' extraction and therefore not as important to consumers and artisans as minerals and metals found within the United Kingdom. This was a type of liberal romance, built around the positivism associated with the free market and rational utilitarianism, civilizing the market for diamonds by holding it in a tempered place. When diamonds in southern Africa became known to Europeans after 1867, the link between metropolitan mineralogy and colonial extraction became a more prominent feature of the Minerals Gallery at the NHM.

### **Empire and the Market as Science: The Natural History Museum**

When the minerals collection moved from the British Museum to the Natural History Museum, Lazarus Fletcher did not share Nevil Story-Maskelyne's passion for diamonds and diamond history, but he understood the role diamonds played in attracting visitors. The layout of the NHM brought visitors into the Great Hall to be confronted by scores of human skeletons that made up Robert Owen's ethnologic Index Museum. After that, there was no obvious single path through the building, so each gallery had to draw in wanderers if it was to achieve the NHM's dual mandate of being a site of public entertainment as well as a scientific institution (Yanni 1999: 132). Fletcher strove to maintain this balance between science and entertainment by displaying the classic gemstones within their systematic mineralogical positions in the general collection. Like at the British Museum and MPG, he arranged cut gems and glass replicas of famous stones alongside the 'rough' (a.k.a. natural) specimens. (Hovey 1898: 712). The juxtaposition of rough with cut created a progressive narrative for minerals that worked well with what historian Mary Louise Pratt might have described as the 'imperial eyes' of Victorian visitors: minerals were provided by the Divine for use by humankind; their beauty and potential could only be unlocked by civilized (read: rational, scientific, free-market-oriented) intervention (Pratt 2008: 6-7, 112). It was Britain's duty to see that this divine plan was carried out. As Prince Albert said upon the MPG's opening in 1851,

it is impossible to estimate too highly the advantages to be derived from an institution like this, intended to direct the researches of science, and to apply their results to the development of the immense riches granted by the bounty of Providence to our isles, and their numerous colonial dependencies (quoted in Yanni 1999: 52).

Albert's enthusiasm about the MPG and its move to Jermyn Street was staged to coincide with the Great Exhibition of 1851, another spectacle Albert was involved in that promoted industry, science, the free market, and educating the public about good taste (Kriegel 2007: 13-8). The MPG consciously worked into the exhibitionary complex of museums, the Great Exhibition, and its gemstone sellers active in London in 1851.

Edmund Hovey, an American naturalist who toured European museums at the turn of the twentieth century, described the NHM Minerals Gallery as 'probably the finest and most complete [collection] in the world', and he valued how the trustees aimed to 'show all the definite mineral species that are known, in all their varieties of crystalline form, modes of occurrence, and associations with one another' (Hovey 1898: 710). He was immediately drawn into the room by a 'very attractive' case just outside the entrance that displayed 'polished samples of some of the rocks and minerals which are used for ornamental purposes' and was impressed by the mahogany cases throughout the gallery, which contained specimens mounted on 'the finest quality of jeweler's cotton wool'. Victorianist Elaine Freedgood has discussed how mahogany furniture, in literature or in person, recalled narratives of imperial exploitation of natural and human resources in the plantation economies of the Caribbean and

Central America, Asia, and the Pacific Ocean world to Victorian consumers (Freedgood 2006: 31). The identification of jeweller's cotton suggests how the boundaries between commodified gemstone and scientific specimen were blurred, encapsulating the two ways of thinking about a stone displayed as mutually constitutive and literally encased in colonial wood and British glass: this was the British imperial political economy on display in scientifically-moderated circumstances.<sup>12</sup> It effected its own kind of romance, both delivering and containing the emodities within, in close proximity to the shops of South Kensington where diamonds would be displayed in similar ways. Indeed, Harrods department store and Edwin Streeter's on New Bond Street took to exhibiting glass replicas of famous diamonds and uncut South African finds in their showcases, troubling any boundary that may have been imagined between the mineralogical gallery and the jewellery shop. Though no mineralogist like Story-Maskelyne, Streeter wrote extensively about diamonds and their histories, insisting on their romantic connections, including in his 1882 publication *The Great Diamonds of the World: Their History and Romance* (Streeter 1882).<sup>13</sup>

While Hovey discussed how there were no special 'gem cases' in the NHM – a mark in the museum's favour in terms of mineralogical acumen – he went on to describe how the 'gem of gems' in the Minerals Gallery was 'a South African diamond crystal of very symmetrical form, weighing 130 carats' (Hovey 1898: 711). Here he referred to the Colenso Diamond that Fletcher had publicized in FitzGerald's romantic piece for *The Strand*, omitting the name Colenso (which probably did not resonate with Hovey's American audience) but remembering a key point: it was associated with colonialism in South Africa. As the *Strand* article detailed, the diamond was also associated with John Ruskin, as the professor and aesthete had bequeathed it to the collection (along with a vast silica display that Ruskin himself had organized). FitzGerald wrote that 'this diamond has a singularly interesting history'. He related how it had been found because of 'diamond fever' gripping a storekeeper at the Cape who had rushed to the Diamond Fields in Kimberley in 1883 with friends. Though they worked their small claim in earnest, it yielded nothing and, unfortunately, caved in, killing one of the men. Fleeing the area at first, the shopkeeper returned to dig out his friend's body and discovered a number of loose diamonds. He brought these to Hatton Garden in London where a dealer, R. Nockold, bought the best specimen and, in turn, sold it to Ruskin. Ruskin described the dealer's house in Soho as 'dingy' and yet reminiscent of the 'Arabian Nights'. Haggling ensued and Ruskin bought the stone for £1,000, intent on sending it to the Sheffield Museum. Instead, he gave it to the NHM in 1887 (FitzGerald 1896: 429-30).

What was romantic about this tale? Colonial madness for wealth, adventurous opportunity, life-and-death stakes, the seedy diamond market, and Ruskin's celebrity. It was not really a rags-to-riches tale but featured dramatic transformation, with a friend being rewarded by Providence for his virtue and a rock being pulled from rugged anonymity, poverty, and danger to become a specimen at the heart of metropolitan civilization and meaning. In FitzGerald's way of contextualizing the stone within the market, it vibrates with market potential as a large yet uncut stone fixed within the 'sobering' Minerals Gallery. It suggested to the visitor what it could enable outside of the museum – too readily, in fact. The Colenso drew attention for decades until it was stolen in an overnight break-in in 1965, never to be recovered (Pointon 2009: 345-50). No doubt the robbers were chagrined to find that the large diamond was only worth a few thousand pounds. Priceless, it was not.

FitzGerald chose not to dramatize the name of the stone itself, which Ruskin gave it in 1887 after his friend, John William Colenso, the first Bishop of Natal and travel writer about his Zulu missions. The cleric was known as a great advocate for Zulu causes, perhaps a reversal of the standard conqueror narratives associating diamonds with booty; the name was meant to be an honour for a life of service. Still, it called up South African colonialism for visitors to the NHM and as art historian Marcia Pointon has noted, 'Ruskin adopted the kind of marketing strategy that his sherry-importing father would have recognized, ensuring that the name given suggested the origins of the product' (Pointon 2009: 350). Colonialism and political economy made this rock interesting, not mineralogy, per se. Mineralogy 'civilized' it (or contained it) and in doing so increased the affect of both the diamond and the Minerals Gallery. It reflected on diamonds as emodities in ways that spoke to 'interest', adventure, mobility, and power.

## Conclusion

The question remains, what emotions are visitors to a mineralogical exhibit supposed to feel? Looking at the NHM's website for 15 July 2024, it appears nostalgia for the nineteenth century, arguably the heyday of public interest in mineralogy, natural history, and even popular imperialism, might be foremost. The website invites visitors to

step back in time to see the Museum as it was in 1881 with its original oak display cabinets in the Minerals gallery. See sparkling gems alongside raw minerals, marvel at the variety of colours, textures and shapes, and learn how they're formed.<sup>14</sup>

The website resurrects a time when the market had not yet delivered the variety and quantity of sensory experiences now available to the general public, and minerals provided that kind of stimulation. Moreover, similar to how some Victorians understood mineral material culture, the website conflates manufactured product, scientific specimen, and historical-patriotic material: 'star specimens and exhibits' include a polished slice of agate that looks like Elizabeth II, 'curiosities from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane', 'ornamental mineral art', 'a 9,381 carat flawless blue topaz gemstone – the largest of its kind', a large iron meteorite that fell in Argentina in 1783, and – a nod to market use-value – 'examples of mineral use, from circuit boards to matches and toothpaste'. Science, culture, and the market come together in this heritage-making process to reinforce mineralogy as a significant category of knowledge. As Laurajane Smith found in her transnational study of museumgoers and heritage-making in 2007, most people go to museums to have their prior opinions and feelings legitimated; indeed, their takeaway from museum 'learning' is often just 'reinforcement' of their prior viewpoints (Smith 2015: 475). The minerals gallery, particularly with respect to diamonds, has been designed to do this for the past two hundred years.

The gallery today does not perfectly replicate what was available to visitors before 2007, however, because most major gemstones, especially diamonds, have been moved to 'The Vault', a permanent exhibition that was created to house the most expensive of the museum's gems and jewels. The Vault is an overdetermined space meant to elicit awe. It reminds the visitor of the supreme costliness of the hundreds of cut (i.e. not natural) diamonds and other gemstones on display as well as the 'maximum security' required to safeguard the preciousness. In 2005 a special exhibition called *Diamonds* was prematurely closed because of police concerns about 'Eastern European criminals who had been paying "regular visits" to the museum'.<sup>15</sup> This, coupled with the 1965 theft of the Colenso Diamond, suggests that the Vault is necessary, if only for the purpose of insurance. On an emotional level, however, the Vault as an experiential space cements the meaning of diamonds as sought-after, scientifically validated items of justifiable high cost (even priceless!) It succeeds better than any amount of advertising on behalf of the De Beers Diamond Consortium and its affiliates (such as the Steinmetz Diamond Group-cum-Diacor International and the London-based Diamond Trading Company that sponsored the 2005 exhibition). The spectacle of security justifies the worthiness of the item, just as the 'interested' emotions of 'science' justify diamonds as emodities.

We cannot draw too direct a line between the Victorians and the NHM of today, in part because there is an intervening century of relationships between the NHM and the diamond industry. Nevertheless, the Victorian frameworks of the Minerals Gallery are still palpable. Mineralogical exhibits in London traded on diamonds as romantic emodities throughout the nineteenth century. Diamond romances were predicated upon interest in political economy, colonialism, and the civilizing mission to take minerals found outside of Britain and transform them into objects of scientific, aesthetic, and market worth. While the imbrication of imperial culture with museum exhibits might be more obvious with human-centric historical displays, the integration of mineralogical exhibits with the nineteenth-century British imperial political economy in the case of diamonds suggests that the Minerals Gallery, as it existed in 1881, was not a politically or emotionally disinterested space.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sir Lazarus Fletcher to W.G. FitzGerald, 5 November 1895, 'John Ruskin and the Colenso diamond: notes by Jessie May Sweet and Albert G. Couper', DF MIN/10/2/22, NHM

Archives (NHMA), London.

- <sup>2</sup> Emma Peacocke (2015) also finds museums understood as sites of the romantic (as opposed to deadened educational spaces) in nineteenth-century literature.
- <sup>3</sup> In addition to Pointon (2009), see also Syperek 2022: 85-123: Syperek reads Ruskin's involvement as infusing subversive multisensory, slippery gendering into the mineralogical display at the NHM.
- <sup>4</sup> Nevil Story-Maskelyne, "Lectures on the mineralogy of antiquity"; includes much on historic diamonds', DF MIN/20/1/4/7, NHMA.
- <sup>5</sup> Story-Maskelyne, "Lectures on the mineralogy of antiquity".
- <sup>6</sup> Story-Maskelyne, "Lectures on the mineralogy of antiquity".
- <sup>7</sup> See Story-Maskelyne papers, 'Historical notes on the Koh-i-noor diamond and other historic gemstones', 'Notes on the Koh-i-noor and other historic diamonds', 'On the Koh-i-noor diamond: manuscript draft', 'On the Koh-i-noor diamond: finished typescript', DF MIN/20/1/4/1-4, NHMA.
- <sup>8</sup> Story-Maskelyne, "On diamonds," the text of a lecture given at the Royal Institute, reprinted from "The Chemical News", 7 April 1860, DF MIN/20/1/4/10, p.6, NHMA.
- <sup>9</sup> On his opposition to moving the mineral collection to the NHM, see Anon [Story-Maskelyne] 1863.
- <sup>10</sup> Leonard James Spencer, 'Notes on diamond models in the Museum collection', DF MIN/20/36/63, NHMA.
- <sup>11</sup> The term 'rational recreation' originates in the nineteenth century. For a discussion of how architectural strategies for naturalist museums may have manifested different meanings in Europe and Canada, see Holmes (2019).
- <sup>12</sup> For a discussion on the meanings of Victorian glass, see Armstrong 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> See also 'The Cullinan and other South African diamonds: notes, letters and news cuttings assembled by Leonard J Spencer', letter of Asscler, 4 December 1909, DF MIN 10/2/15, PK1, NHMA.
- <sup>14</sup> Natural History Museum (South Kensington, London), 'Minerals Gallery', 2024. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/galleries-and-museum-map/minerals.html>, accessed 15 July 2024.
- <sup>15</sup> Robin McKie and Vanessa Thorpe, 'Top Security Protects Vault of Priceless Gems', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/nov/11/artnews.art>, accessed 15 July 2024.

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