BEHIND THE GAVEL

Meet Annabelle Cukierman, an independent jewelry expert and gemologist based in France.

By Sonia Esther Soltani



Annabelle Cukierman.

How did you start your career in auctions?

At the age of 12, I went with my mother to see an auction at Drouot saleroom in Paris. I was impressed, and I fell head over heels for this profession. From that day on, my whole life changed. I began visiting museums and studying art history. I do this job out of passion, a passion for objects and the stories they tell, and the passion of the people who pass them on from generation to generation.

What was the first important piece of jewelry you handled and sold that made a lasting impression?

When I started my first jewelry auctions, several people entrusted me with exceptional pieces. I remember a rectangular Colombian emerald from the Muzo mine, step-cut, 17 carats, old mine. At that time, we didn't work digitally, and we didn't make videos of stones like we do now. The impression of the paper catalog was paramount. The beauty of its color could not be reproduced on glossy paper, and emeralds are always very difficult to photograph, even for a professional photographer. So I went to meet potential buyers to show them the stone, without sending them a photo beforehand. I roamed the Place Vendôme. I was very young and unknown, but this stone opened doors for me. It's an extraordinary memory. I understood immediately that if you have the right gem, or [a] great piece of jewelry, you can reach any potential buyer.

Who have been your mentors?

I was fortunate to meet a woman at the very beginning of my career, whom I later understood to be an exceptional jewelry antique dealer. Her name is Aviva, sister of the famous Shlomo Moussaieff. She used to have a tiny shop on Geneva's Rue du Rhône, with the most beautiful stock of antique jewelry. She trusted me; she taught me everything. From the 19th century to Art Deco, she knew everything, and she had the most beautiful pieces on the market, signed and authentic. She taught me the levels of quality of gemstones from diamond to jade, and craftsmanship, prices, requirement for authenticity, and she introduced me to the greatest merchants of the time. I owe her a lot. During my career, which began when I was young, I had a few other mentors, mostly international diamond dealers.

Would you say jewelry auctions in France have a distinctive style, or has the market grown too global to see differences?

The French market for jewelry auctions has its own distinctions. The first is that it draws its wealth and diversity from the resources of French heritage. Many treasures — ancient jewelry and gemstones — are hidden in French heritage. I once appraised a case for a French family that contained exceptional jewelry dating from the 18th century to the present day — three centuries of collections and transgenerational transmission! That's exceptional.

The second distinction is that it targets all types of buyers: professionals from all over the world or private collectors, future brides or just enthusiasts. The French auction market is very open and diverse. In the same auction, we can offer a lot for EUR 100 ($107) and another for EUR 1 million ($1.1 million)!

How would you describe your current job?

My job consists of finding treasures, evaluating them, appraising them, and describing them. Advising and informing buyers as accurately as possible. It's a job encompassing research and transmission.

The last Kashmir sapphire I sold — a 10.43-carat stone flanked by diamonds — belonged to a French family. The owner told me, "I'll show you a ring before I decide to throw it away, in case it's worth something." I took the ring in one hand and my loupe in the other and before I even thought about the kind of gems it could be, and far before I sent it to the Swiss gemological laboratories, my whole body started to shake. A Kashmir sapphire detected by shivering! Of course, we sold it for a record price: EUR 440,920 ($495,528) at the Baron Ribeyre auction house at Drouot in May 2017.

[An] Art Deco necklace [that achieved] a world record was a piece I knew for 15 years at least, belonging to a collector I advise. It was a signed Cartier piece, circa 1925, set with turquoise, coral, onyx and diamonds, which realized EUR 512,000 ($480,475) in June 2020, also at the Baron Ribeyre auction house. When she decided to sell, I was happy she contacted me instead of Christie's or Sotheby's. I knew I would have great collectors bidding and fighting for it. It was a great achievement.

I don't see my job as work, but as a constant source of surprises and encounters with objects or connoisseurs. Besides, for a long time, I have been a consultant for jewelry brands in Place Vendôme, and I have had the pleasure of building projects with people for this industry, always aiming to teach sellers about jewelry heritage and history. Just before Covid-19, I taught at the Gemological Institute of China (GIC) at Wuhan University, which was a tremendous experience, addressing the next generation of Chinese jewelers and introducing them to Western jewelry culture, history and markets.

Is there a sale to which you are particularly looking forward?

Like every year for over 20 years, I am organizing a major auction at the Hôtel du Palais in Biarritz with Biarritz Auction House. This French auction is close to my heart, because in 20 years, we have made it an important, anticipated and observed event by collectors and dealers from around the world.

This year, I also have a brand-new project for a summer auction on the French Riviera with the auction house Boisgirard Antonini, with which I have been working for 23 years. New projects are always exciting and a bet on the future of the market.

Which jewel would you have loved to buy for yourself?

I confess that when it comes to buying jewelry for myself, I become more of a woman than an expert. I love the jewelry my husband gives me. But it's been a long time since I let him choose it! ®



Opposite, from top: Van Cleef & Arpels floral set comprising a brooch and earrings; a 16.72-carat, fancy-yellow diamond. Both sold by Annabelle Cukierman.

IMAGES: ANNABELLE CUKIERMAN