



STONES AGAINST DIAMONDS (1947)

Ever since I was a child I've collected things: pebbles, shells from the rocks in the Abruzzi, strands of wire, little screws. While I was still very young I remember something momentous happened in the form of a chicken my mother was preparing for our Sunday roast. In its stomach was a collection of glass and pebbles worn smooth by water, in shades of green, pink, black, brown and white. My mother gave them to me, and that was the start of my collection, which I kept in a little powder compact, a present from my Aunt Esterina, made from the blue steel of German guns abandoned after France's victory in the First World War. I was six years old. Aunt Esterina had gone to Naples to sit for a school exam, and when she came back she told me that all the trees in Naples were made of pink coral. From that moment on, pink coral became a part of my life.

My passion for stones continued to grow. By the age of 15 my new love was a window display on the Via Condotti, which was always full of antique jewels. At least once a week, on the way home from my school on Via Ripetta, I'd stop and gaze at the display. One day the owner invited me in, and so began my friendship with Signor Rapi, who let me handle the stones. My absolute favourite was a little blue cameo, dazzling as the dawn, with a little dog's head on it. Signor Rapi said it was English, dating from the start of the last century, and that the stone was called labradorite. So blue labradorite was now added to the pantheon alongside pink coral. These were 'semi-precious' stones – gold, pearls and diamonds never interested me at all.

The years went by, bringing the outbreak of the Second World War, my training as an architect, a fast-moving career – I was editing *Domus* by the age of 25. Then P M Bardi

appeared on the horizon. An interview for *Domus* came with a lovely surprise – a necklace of dark coral cameos and gold that I had admired platonically on the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, in the window of Settepassi, goldsmiths to the King of Italy. Thus my love affair with ‘stones’ was rekindled.

The years passed.

In 1946 we were invited to come to Brazil. P M Bardi, then my husband, gave me a collection of night-blue aquamarines and other Brazilian stones.

My collection has grown. My love for Brazil has fuelled my love of gems. This is a country of marvellous stones, such as the quartz crystals that you can pick up from the ground in the mountains of Minas Gerais, in the tablelands, or even in São Paulo state, where, some years ago, I found some really beautiful ones, perfectly polished by nature, serving as gravel underlay for the tarmac being laid on the road out of Itararé.

Well, all of this is a prelude to calling for designers in Brazil to start working with these gemstones, which are unjustly tagged ‘semi-precious’. Consider it an ethical demand for ‘ornaments’ made of base gold, bronze, diamonds with visible inclusions, silver, chrysolite, quartz and coloured beryl. Ornament has been a constant in human history, since ancient times – now in Brazil we may perhaps see the industrial design of ‘high-end’ jewellery distinct from the diamonds and gold of high-society ladies.

I could go on to the ‘trinkets’ sold by market traders and street peddlers. But that would be a whole other story.

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