

Making *the* Cut

For half a millennium, Antwerp has been synonymous with its lucrative diamond trade. While buffeted by geopolitical headwinds and the advent of lab-grown alternatives, its reign as the diamond capital of the world remains strong

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

Antwerp has always sparkled. One of Europe's richest metropolises in the Middle Ages, flush from the robust cloth trade between the Low Countries and England, its eclectic architecture spans renaissance guildhalls, Flemish-style gabled townhouses, experiments in art nouveau and Zaha Hadid's Port House, the headquarters of the continent's second-largest port.

The artistic engine of the Flemish Golden Age, the city produced Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck and, more recently, turned out the likes of Dries Van Noten and Martin Margiela. To that dazzling crown, the city can add another jewel: it is arguably the world's pre-eminent diamond hub.

A rich history

Some 80 per cent of the world's rough diamonds (stones that have not been cut or polished) pass through the city's Diamond Quarter, a compact set of streets tucked behind the city's train station, at some point. Since the '60s, Indian traders (predominantly from the Jain religious community, whose roots largely lie in Gujarat, India's diamond mecca) have played an increasingly prominent role in the industry. But the trade was built by Antwerp's Jewish community.

"Sephardic Jews in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries moved from the Iberian Peninsula to Antwerp [after mass exiles of the Jewish population] and settled there," notes Saskia Coenen Snyder, professor of modern Jewish history at the University of South Carolina and author of the 2022 book *A Brilliant Commodity: Diamonds and Jews in a Modern Setting*.

"They were [already] engaged in international trading and they folded [diamonds] into their trading networks," she continues. "In the early modern period, Sephardic Jews laid a foundation for what would become an international diamond city and industry."

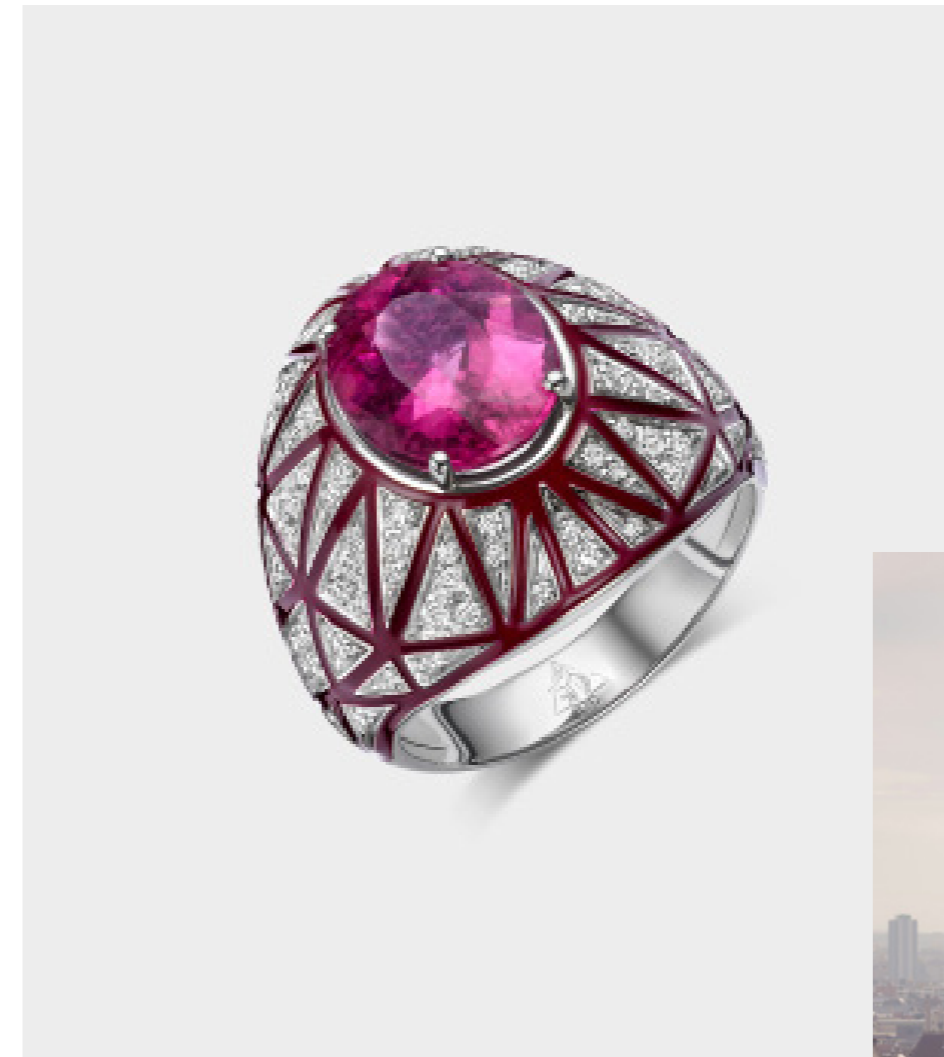
The Jewish diamond trade in Antwerp remains based on traditions going back centuries, says Coenen Snyder. "Major deals between buyers and sellers are still done with a handshake," she explains. "There's a [Hebrew] saying [they use], *mazal u'bracha*, which means 'good luck and a [blessing] for this interaction'. It's still very much a system of trust."

Centre of the action

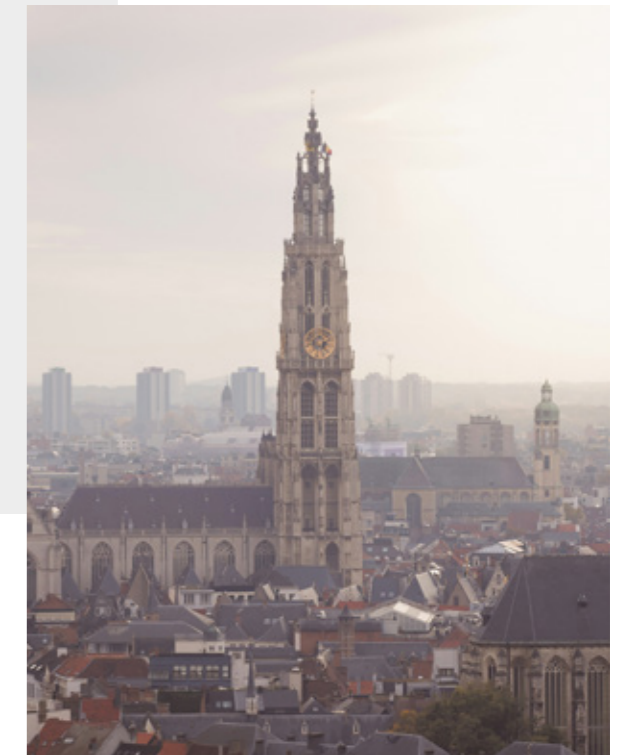
Antwerp-based jewellery designer Dries Criel founded his namesake label in 2018 and his pieces – fusing sleek lines and a modern sensibility with nods to ancient Egypt – have been worn by Natalie Portman and *Stranger Things*' Joseph Quinn.

Living in Antwerp, which Criel has since high school, is a "dream come true" for those in the industry, he explains.

Photography: courtesy of Dries Criel (ring); Zoë Gayah-Jonker via Unsplash (Antwerp).



THIS PAGE, L-R Dries Criel Sphinx Ring, 18c white gold, natural white diamonds, Pink Enamel in Pink Tourmalines; the global diamond hub of Antwerp, Belgium.



"Everybody knows each other. [There] are three different parties that I work with constantly. They know what I'm looking for, I know what they can offer."

While he has harboured a life-long love of jewellery, he admits: "If I hadn't been in the city, I wouldn't have been able to explore and discover that world."

This proximity allows Criel to see the process up close, which provides him with an unparalleled vantage point for his customers. "Let's say I'm working with a client who's looking for something very specific from a design perspective," he shares. "I can take them to the cutter and to the dealer and I can really work with the client to create something extraordinary, with the best materials around. From a designer's perspective, it's a great place to be. Everything that I can possibly dream of is within my reach – a 10-minute walk from [my studio]."

Homegrown connection

Cushla Whiting founded her namesake jewellery brand in 2014 with her siblings Anna and Hamish. The Melbourne-based label is known for their custom engagement rings that draw on Whiting's

training as an architect and for their prowess working with antique stones. As the daughter of a former All Black player-turned-diamond wholesaler, she has been visiting the city since she was 14.

Her brother Hamish, a Gemological Institute of America (GIA)-certified gemmologist, moved to the Belgian city six years ago to "be at the heart" of the industry. There, he liaises with dealers who specialise in particular stones, be that side, coloured or antique gems or unique cuts. It's here, too, that highly skilled hand-cutters correct surface imperfections of the antique diamonds Cushla Whiting often incorporate in its pieces.

"There'd be no one else in the world that could repair an antique diamond like that [outside of Antwerp]," reflects Whiting.

In Antwerp, geopolitics and jewellery intersect with remarkable frequency. In September 2025, it was announced that the Trump administration would make the European Union exempt from the 15 per cent import tariff imposed on diamonds polished in the EU, making Antwerp the only global centre of diamonds able to access the American market duty-free.

"I think that will make Antwerp even more popular, because obviously [tariffs] make a huge price difference," muses Whiting.



Evolving industry

Due to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the city found itself as a focal point of sanctions when, in early 2024, direct and third-country imports of rough diamonds from Russia – which remains the world’s largest producer of the stones – were banned from entering G7 countries and the EU. The decision has delivered a considerable financial blow: Antwerp World Diamond Centre (AWDC), the chief representative body of the sector, claims total import and export figures declined by 25 per cent in 2024 compared to 2023, post the sanctions’ implementation.

Diamonds entering the city must also strictly follow the Kimberley Process, a certification introduced in 2003 via a United Nations General Assembly Resolution to eradicate the circulation of “conflict” or “blood” diamonds from the market. An increasing number of companies – including industry titans De Beers and Bonas Group, with whom Whiting works closely – are implementing blockchain technology to guarantee full traceability across the stone’s journey, from mine to its final sparkling setting.

The rise of lab-grown diamonds has also transformed the landscape globally. The synthetic diamond market is booming, valued by Allied Market Research to be worth \$36.71 billion in 2022 and projected to reach \$90.56 billion by 2032. Yet leading grading laboratory HRD Antwerp announced in June 2025 that it would stop certifying synthetic diamonds. “The move reaffirms Antwerp’s role as the international hub for natural diamond trading,” the AWDC said of the decision.

Global poles have shifted and, today, India is estimated to cut and polish nine out of every 10 diamonds. “Especially for diamonds under two carats, it was impossible to compete with the labour costs,” offers Whiting. “[But] the really big, expensive stones still get cut in Antwerp because of the skill of the cutters there.

“I had a client from Florida who wanted a five-carat antique Asscher cut, which is so rare,” she continues. “There’s no way I ever would have found that in Australia. Hamish had to go to all the dealers and he found something, miraculously. I was like, *That could only happen in Antwerp.*” **HB**

Photography: courtesy of Cushla Whiting (this page); Victoria Huisman (opposite page).



OPPOSITE PAGE Cushla Whiting Futurist Spinning Pendants. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Cushla Whiting wearing her designs; siblings Hamish Whiting, Cushla Whiting and Anna Whiting; examining a diamond.



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