

RACHAEL TAYLOR

TIFFANY & CO.  
The Story Behind the Style



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## The King of Diamonds: Charles Lewis Tiffany

Charles Lewis Tiffany, the man who would go on to win the moniker of New York's 'King of Diamonds', did not hail from a long line of jewellers. His start in life was more modest, making his ascent to high society all the more glittering.

Tiffany was born in 1812 to Comfort and Chloe Tiffany, and grew up in the small town of Killingly, Connecticut. The major business of the town was the production of cotton goods, and the family owned a manufacturing company. Tiffany was educated at local schools in the area before joining his father in the family cotton business.

By 1837, Tiffany felt restless. No longer satisfied by working at home with his family, he began to envision how he could make his own mark in business. He teamed up with a school friend, J. B. Young, and the duo set in motion a plan to open a stationery store in New York City. With a \$1,000 loan from Comfort Tiffany, the ambitious 25-year-olds made the 150-mile journey south. The store, named Tiffany & Young, opened its doors at 259 Broadway that same year, and on its first day, \$4.98 rang through the tills.

Tiffany & Young soon began to expand its remit, stocking glasswear, cutlery, porcelain, clocks and jewellery, and began to develop a

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OPPOSITE: Tiffany & Co. founder Charles Lewis Tiffany, photographed by Jessie Tarbox Beals in 1902.

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The Monarch  
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reputation as a purveyor of fine goods of taste. In 1841, the business expanded with the addition of a third partner, J. L. Ellis, and was renamed Tiffany, Young & Ellis. The trio expanded the store, doubling it in size by renting the adjacent unit, and continued to increase the quality of the goods they sold, with Young making buying trips to Europe to pick out English and Italian jewellery.

It was, in fact, political events in Europe that would be the making of this American luxury success story. In 1848, the status quo trembled as republican revolutionaries sought to topple European monarchies and strip aristocracies of their power and wealth. It was a societal upheaval known as the Springtime of Nations. More than 50 countries were impacted by this, but none more so than France, where the monarchy was overthrown and replaced with a republic. Such widespread panic and disruption had an impact on the price of diamonds, and Tiffany, Young & Ellis swooped. By now, the firm

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**PREVIOUS:**  
An illustration of horse-drawn carriages outside Tiffany & Co. in New York.

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**OPPOSITE:**  
A sketch of the Tiffany & Co. booth at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889.

was manufacturing its own jewellery, and the opportunity to pick up diamonds at low prices put them at an advantage. The rocking of the aristocracy also loosened some important gems – the likes of which had never been seen in America before – and Tiffany secured a number of important heirlooms, including the collection of Hungary's Prince Esterházy.

In 1853, Young and Ellis decided to retire from the business, but Charles Lewis Tiffany was far from finished. He found new partners to work with, and the business was, at this point, renamed Tiffany & Company. Tiffany would go on to build his empire, grabbing headlines along the way. By the 1860s, the business was well established as an emporium of choice for the rich and the famous, both for its jewellery and its top-quality silver. In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln purchased a seed pearl necklace and earrings from Tiffany & Co. for his wife Mary Todd Lincoln, who wore them to her husband's inauguration ball.

In 1870, Tiffany & Co. moved into a large new store in New York's Union Square, marking the beginning of a major decade for the jeweller; one in which Charles Lewis Tiffany would earn the title the King of Diamonds. It was a single purchase that would truly jettison Tiffany into the high-jewellery stratosphere – a 287.42ct rough fancy yellow diamond. When cut and polished, what emerged was a diamond of staggeringly enormous proportions for a rare yellow diamond of that quality. It weighed 128.54ct and was named the Tiffany Diamond.

If the purchase of this now world-famous stone, which is on permanent display at Tiffany & Co.'s Fifth Avenue store in New York, signalled Tiffany's intentions to dominate the diamond market, his groundbreaking invention eight years later sealed the deal. Seeking to

celebrate the beauty of diamonds, Tiffany designed an engagement ring in 1886 that remains a sought-after classic to this day. The Tiffany Setting engagement ring kicked back against the over-fussy designs of the time with a clean, minimalist band and a six-prong setting that lifted the diamond above the ring. The purpose for this innovative setting was to allow light to flow through the stone, and therefore maximise the sparkle. It was a huge hit, and the iconic design has become synonymous with engagement rings.

Just 15 years before his death, Tiffany pulled off a final coup. The aftermath of the French Revolution that had gifted Tiffany an abundance of important gems in 1848 and its early credibility in high-jewellery circles rumbled on. In 1887, the French government was masterminding a plan to sell the crown jewels of its fallen monarchy. Outwardly, it claimed that a democracy such as France had no need for “objects of luxury, devoid of usefulness and moral worth”. The rumour mill suggested that it was in fact afraid of a power grab by Bourbons, Orleanists or Bonapartists, who might use ownership of the jewels to claim a right to rule. Tiffany cared little for this political posturing, but he did see an opportunity in it. He travelled to Paris to attend the auction of the French crown jewels at the Louvre. He sat in the audience, ready to make his bids, along with fellow jewellers, including a young Frédéric Boucheron, and Orleanists, members of the French royal family, whose pockets proved too shallow on the day to win back their family heirlooms.

When the final strike of the gavel fell, Charles Lewis Tiffany had in his possession close to a third of the historic crown jewels. He placed them in specially crafted red-leather boxes, embossed in gold with the words *Diamants de la Couronne*, translating from French as Crown Diamonds. Inside, impressed on the silk lining in the lid, was Tiffany & Co. New York and Paris, thus securing Tiffany & Co.’s place in the history books as a purveyor of royal jewels and his own coronation as the King of Diamonds.



LEFT:  
The Tiffany & Co.  
flagship store in  
New York.

BELOW:  
A gold,  
diamond and  
enamel floral  
brooch, made  
by Tiffany & Co.  
in 1890.

