

THE MAYFAIR MAGAZINE

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From stitch to style

What's trending for A/W16,
sculptures by Nicole Farhi
and Fendi's 90th anniversary

Figure drawing

Couture designs through the ages
from master fashion illustrators



R I N G T R U E

Ex-model Vania Leles worked her way from the bottom of the jewellery industry to launch VanLeles Diamonds. **Mike Peake** finds the Mayfair fine-jewellery brand giving some of the area's big-hitters a spirited dose of competition

It started with a heist – not a dramatic one, admittedly, but there were missing diamonds followed by mild panic and then an awkward confession to the ‘authorities’ (mum and dad) before everyone could go home again.

This is Bond Street jeweller Vania Leles’ first memory of precious gemstones. It actually has more to do with a then ten-year-old girl’s desire to show off her mother’s diamond ring to her school friends than any criminal wrongdoings.

“I totally forgot that I’d left the ring in my schoolbag, and when I got home I saw everyone frantically searching for it,” winces Leles. “I snuck into my mother’s bedroom and put it back, but then suspicion turned on the workers at our home so I came clean and told mum everything.”

Leles has come a long way since these unintentionally nefarious beginnings. Today her first-floor atelier opposite Graff Diamonds is awash with beautiful jewellery she can rightfully call her own – or at least until a client snaps them up. >



ZANZIBAR 18K GOLD, DIAMOND AND PARBA TOURMALINE RING AND EARRINGS





FROM LEFT: MISSILEO OCEANA 18K GOLD, DIAMOND AND SAPPHIRE RING AND EARRINGS, ENCHANTED GARDEN 18K GOLD, DIAMOND AND SAPPHIRE DOUBLE FINGER RING

► There are extravagant multi-jewelled earrings designed to look like the map of Africa, bejewelled dancing butterflies and scintillating pink sapphire flowers. And that's before we get to the bespoke pieces Leles makes for discerning clients who have been inspired by her commitment to the ethically sourced stones that form the backbone of her work.

"You can actually see my old desk from this window," says Leles, looking out over Bond Street at the stately Graff building, opposite. It was right here that her jewellery career began. The story, however, goes back a little further.

"I grew up in West Africa, in Guinea-Bissau, where I lived until I was ten. Then I went to Portugal," says Leles. She later moved to Paris after studying sociology at university in Lisbon. It was in the French capital that she first got a taste for fashion, which only intensified when she moved to London in 2000 to learn English and was 'spotted' by Select model agency.

Global modelling assignments for an assortment of fine jewellery brands followed, but after a few years in the fast lane Leles had a hunger for something else. "What I really wanted was to work as a jeweller," she says. "When I told my parents they said, 'OK, give yourself ten years to learn the trade, and then maybe we'll help you open your own boutique.' I thought, 'Ten years!' but I love to defy them – in a good way – and I went to the GIA (Gemological Institute of



America) and learned all about gems, jewellery design and business."

By the time she had returned to London, she had decided that Graff was the best jeweller in the world and started to learn everything she could about them.

After sending in her CV no fewer than 15 times – "It was Graff or nothing," laughs Leles, "I really didn't want to work anywhere else!" – she finally received the phone call that would change her life. Leles worked at the high-end jeweller for three illuminating years, before she was headhunted by De Beers, and then scooped up by Sotheby's jewellery department.

She really couldn't have scripted her career any better. After being involved in the sale of one of the world's most sought-after diamonds – the 24.78 carat Graff Pink, which Sotheby's sold for a then-record-breaking \$46 million in 2010 – she realised that she had a pretty good handle on the industry. That isn't to say that Leles' leap into the unknown world of start-ups in 2011 was easy.

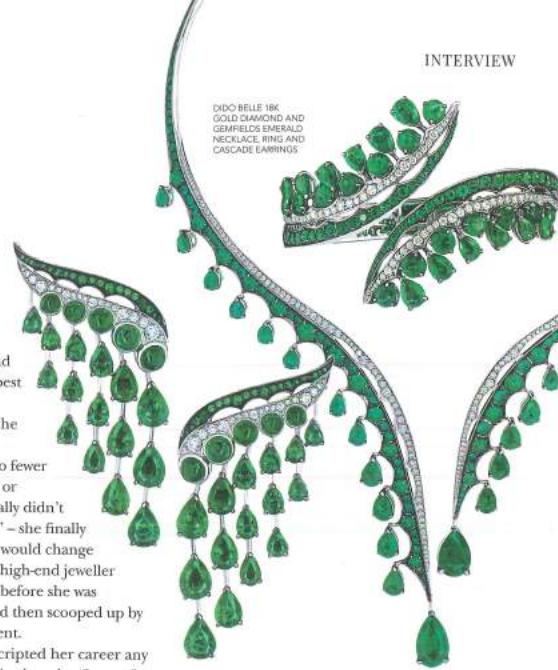
"I'm definitely ambitious. I want to look back in five years and see my collections in Harrods"

"In one way I was lucky, because I already knew a lot of the suppliers, the mines, the dealers and the workshops, and I had some clients as well," she says.

The flipside – which continues to be a daily battle – was that she had to fight with all of the big houses for the best stones. One helping hand during those tentative first years came from a kindly diamond dealer she had known for almost a decade. She was lent eight beautiful diamonds under the agreement that she would design a small collection of engagement rings and settle the bill when she'd sold them.

One by one the rings found buyers and Leles was on her way. She has the air of a woman who will always be heading somewhere more exciting.

"I'm definitely ambitious," she laughs. "I want to look back in five years and see my collections in Harrods or Neiman Marcus and go, 'Wow!'"



DIDO BELLE 18K GOLD DIAMOND AND GEMFELLOES EMERALD NECKLACE, RING AND CASCADE EARRINGS

Everything seems to be going to plan. VanLeles Diamonds is proving popular in the press and the brand has attracted a discerning group of jewellery lovers who share Leles's passion for ethically-sourced gems.

The company adheres to the strict policies of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) to guarantee that all the diamonds originate from conflict-free areas and legitimate sources. The legal trading of African diamonds is worth a staggering \$8.4 billion and schemes like this ensure that money is fed back into education, healthcare, clean water and food for the African populations working in the industry.

In every consultation at VanLeles, a client is shown a certificate of their chosen diamond, produced by a team of trained gemologists, detailing the analysis of dimensions, clarity, colour, polish and other characteristics.

"I've not re-invented the wheel, I just do what I believe in. We have great craftsmanship and I try to get the very best stones," she says. "Some people don't really care where their gems come from, but I think most of my clients really do."

It may have been some years since the day of the lost diamond ring, but Vania Leles' passion for the finest sparkling jewels has far from diminished. ■

By appointment only, 174 New Bond Street, W1S, vanleles.com