

Extraordinary gifts

by Tiffany Parks

February is the month of love. What better time to cover your lover with diamonds?
(Or take your beau window-shopping and hope he gets the hint!)

Or perhaps you've come to Rome to pop the question and need the perfect ring
to help illicit that all-important "yes!"

Well, you've come to the right place, and the Eternal City's jewelry shops certainly won't disappoint. Since the lush days of *la dolce vita*, countless divas and starlets have snapped up the glistening treasures that abound on and around Rome's most exclusive shopping street, Via Condotti. Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, Gina Lollobrigida, to name but a few, all adorned themselves with jewels from the world-famous shopping neighborhood found at the foot of the immortal Spanish Steps.



Is it any surprise that the tradition of giving an engagement ring originated in Ancient Rome? The custom began over two thousand years ago, when a simple iron band was placed around the third finger of the bride's left hand at the time of betrothal. This finger was believed to contain the *vena amoris*, or the "love vein" that led directly to the heart. It was not a gift of love, but rather visual proof of the legally binding engagement contract. As the ancient Romans became more skilled in working with precious metals, gold rings began to replace their iron counterparts, particularly as this metal neither tarnished nor rusted. By the 9th century it became law that all engagement rings must be made of gold, to show the groom's financial commitment to his bride. But diamonds came into the picture much later...



The first documented case of a diamond engagement ring occurred in Austria in 1477. Archduke Maximilian presented a ring set with tiny diamonds forming the letter 'M' to his future bride, Mary of Burgundy. This custom did not become widespread for many centuries to come, gaining popularity worldwide only in the 1930s following the DeBeers advertising campaign. In fifteenth-century Italy, however, diamond rings immediately became popular and were a customary gift for noble



Renaissance brides. An Italian belief held that diamonds were created by the flames of love. Others believed that they were flints of stars that steered the arrows of Cupid. Whatever the case, a glittering diamond has helped many a would-be bridegroom seal the deal.



BULGARI

Without a doubt the most glamorous and prestigious of all Italian jewelers, Bulgari's creations are both elegant and over-the-top, with cutting edge design and over-sized glittering stones in unusual settings. They have been dazzling jewel-lovers the world over since 1884. **Via Condotti, 10. Tel 06696261.**

TIFFANY & CO.

An American classic, Tiffany and Co. has been gaining more and more popularity with Romans. And can you blame them? Every girl dreams of one day receiving that little blue box. The epitome of elegant understatement, Tiffany & Co. practically invented the classic brilliant-cut diamond solitaire set in platinum, still their most popular engagement ring. **Via del Babuino, 118. Tel 066790717.**

CARTIER

Oozing with sophistication and *savoir-faire*, this French jeweler is famous for more than just its timeless timepieces. The definition of excellence and luxury, Cartier has set the standard that all great jewelry houses attain to. But be prepared for vigilant security if you visit this boutique as a diamond ring worth over €700,000 was stolen from this very shop last October! **Via Condotti, 83. Tel 06696751.**

POMELLATO

Chic, trendy and oh-so-fun are Pomellato's daring rings in bright candy colors and unusual cuts. Why go the traditional route with a diamond engagement ring when you can take your pick of every color in the spectrum? The hardest part is deciding which tempting



creation you love most, as each one is more brilliant and dazzling than the next. **Piazza San Lorenzo In Lucina, 38. Tel 0668809790.**

DAMIANI

Established in 1924, this Italian jeweler's designs are strongly influenced by the Art Deco style. Using the warm tones of rose gold and cascades of diamonds, Damiani now offers a new line of jewels designed by Italian glamour icon Sophia Loren. Or you might prefer a jewel-encrusted ring from their Gomitolo collection, with each ring named after a different Italian city. **Via Condotti, 84. Tel 0669200477.**

ANSUINI

Proudly claiming the position of honor as Rome's oldest jewelry store, Ansuini has been adorning lucky Roman ladies since 1860. So well respected, Ansuini has been trusted as the official restorer of the jewels in the Vatican's treasury for over one hundred years. They recently introduced a new line, Ansuini A&M (Art and Museums) with jewels inspired by the best-loved Italian works of art. **Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, 151. Tel 0668806909.**

ALFONSI

For a non-traditional bride, why not pick something truly one-of-a-kind? This luxurious jeweler will work with you to create original and astounding jewels beyond your imagination. The whimsical and eye-catching Exclamation Point ring, set with black and white diamonds, is perfect for the expressive woman who likes to talk (literally!) with her hands! Each piece is unique and lovingly handcrafted on site by this father and son team. **Via della Vittoria, 80. Tel 0669380447.**

