

THE ORIGIN OF RHINESTONES

Rhinestones aka Diamantes, Crystals, Flat Backs or Strass in many European countries, or even Paste as the original methods imply, go back to the 1200s where they were first made from Czechoslovakian or Bohemian hand blown glass.

The term Rhinestone was given to the little sparkles after the river Rhine, where quartz pebbles, rock crystals with a high lead content were originally found.

Folk would collect them from the shores, jewellers cutting and moulding them into little imitation diamonds. The flaws within them threw the light around to give them that great sparkle. Needless to say, supplies soon became scarce prompting jewellers and technicians to try recreate their wonderful properties.

By 1548 the roots of Preciosa were settling as a new industry was emerging; workshops and ateliers for glass-making began to pop up across Northern Bohemia's Jizera Mountains and Crystal Valley was born. In 1680 Bohemian jewellers and craftsmen were making the first glass bead necklaces, which quickly became a sought-after commodity among Bohemian and Saxon aristocracy for their exquisitely polished and perfectly cut stones. By 1688 a new, pristine clear glass, practically indistinguishable from natural mountain crystal was created and hard enough to be polished for brightness. In 1715 Bohemian glassmakers discover the art of melting coloured glass.

Joseph Strasser could be credited with the precursor to our present-day Rhinestone, but it was really when Georg Freidrich Strass in 1760 invented the first ever rhinestone (artificial gemstone) from a special type of crystal found in the Rhine River that the stones we know today were born.

In 1878, less than two decades after the first school of glass was founded in the Crystal Valley, the first school of The World Exhibition in Paris brings a newfound demand for "diamond jewels" that could be sewn onto clothing. Crystal Valley glassmakers respond, creating a glass component with a "silver mirror" on the underside of the stone, known today as foiling paper.

Daniel Swarovski, who was the son of a Bohemian gem cutter, patented an electric glass cutter in 1892. He formed his own company in 1895 in Austria - Swarovski was here to stay.

In 1908 machine-cut jewellery stones known as "chatons" were produced for the first time on proprietary cutting and polishing machines, resulting in a boom of new designs and applications. In 1948 Preciosa, now with its long history of centuries of crystal making, was officially established when 25 small, medium and large-scale companies and factories scattered throughout the Crystal Valley merged together into one company in Jablonec and Nisou, where Preciosa is still headquartered today. In 1956 they founded the Research Institute of Glass and Jewellery which today serves as an integral part of the company and remains one of the most respected research and development facilities in the glass industry.

Now we have the two most prestigious companies manufacturing Rhinestones in the world.

LEAD CONTENT Traditionally a Rhinestone needed to contain lead to give it its' superior shine. Lead increases the Rhinestones refractive qualities, softens the glass making it easier to cut. It was thought the higher the lead content the greater the sparkle. The Swarovski company's stones having up to 30% lead gave it a reputation of having the most prestigious Rhinestone.

However, times and technology has changed. Due to the health risks well documented from the ingestion of lead, especially amongst children, Rhinestone manufacturing has had to change.

It was in 2011 that the US CPSIA (Consumer Product Safety Improvement) made it an essential that all products are tested and certificated as safe for children 12 and under, and that meant no lead content. Preciosa introduced its trademarked Hi-Pure Crystal technology for an even more defined brightness as well as its Dura-Foiling process, which allows for better adhesion and stronger durability during secondary manufacturing. In 2013 as the call for greener products increased, Preciosa came through with the lead-free Maxima line. A unique material with an extraordinary sparkle meeting the highest international standards of quality and environmental certification.

So we now have a CPSC approved Rhinestones from Swarovski containing 0.009% lead or less.

Outside of these two companies there are other Rhinestone producers and so it is necessary to check their credentials and certification as to the lead content in their stones.

Of course, time marches on and development doesn't stop - 2020 for example saw Preciosa releasing the new Red Velvet stone - a revolutionary cadmium-free red range, previously not possible!

Whatever the future holds, we're sure it will be colourful.

