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Interview with Mr Iver Rosenkrantz

(Founder of Rosenkrantz Africa and Zimbaqua Women's Mine)



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Introduction

Iver Rosenkrantz focuses on making a direct impact among small artisanal miners and their communities through Rosenkrantz Africa and Zimbaqua Women's Mine, all while producing elegant pieces of high jewellery.

In this interview, The Thinking Watermill Society learns more about Rosenkrantz Africa, Zimbaqua Women's Mine and the impact one can make in the jewellery industry by working directly at the source.



1. The Rosenkrantz Africa brand is synonymous with elegance, luxury and sustainability. What is your inspiration behind its creation?

We are an African brand and we are proud to be an African brand. So, we try and stay in the sustainable luxury segment which is still relatively new especially in Africa. Our DNA is African but we also want to make products that can be worn anywhere in the world.

2. Your brand is well-known for fine jewellery, such as the breathtaking Thalassa necklace which is made of 600 carats of Tanzanite and 100 carats of Diamond. What steps do you take to responsibly extract and refine these precious stones?

We do not actually work that much with diamonds. We work with different miners to source them. While we work with a lot of precious stones that are not mined by us, we make an effort to know where they come from.

Right now, for example, we are in dialogue with De Beers to do a collaboration and source stones from them.

Traceability is very important to us. However, we are still a small brand. For example, we do not mine gold. So again this is one of the areas where we have to rely on someone else. We are more about coloured gemstones and for that, we influence about 60-70% of our stones.

Colour gemstone mining is relatively gentle on the environment. We do not use any chemicals and it is mostly manual labour, so it is something that creates a lot of jobs, which is how gemstones in Africa helps the communities. This is good for rural communities because when 2 or 3 people go out and dig a small hole, it does not really damage the environment.



3. Rosenkrantz Africa is responsible for some of Africa's largest jewellery pieces. Much attention must lead to caution. What are your thoughts on the protection of jewellery design by intellectual property?

We have protected some of our designs but we also do a lot of one-off pieces so it is very difficult to trademark those.

In a way, we have not experienced trademark breaches except in one case where the design was not protected.

With my first jewellery brand, Uru diamonds, unfortunately, we had so many copycats.



4. What laws, policies or guidelines does Rosenkrantz Africa adhere to for the assurance of ethics and sustainability to their clients?

We are a small business with 3 people, including my wife and I, who do everything. So, you can go down a rabbit hole with these things. I feel that it is much more important for us to dig our hands into the dirt and find out what is going on with the people on the ground, work with them and look them in the eye. This is what we do more of.

In the past, when I had a textile factory manufacturing responsible garments for export, we had fair trade certifications and it was an expensive process. For me, it is much more impactful to work with people on the ground. I would much rather have spent the money from the fair trade certificate on things that would have helped the community, such as building schools and facilitating healthcare. Yet, I really do understand the need for policies, especially for people who do not work on the ground.



5. You are also the founder of Zimbaqua Women's mine, which is the world's first all-women mine. This is a milestone especially in an industry that is male-dominated. What motivated this initiative?

For the last 15 years, I have specialized in working with people at the source by starting small mines, and helping people with the mining — working with the first links in the value chain. This is how it all started. My friend and I were once buying stones from small scale artisanal miners and spent about a year in Zimbabwe. We realized how difficult it was to survive there, especially for women. We then decided to start a mine and only employ women.

Personal change has to come through business and not through donors. Specifically, through sustainable businesses where everyone makes a profit — that's how it becomes sustainable and how the businesses can survive for a long term while making an impact.



6. In what ways has the Zimbaqua Women's mine impacted the people in that community?

We started the Zimbaqua mine in 2019 and it has really been a success. It has created jobs for 30 women who have become the breadwinners in their families. Before, they had no opportunities at all because some of the rural areas in Zimbabwe are very poor — there is no healthcare, public transportation or schools. It is really bad and there were no job opportunities especially for single mothers who ended up working terrible jobs to survive and feed their children.



7. We are now in an era where consumers want to know all the aspects of any product before they buy it. How do you ensure traceability of the gemstones acquired by both Rosenkrantz Africa and the Zimbaqua mine?

We extract these stones ourselves so it is easy to ensure their traceability. We use a lot of social media and press to tell stories about both Rosenkrantz and Zimbaqua.

With the Zimbaqua mine, normally a gemstone will change hands 9 to 11 times before it reaches its final destination. Each link in the value chain will try to protect his/her source and keep it secret so they do not get cut out of the value chain, because most of them are traders. At the end of the day, they do not want people to know where their stones are coming from and this also means that by the time the stone has changed hands 9 to 11 times, no one has a clue where it comes from.

When you go into a jewellery store and want to make a purchase, you would love to know who had found this stone, where it was found and that somebody actually benefited and improved their livelihood from this stone. It would make you happy to buy and wear a beautiful stone with a beautiful story and that someone in Africa is smiling because he/she extracted the stone and can send their children to school.

At Zimbaqua mine, we are happy and proud to tell the story of where a stone comes from.

8. Your recent partnership with Excel Mining Limited in Taita Taveta County, Kenya is an important step towards empowering African artisans and small-scale miners. What steps did you take before agreeing to the partnership?

This is a step in the direction of formalizing our partnerships with artisanal miners. We came up with the idea to set up an agreement where when they find a special stone, instead of selling it to a trader after a quick deal and for a low price, they can give it to us on consignment. If they are struggling we can give them an advance, then when we design a piece of jewellery, name the stone, document its journey and when it's sold we give them half of the profit of the retail price. That is a partnership as opposed to how it normally works where a miner buys things on credit in shops, so when he finds a stone he has to sell it to a local trader to pay off debts.



9. What should we look forward to from Rosenkrantz Africa and Zimbaqua Women's mine?

We are working on some very big pieces this year which is exciting. We are going to make and publicize some necklaces with Colombian emeralds which we have been working on for the last couple of years. I am very excited about showing those. One of them has a centre stone of 162 carats. We are also doing a very big necklace with stones from Zimbaquiua which will have approximately 150 carats.



Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Mr Rosenkrantz.

Learn More about Rosenkrantz Africa and Zimbabwe Women's Mine

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The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

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