

# Looking Sharp

French jeweller Cartier reveals a refreshing and edgy take on one of nature's most enigmatic flora species with its jewellery collection *Cactus de Cartier*, writes *Kyla Zhao*



**P**ASSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE cornerstone of inspiration for Cartier. In the monograph *Cartier Dazzling: High Jewellery and Precious Objects*, author Francois Chaille dedicates an entire chapter, fittingly titled *Dazzling Tokens of Love*, to unpacking this long-held association between romance and jewels. He declares: “The art of Cartier is seduction, an invitation to allow oneself to be carried away in a heady whirl of intoxication, to be dizzied and dazzled.”

Cartier’s creations are renowned for being emblems of romance and sensuality. Therefore, it took the jewellery world by surprise when in 2016 the maison released *Cactus de Cartier*, a collection of fine and high jewellery that derived its inspiration from the plant. The cactus has long been regarded as a symbol of repulsion, its physical thorny form translating into an unwelcoming, somewhat vicious aura that is at odds with Cartier’s romanticised objets d’art. In O Henry’s short story *The Cactus*, the protagonist Trysdale proposes to his girlfriend and receives a response in the form of the story’s titular object, “a singular-looking green plant...

with long, tentacular leaves”. He takes it as a sign of her disinterest—can we really fault him for thinking that?—only to find out at the end of the story that the plant was intended as a love letter: its name *Ventomarme* means “come and take me” in Spanish. But alas, it was too late for him to make amends, and their relationship crumbled beneath the weight of this prickly misunderstanding.

It appears to many, as it did to Trysdale, that there is nothing even remotely amorous or romantic or even Cartier-esque about this spiky, odd-looking plant. However, the flowering cactus is hardly the first plant to pique the imagination of Cartier designers, who have long been enamoured with nature. This was the influence of Jeanne Toussaint, Cartier’s head of fine jewellery from 1933 to 1970. Known for her impeccable taste and creativity, she helped inject into Cartier a more naturalistic phase inspired by flora and fauna, which was at odds with the geometric style of the art deco era. Floral motifs have resurfaced time and again in the brand’s collections, from

## PRICKLY PERFECTION

With tiers of diamonds, chrysoprase and lapis lazuli set in yellow gold, this *Cactus de Cartier* creation commands attention, much like the ring (opposite right) in yellow gold with diamonds and lapis lazuli

IMAGES: CARTIER





the orchid in its Cresse d'Orchidées line, to the Edelweiss coronation brooch for Queen Elizabeth II in 1952.

But in many ways, the desert flower's sturdiness and prickliness make it the antithesis to the daintiness that comes to mind when one thinks of "flower". Yet, one can never accuse Cartier of indulging in clichés. A flower, often regarded as flimsy, fragile and fleeting, is reinterpreted through a different lens by the maison's designers. Not in the least bit romantic or over-sentimental, the jeweller elevates the blossom's inherent femininity to an unfettered, powerful proclamation of energy and desire. A quick retrospective glance through the cactus' predecessors in the Cartier garden—thistle, wild rose, palm tree and iris, among others—reveals that the brand has long held a soft spot for plants known for their free-spirited, mould-breaking nature. The desert succulent is simply the latest in a long line of such flora inspirations.

But while the orchid and edelweiss are staples in our floral lexicon, the cactus and its flowers remain an enigma to most people, who are unaware of the diversity within the species. Most flowering cactuses bloom only

at night, and their flowers are short-lived—the *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, for instance, is in bloom for only a single night every year. There is something rather tragic about the fact that the plant is at its most beautiful when no one is around to appreciate it. However, it is now being pushed to the forefront of public consciousness with Cartier's cactus-centred jewellery line.

For all its peculiarities and mysteries, the desert plant makes for a generous muse: it comes in different forms, colours, textures and structures, providing inspiration for Cartier's creative masters. The pieces in the Cactus de Cartier collection reflect this stunning variety; they capture the secret beauty of this often misunderstood plant from different angles and perspectives. The cactus' thorniness might deter people from approaching it, but now you can wear it close to your body in a multitude of ways.

At first glance, the Cactus de Cartier line appears to be bursting with colours, textures and striking proportions. The cactus' intricate botanical anatomy is rendered in stylistic abstraction in a bracelet set in yellow gold, which features an array of chrysoprase dotted with emeralds to recreate the prickly

**TRUE TO ITS ROOTS**

*The Cactus de Cartier collection transforms the humble plant into a thing of precious beauty*

leaves while juxtaposed against a sprinkling of carnelians and diamonds that have been masterfully sculpted to emulate the succulent in full bloom at night. A cocktail ring in yellow gold featuring brilliant-cut diamonds arranged into a dramatic geometrical form, is reminiscent of morning dewdrops glittering on the cactus' bulbous, fleshy stem. It is crowned by a cluster of lapis lazuli beads shaped into petals peeking out from the ring's centre, akin to a cactus flower shyly withdrawing into its bud once dawn beckons. But there is nothing shy about the designs of these statement pieces; they are meant to command the viewer's attention.

These vibrant eye-catchers in the collection are balanced out by their more discreet but no less charismatic counterparts that carry with them an understated elegance. A seemingly simple necklace reveals pearls and yellow gold that have been woven into tiered contours designed to simulate the undulating curves of the squat barrel cactus. The slightly oversized orb pendant is adorned with six brilliant-cut diamonds totalling 0.39 carats that have been bunched together to form a blossom that looks as spiky as it is sensuous. A pair

of hoop earrings, covered in a dense thicket of shimmery pink gold thorns interspersed with diamonds, is a subtle way of letting one's rebellious and quirky side shine through, instantly lending an edge to any outfit.

With these new baubles, Cartier has made a very persuasive case for the desert flower's prickly charm. Much like how it stands tall and strong even in the harshest environments, the jeweller stands a cut above the rest, set apart by its eye for the unique and its boldness in constantly thinking outside of the box. ①



**DOUBLE DUTY** Rounding off this collection is a sleek bag made of green alligator leather, topped with a dramatic cactus clasp that doubles as a brooch

**THE CARTIER GARDEN** Notable floral-inspired pieces from the French jeweller

*A brooch from 1940 in yellow gold with diamonds and coral*



*The 1940 thistle brooch ordered by Lady Mendl comes in platinum with diamonds*

*The orchid, which first appeared in Cartier's works in 1925, is seen again in this Cresse d'Orchidées brooch from 2005*



*This 1962 flower clip brooch in platinum and white gold stars a 12.94-carat yellow diamond surrounded by diamonds*

*This palm tree brooch from 1957 is created by Georges Rémy, one of Cartier's most prolific designers*

