

Press Information:

Erin Blatzer 713-639-4785 or eblatzer@hmns.org

Melodie Francis 713-639-4743 or mfrancis@hmns.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Public Information:

(713) 639-4629 or www.hmns.org

**World's finest gems dazzle in new Museum exhibition hall
The Lester and Sue Smith Gem Vault premieres Nov. 17**



HOUSTON—Intensely hued jeweled masterpieces float wondrously in utter darkness, embodying the ultimate combination of natural perfection and flawless artistic execution. Opening Nov. 17, 2006, The Lester and Sue Smith Gem Vault, a new permanent exhibit hall at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, completes the story begun by the now world-renowned Cullen Hall of Gems and Minerals.

“Many people don’t realize this, but minerals come straight out of the ground with amazing color and fascinating, extremely artistic forms, with absolutely no help from humans,” said Joel A. Bartsch, president of the Houston Museum of Natural Science and curator of the Cullen Hall of Gems and Minerals and The Smith Gem Vault. “With The Smith Gem Vault, we wanted to build on the story created in the Cullen Hall of Gems and Minerals to show what people can then do with these materials, to show how they can evolve into something different, stunningly beautiful, and fascinating in its own right.”

Made possible through the generous support of The Lester & Sue Smith Foundation, this entirely new permanent hall abounds with some of the most mesmerizing cut and polished jewels ever displayed in a single exhibit. It includes dazzling examples of diamond, ruby, sapphire, emerald, aquamarine, topaz, amethyst, alexandrite and tourmaline. The stunning centerpiece is a 1,869-carat natural emerald crystal, the largest and most spectacular ever recovered in North America.

“When people think of rare gems, they tend to think of diamonds. In reality, diamonds are fairly common, with millions of carats mined each year. Truly rare and important gemstones are far more elusive,” said Bartsch. “The collections of a museum define it. Our focus has been, and will continue to be, finding the rarest gemstones of unrivaled quality to create the best gem collection in the world.”

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Smith Gem Vault/2

The Lester and Sue Smith Gem Vault will present the world's finest aquamarine, a gem that was mined in 1938 only to disappear from history for four decades before recently surfacing. Also displayed will be the world's finest Tsavorite garnet, a 144-carat gem in that variety's rarest color—a striking green—and the 2,765-carat Boulder Opal, the world's finest of its kind.

"Each of the jewels on display tells an incredibly dramatic story—a story that begins deep underground where the transparent, colorful crystals and rare, precious metals are fashioned and formed. The story continues by recounting the efforts of those miners who toiled to recover them from the earth and, having done so, then passed them on to the master cutters who shaped and polished the gems by hand. It ends with the creativity and craftsmanship that highly skilled jewelers employ, working "at the bench" for hundreds of hours to create the final masterpieces," said Lester Smith, member of the Board of Trustees of the Houston Museum of Natural Science. "The Museum already has the best collection of natural mineral crystals on public display anywhere in the world. It only makes sense to show the public how these natural wonders are transformed into artistic masterpieces, in the form of stunning gemstones and jewelry. The Smith Gem Vault completes the story of how the artistic efforts of man can complement these mineralogical wonders of nature-and that story is told all in one place."

Other highlights include a stunning emerald, platinum and diamond tiara; a magnificent blue star sapphire, diamond and platinum ring; and a brilliant golden sapphire brooch surrounded by dramatic green diamonds. Special lighting for the hall was designed to create the appearance of inner illumination, and the only light in the hall will radiate from the pieces themselves.

"To work with such outstanding gems is a designer's dream," said Ernesto Moreira, Smith Gem Vault jewelry designer. "To capture the raw beauty found in nature—beauty marked by brilliant colors and facets—has been the most extraordinary experience in my professional career. It is a tremendous privilege and honor to take these spectacular gems and create artistic masterpieces that Museum visitors will enjoy, and learn from, for generations to come."

The creation of the Lester and Sue Smith Gem Vault was made possible through the generous support of The Lester & Sue Smith Foundation.

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Smith Gem Vault/3

The Lester and Sue Smith Gem Vault is one of the Museum's permanent exhibition halls. Tickets for the permanent exhibit halls, including The Smith Gem Vault, are free for members, \$9 for adults; \$6 for children (3 – 11), seniors (62+), college students and military with a valid ID; \$1.50 school groups; \$3.50 for groups of 20 or more. For tickets, or more information, visit www.hmns.org or call (713) 639-4629. Information is available in Spanish at (713) 639-4603.

Photo credit: Tom DuBrock

Additional photos available on request

The Houston Museum of Natural Science—one of the nation's most heavily attended museums—is a centerpiece of the Houston Museum District. With four floors of permanent exhibit halls, and the Wortham IMAX® Theatre, Cockrell Butterfly Center, Burke Baker Planetarium and George Observatory and as host to world-class and ever-changing touring exhibitions, the Houston Museum has something to delight every age group. With such diverse and extraordinary offerings, a trip to the Houston Museum of Natural Science, located at One Hermann Circle Drive in the heart of the Museum District, is always an adventure.

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