

Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Where are we headed? The post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin used a huge canvass to ask these questions, both in words and images. His friend Vincent van Gogh had died young, and Gauguin himself lived to be fifty-four only, though he traveled to the tropics to paint, bed nubile women, and search for answers to the questions (and the bouts of depression) that troubled him.

Whenever the present seems stressful or hollow, we pine for the past, consoling ourselves with fantasies of an earlier, gentler time. Gauguin, whose ancestry was part Peruvian, looked for more authentic expressions through “primitive” art styles. Today, we might visit museums to contemplate his search, and that of others. Hence I was delighted when, on a recent visit to Germany, friends offered to take me on a day-long excursion to Regensburg, with a stop-over in a hamlet of the Altmühltal for a tour of the town’s museum. It wasn’t famous van Goghs or Gauguins, however, that my friends wanted me to ponder but an exhibit—rather, an astonishing number of small exhibits—of precious gems, jewels, and rare minerals.

I looked forward to visiting Regensburg, a town that has long occupied the imagination of poets and writers. By the late 1340s, as the Black Death stalked Europe, as much as two-thirds of the entire population succumbed—an estimated 20 million deaths in Europe alone. In many city-states and small fiefdoms, blaming the Jewish population for the calamities ran rampant, causing dreadful pogroms. The deranged reasoning had it that Jews’ poisoning the water wells were the cause of mounting deaths, never mind that Jews used these wells also. Today we know, the plague was brought back in the ships of returning crusaders, via rats that harbored the disease-bearing fleas, but in those days people functioned on superstition. In Germany, only two cities’ Jewish populations were spared the mass hysteria that brought on large-scale pyres of human victims. Regensburg was one of only two towns governed by enlightened leaders. The major of Regensburg stood firm against the terrified residents he needed to guide.

But before Regensburg came the stop-over at the Kristall-Museum in a hamlet of the Altmühltal, the “Valley of the Old Mill.” Its pièce de resistance consists of a gigantic grouping of precious stones, 7.8 tons in weight, that originated in western Kansas. There it was acquired in 1981 during a complicated auctioning process, thence to be sent by ship and rail to its current destination. “This natural wonder exceeds in beauty, clarity, and sheer size all other finds heretofore recorded; no wonder it gained entry into the Guinness Book of World Records,” gushes the description. On display in the museum are newspaper reports concerning the three people whose collective obsession brought the behemoth from Kansas to Germany: Maria, Ursula, and Erhard Scholz. The giant stone formation itself, along with countless high-priced gems, can be viewed at <http://www.kristallmuseum-riedenburg.de>

The displays left me vaguely restless and dissatisfied. Precious stones on velvet do not illuminate the clamor for their possession that has brought unimaginable suffering to the unfortunates destined to mine them, then under the whip of the colonialists, now under the corporate greed of multinationals. To read Greg Campbell’s “Blood Diamonds” about the chaos that devastated Sierra Leone throughout the 90’s and his more recent “Flawless,” a true-crime story he co-wrote with Scott Andrew Selby about Brussel’s largest, most audacious, and almost-perfect diamond heist is to gasp at the erring, warring humanity that claims us as members.

As we left the museum I was cheered by an unexpected sight. This one, too, originated in the US—in Wyoming, would you believe it?—and is displayed on the outside wall of the museum (hence, not on view at the website). It's a stone plate of calcified fish, found, as the accompanying legend tells it, “in one of the most famous fossil-finds on Earth: the Green River Formation in Wyoming.” The small sweetwater fish belong to the herring family and are deemed fifty million years old. In the the stone plate made my day, and I looked forward all the more to my sojourn in Regensburg, albeit wondering whether that long-ago Bürgermeister managed to survive the plague that devastated what once was my home country.

On my return to Wyoming, a retired paleontologist told me the Green River Formation fish, “*Knightia humilis*,” were named after his predecessor at UWYO in Laramie who discovered them sometime during or after WWII. Historical epochs vanish in the blink of an eye, sweeping with them countless human lives. Where are we headed? Who can say.