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'Once in a lifetime' Kashmir sapphires at Adam's, months after €550,000 record breaker

TREASURES ELEANOR FLEGG

When the Irish American heiress, Katharine Howard, died in 1990, she left a considerable fortune behind her. Her money went to the Katharine Howard Foundation, a charitable trust established in 1979, and her jewellery to a single beneficiary.

Nobody realised the value of the collection, which includes two Kashmir sapphires set in early 20th-century brooches. They're going under the hammer at Adam's Fine Jewellery & Ladies Watches Auction on September 9.

In May 2025, a Kashmir sapphire weighing 6.22cts went under the hammer at Adam's. It was estimated to sell for between €150,000 and €250,000. Following a bidding war, it sold for a hammer price of €550,000, making it the most expensive item of jewellery sold in Ireland to date. The pair in the current sale are considered of similar quality.

Ironically, the brooches have spent the past 40 years languishing in a Dublin bank. "They were valued by Adam's in 1990, but not identified as Kashmir sapphires," says Claire Mestrallet, head of Jewellery & Watches at Adam's.

The first brooch (Lot 46: est €150,000 to €250,000) dates from around 1905. Mestrallet estimates that the sapphire, weighing 6.53cts, to be of slightly better quality than the one she sold in May.

The second (Lot 47: est €200,000 to €300,000) includes an 8.24ct and dates from around 1900.

Its value is directly related to its size. "A 6ct Kashmir sapphire is already very large," Mestrallet explains. "An 8ct one is even rarer."

Kashmir sapphires were only mined between 1882 and 1887, and are considered the finest and rarest sapphires in the world. The odds of discovering three high-quality Kashmir sapphires in one auction house are impossibly high.

"You wait for one in your career and then you get two more in the same year!" Mestrallet says. "Within the world of gemstones and collectors, it's big deal. When I told my mother, she asked me for six numbers for the lottery."

The two sapphires are set in their original pieces of jewellery, but have been removed from their settings for testing and will not be reset for the sale.

Both are accompanied by recent reports from two laboratories in Switzerland and one in London, stating the weight of the sapphire, and that they are of Kashmir origin and show no indications of heating.

When Mestrallet sold the Kashmir sapphire ring in May, she already had the brooches in her safe deposit box. She strongly suspected that these two were Kashmir sapphires, but decided to wait until the May auction was over before having them tested. "I didn't want to word to be out that I had another two coming up," she says.

The brooches come from an Irish American collection with a back story that could have been written by F Scott Fitzgerald.

They were a wedding present to May Emily Sands (1879-1941) from her parents.

May's father was the banker Benjamin Aymar Sands (1853-1917).

The Sands family, who came from New York, were old money and high society. They were associated with Sands Point, Long Island, believed to have influenced Fitzgerald's peninsula of East Egg in *The Great Gatsby*.

The bridegroom, Hugh Melville Howard, was the younger son of the sixth Earl of Wicklow, based at Shelton Abbey, Co Wicklow. It was a classic marriage of Irish lineage and American money.

Their wedding at St Andrew's Dune Church at Southampton, Long Island, in September 1908, was lovingly reported in the *New York Times*: "The historic little church on the sand dunes ... was massed with oak leaves, with a rosette of fine white daisies at the head of each pew."

The bride's gown was "of heavy brocaded satin, overlaid with the same handsome duchesse lace that was worn by her grandmother, the late Mrs Samuel Sands, on her wedding day."

The best man, Mervyn Wingfield, brother of the bridegroom, was too late to make the wedding. He had travelled to New York on the *Mauretania*, which was delayed by fog.

Sadly, the couple did not find lasting happiness. Hugh died of pneumonia in 1919, and May was institutionalised due to poor mental health.

Their children, Katharine and Cecil, went to live with their uncle the seventh Earl of Wicklow at Shelton Abbey, where they occupied a wing of the great house in the care of a housekeeper. It sounds miserable. They spent their summer holidays with their grandmother Amy Sands, who left her fortune to Katharine.

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Both come with original jewellery settings, which were removed for testing

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Very rare early 20th-century Kashmir sapphire and diamond brooches with (left) cluster design and 8.24ct oval sapphire, circa 1900 (est €200,000 - €300,000); and (right) openwork lozenge design and cushion-shaped 6.53cts sapphire (est €150,000 - €250,000) at Adam's