

HIDDEN TREASURE

A CENTURY OF MYSTERY



WORLD PREMIERE: HISTORIC JEWELS TO BE UNVEILED TO THE PUBLIC AT THE MUSÉE NATIONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS DU QUÉBEC

City of Québec, September 3, 2026 — **Starting September 4, 2026**, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ) will be displaying **prestigious jewels associated with the Habsburg family for the first time in *Hidden Treasure: A Century of Mystery***, revealing a story with a strong Québec connection.

While the brilliance, elegance, and historical significance of these jewels make them worthy of display in their own right, they are being featured at the Musée because they are part of a story with close ties to Québec: that of Zita of Bourbon-Parma, the last Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, who found refuge in the city of Québec in October 1940.

A LOOK BACK AT THE JEWELS' HISTORIC JOURNEY

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, Emperor Charles and Empress Zita went into exile.

As the Second World War raged, changing Europe's fate once again, Zita fled the Nazi troops and sought refuge in the city of Québec, at the Villa Saint-Joseph in Sillery. There, the family formed lasting ties that would help anchor this story in Québec's collective memory: the empress had been travelling with a set of jewels that would remain hidden in Québec for decades.

The collection, long kept out of the public eye, is now on display. Its 15 jewels, including the legendary 137-carat *Florentine* Diamond, tell a story of exile, legacy, and resilience that forms an unexpected bridge between Europe and Québec.

A THREE-PART JOURNEY

In the first part of the exhibition, visitors will learn about the major historical milestones in the story: the Habsburg dynasty's legacy, Charles Habsburg-Lorraine's marriage to Zita of Bourbon-Parma in 1911, their unexpected accession to the throne, the collapse of the Empire in 1918, and the years of exile that brought the empress and her children to Québec.

Next, the exhibition ties the story of the imperial family to works and objects associated with 19th-century Québec society. It then narrows the focus to the city of Québec, highlighting the imperial family's relationships, the mystery surrounding the treasure, and the way the secret was passed down from generation to generation.

Finally, the journey culminates in the display of the 15 jewels themselves, as well as the suitcase that protected them for decades. They have borne witness both to the history of a dynasty and to the fate of a family in exile. Long kept out of the public eye, this exceptional collection tells a story of legacy, resilience, and an unexpected bridge between Europe and Québec.

SPOTLIGHT ON KEY PIECES IN THE COLLECTION

INSIGNIA OF THE ORDER OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE



The Order of the Golden Fleece is one of Europe's most prestigious Catholic orders of chivalry and a core part of the Habsburgs' dynastic identity. This particular medallion dates back to the 18th century and was worn by Charles I during his wake. More than just an ornament, it symbolizes the Habsburg dynasty's secular ties to Catholicism.

MARIE ANTOINETTE'S POCKETWATCH



This sumptuous accessory is a rare intersection of fine jewellery and watchmaking, from a time before wristwatches were common. It was part of the trousseau of Marie Antoinette (1755–1793), Queen of France, and placed in safekeeping during the French Revolution before being returned to her daughter Marie-Thérèse (1778–1851), heir to the French throne, for her marriage. On its backside, a lock of hair—perhaps belonging to Marie Antoinette’s mother, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria—illustrates that this was a deeply personal memento.

THE FLORENTINE DIAMOND



The centrepiece of this collection is the *Florentine* Diamond, emblem of both the Habsburg dynasty’s power and the mystery surrounding the treasure. It is one of the largest known diamonds and was believed to have been lost for over a century. Its light yellow colour is remarkably pure, and its double rose cut adds a second layer of facets on the underside of the gem to create more sparkle. It made its way through the centuries and the European courts before joining the Habsburg family’s jewellery collection.

QUOTES

“Quebec is proud to share this extraordinary story with the public and to welcome to the MNBAQ a collection of remarkable historical significance,” said **Mathieu Lacombe, Quebec’s Minister of Culture and Communications**. “Bringing these treasures to light creates a striking dialogue between heritage, memory and human resilience.”

“In 1940, Québec and Canada welcomed the Habsburg family during a time of great uncertainty. That generosity left a deep impression on the family and has never been forgotten. More than 80 years later, it is deeply moving to see this story continue in Québec and to be able, in turn, to share these treasures with the public. We are proud to help preserve them and pass on their story to future generations,” said **Andrew Molson, trustee of the Saint Joseph Trust**.

“The city of Québec offered my family safety, respect, and hope during a time of great uncertainty,” explained **Empress Zita’s grandson Karl von Habsburg**. “Showing these jewels at the Musée is an expression of profound gratitude to Québec and Canada for welcoming and sheltering my grandmother and her eight children during World War II.”

“We are incredibly proud to be presenting *Hidden Treasure: A Century of Mystery* at the Musée given the jewels’ close ties to the history of the city of Québec, where they were kept in secret for decades,” said **Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec Director General Jean-Luc Murray**. “For the very first time,

we are inviting the public to see these extraordinary masterpieces of European jewellery, whose brilliance, elegance, and story echo through history.”

CREDITS

Hidden Treasure: A Century of Mystery is an exhibition designed and produced by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in collaboration with the Saint Joseph Trust.

MANAGEMENT

Jean-Luc Murray, Director General, MNBAQ

Anik Dorion-Coupal, Director of Exhibitions and International Partnerships, MNBAQ

CURATION, CONSERVATION, AND CONTENT

Manon Pouliot, guest exhibition curator and content contributor, Loto-Québec

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Carole Breckler, guest restorer, Centre de conservation du Québec

Lysandre Bouchard, Exhibition Development and Planning Officer, MNBAQ

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Charles St-Gelais, guest designer and graphic artist

PARTNERS

The Musée thanks the Saint Joseph Trust, which expressed its desire to show this collection of historical items in the city of Québec, for its involvement in the initiative and the development of the project, as well as for its trust in our institution.

The Musée also thanks the Habsburg family for their support and cooperation throughout the project.

LENDERS AND ARCHIVES

Archives de la Côte-du-Sud

Archives de l'Archidiocèse de Québec

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ)

Marie-Charlotte and Zita De Koninck

Université Laval

La Maison A. E. Köchert

SPECIAL COLLABORATION

Otto von Habsburg Foundation (collaboration and loan of visual materials)

SPECIAL THANKS

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GENERAL INFORMATION

ADDRESS

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec
Battlefields Park
City of Québec, QC G1R 5H3

Main entrance
179 Grande Allée W

CONTACT

418-643-2150 or 1 866-220-2150 (toll-free)
mnbaq.org

HOURS

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 AM to 5 PM

ADMISSION

PLUS ticket | Includes admission to all Musée exhibitions and *Hidden Treasure: A Century of Mystery*.

Members: Free
Ages 12 and under: Free
Ages 13–17: \$8
Ages 18–30: \$21
Ages 31–64: \$28
Ages 65+: \$27

Online rates. Save up to \$3 per ticket.

Only PLUS tickets include admission to *Hidden Treasure: A Century of Mystery*.

Ticket reservations required at mnbaq.org

PHOTO SOURCES

From left to right:

Unknown European jeweller, *Insignia of the Order of the Golden Fleece*, 18th century. Silver, gold/gilt silver, diamonds, tourmalines? and silk, 17 × 6.5 × 2,5 cm. Saint Joseph Trust // Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

Jean-Antoine Lépine, *Pocket watch*, c. 1770 or before. Silver, ferrous alloy, diamonds, pink sapphires (?), glass, enamel, enamel powder, and hair, 5.6 × 4 × 1.2 cm. Saint Joseph Trust // Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

Unknown, *Florentine Diamond*, date unknown. Diamond, 2.6 × 2.6 cm. Saint Joseph Trust // Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

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Source: MNBAQ

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