

Focus On: Sapphires

Sapphire is often used interchangeably with the color blue. But, in actuality, as it pertains to jewelry, sapphire is gorgeous in almost every color of the rainbow, save red, which is called ruby. The blue sapphire just happened to be the most popular and sought after type of sapphire for thousands of years, hence its name, which simply means, “blue gem” in Latin. To this day, the blue sapphire is the most in demand and popular type of sapphire.



Background

Corundum, which is the scientific mineral name for rubies and sapphires, is the second hardest crystal known (second only to diamond) and comes in all ranges of color. It is the trace minerals within the corundum that give a sapphire its color. For example, a blue sapphire reflects blue because of the trace amounts of titanium in the crystal, a pink sapphire contains trace amounts of chromium, a combination of trace elements, in various saturations, produce the other colors. It is this naturally haphazard happenstance of elemental combinations that make sapphires unique. No two are exactly alike. Rare and unusual sapphires are irreplaceable in all sizes.



Sapphires are mined in many countries and regions around the world, but few produce fine quality stones. Sri Lanka and Madagascar are today, as they were a millennium ago, the finest producer of sapphires. Myanmar (Burma) and the Kashmir region of India also produce very fine quality sapphires, almost mythical in quality, but in far fewer quantities. Other countries, such as Australia, Tanzania, and Thailand also produce sapphires, but their quality is usually good only for commercial purposes.

A good quality of sapphire is rarer even than diamond. The fact that royal families around the world still exchange sapphire engagement rings, rather than diamond ones, is a testament to their high esteem and collectibility. As a matter of fact, Princess Diana’s engagement ring from Prince Charles was a sapphire. Even Elizabeth Taylor was given a sapphire engagement ring by Michael Wilding.

Rare Colors

Yellow Sapphires

Most yellow sapphires are found only in Sri Lanka and were historically among the most undervalued type of sapphire. Usually very clean and very bright, these stunning stones look great in every lighting condition and rival yellow diamonds in appearance. Because of their sudden popularity and general rarity, medium-sized stones with good canary coloring are becoming fast investment pieces.

Orange Sapphires

Considered by most experts to be unique to Australia, pure orange sapphires are almost never found in sizes larger than 3 carats.

White Sapphires

White sapphires are the only real pure sapphires. Since colored sapphires achieve their color from the trace elements within the corundum, white sapphires are simply corundum with no trace elements at all, or, put another way, pure corundum. With an appearance very similar to a clean diamond, white sapphires are an interesting, yet rarely seen, option for many types of jewelry.

Color-Shifting Sapphires

Considered by many to be an urban legend, these rare stones exhibit the outstanding and naturally occurring ability to shift colors between fluorescent and incandescent light. Found mainly in Tanzania, some color-shifting sapphires display only a slight visual change, while others

demonstrate a full change from blue to purple, or green to red, or green to yellow. While the color shift varies from stone to stone, all color-shifting stones are considered collector’s pieces and are rarely available for sale. Larger sizes with full color shift will demand very high prices.

Padparadscha Sapphires

Padparadscha’s are *the* rarest of sapphires. Generally unknown to most jewelry buyers due to their extreme demand, the color of these striking pink-orange sapphires is often compared to sunsets, tropical fruits or the eponymous lotus flower. Found only in Sri Lanka, these exquisite sapphires are considered by many to be the most beautiful gemstone, with a color that is to this day impossible to duplicate.



Cut Varieties

Besides the vast range of colors, sapphires can also be cut to express different aspects of this beautiful stone.

Cabochon Sapphires

The cabochon is more than just the most ancient and historically accurate method of cutting and polishing a stone, it is considered by many to be the best way of displaying a gorgeous sapphire’s distinctive natural beauty. It is the cut of choice for color purists who seek enjoyment from the raw splendor that only a perfectly clean, almost glassy, stone can provide. Cabochons come in a variety of shapes, including, oval, round and cushion-cut. The high-domed sugarloaf is among the rarer and more desirable of cuts.



Star Sapphires

Star sapphires were once considered to have special powers; they were held in high esteem and awe as powerful talismans. Today, we know why some cabochon-cut sapphires contain a star (or asterism) and others do not, but the awe these remarkable gems inspire still lingers. The star in a star sapphire is created by a delicate balance of concentration and location of internal “silk” rutile needles within the corundum crystal, that when seen in direct light, create a six-rayed effect. This completely natural phenomenon adds to the star sapphires mystique and rarity. Found mainly in Sri Lanka, star sapphires, like all sapphires, can be found in all colors of the rainbow – like the ubiquitous blue and black to rarely seen lavender and purple stones to as-of-yet unseen, but possible, orange, green or Padparadscha.

Size Comparisons

In addition, as a general guide regarding size, 1 to 2 carat sapphires in fine quality are considered rare. 3 to 4 carats in fine quality are difficult to replace. 5 to 7 carats in fine quality are very rare and almost impossible to replace or match. 8 to 10 carats in fine quality are one of a kind pieces. More than 10 carats in fine quality are usually referred to as “important”. These are for those who are wealthy enough to purchase and fortunate enough to find.

Conclusion

Sapphires do not have a grading system like diamonds. The individual characteristics of color tone, saturation and purity of color that define a sapphire are as distinct from stone to stone as the interpretations of these characteristics are individual from buyer to buyer. The only agreed-upon method of grading sapphires is common sense and beauty. The sapphire must be attractive to you. The color must be pleasing to you. The size must be appropriate for you. The cut must speak to you.

