

TANZANITE - MY BLUE LOVE

I think every gem dealer has a gem that s/he likes the most. Tanzanite for me is the essence of gems, my blue love, my true love of the mineral world, and yes, like a real lover, it does not always behave the way we expect it to.

It is fascinating as a gem and as a gem product. I fell in love with the stone on my first encounter with it in the early 1970s when it was brought by a customer to my gem lab. I don't really care in what color it is normally found in nature (brown) and that a short and not very sophisticated heating process turns it into beautiful blue.

This gem has sent me for the last 30 years, for months on end, to Kenya and the mines in the Merelani hills in Tanzania where conditions used to be terrible in the early days, buying in the bush from the Masai miners and exporting it to the west.

I spent years trying to refine my tanzanite heating process, including a custom-made computer-controlled oven with many stages and properties, only to find, fairly late in life, that my gem behaves best when cooked on a fire or gas stove packed in a cigarette paper.

The history of tanzanite begins in the late 1960s when Christie's introduced this fine stone to the international market by launching a campaign. The stone was accepted with great enthusiasm and fetched very high prices, well over \$1,000 a carat for fine, large pieces. But due to unstable supplies, the market was limited mainly to collectors.

When we first arrived with calibrated tanzanite in the US market in the late 1970s, many dealers were reluctant to look at this soft gem. One even told me that the gem was so soft (6+ on the Mohs scale of hardness) that it can crack even if one sneezes on it, which is a gross exaggeration, but come to think about it, not so far from the truth. I once had a 15 carat gem that lost its corner when I accidentally dropped it on the table. (Don't try it at home!)

The 1980s saw a surge of supply from the mines, which resulted in greater recognition and appreciation of the stones. By the late 1980s, supply and demand were both high. Prices were reasonably low resulting in many designers using this remarkable stone as a centerpiece for their jewelry. The 1990s saw the golden era of tanzanite as a commercial product.

Outstanding tanzanites were used for fine quality jewelry, but on the other hand, inferior qualities of tanzanites, pale or too violet, which were once considered to be too poor for use in jewelry, are quite commonly used today. Parcels of tanzanite cut in calibrated sizes are in high demand.

One should not forget that a fine blue tanzanite of 10 carats could cost today about \$5,000-\$10,000 a piece, whereas a similar color of sapphire weighing 10 carats could cost anything between \$30,000-\$100,000 a piece. Because color is so dominant in jewelry today, big, colorful, sapphire blue, natural stones at a reasonable price is only feasible using tanzanite.

In 1997, for no apparent reason, the price of tanzanite collapsed with the gems dropping in value by the day. This caused many people, including your humble servant, to lose lots of dollars because of his love for, and loyalty to, the gem. They say it was a flood of gems from the mine. The prices were down for two years, then from mid-1998 up to mid-2001 they rose sharply, bluing many jewels and reigning over many TV shopping evenings.

And then came 9/11 and the false rumors that the gem was generating funds for terrorists... and the prices died for a couple of years. Since then new players have been in the market, some trying to stabilize the market and create some kind of a controlled environment.

Let's not forget that tanzanite does not have the 1,000 year history and record of sapphire, hence it is more sensitive to changes. However, I believe that the fact that there is only one locality in which the stone is found, coupled with the relatively small supply, and the ever-growing demand and interest of the world market, and the fact that the Holy Bible mentioned only one big flood, tanzanite's place in the gem-world is secured for many years to come.

As for myself, my love for the gem is as strong today as the first day I set eyes on it...

Regards
The GemEwizard

The GemEwizard is also known as Menahem Sevdemish, D.Litt., FGA, the architect behind the "Gemewizard", the GIA approved color communication and grading for gemstones. He is also President and founder of the European Gemmological Center and College, the Gemmological Association of Israel as well as a founding member of the ICA. In his spare time, he has authored several gemstone and diamond reference works including "The Dealer's Book of Gems and Diamonds".