

The Magnificent Sapphires of Kashmir



View of mining area - One of the earliest photos, circa 1887-88



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For those of you who read my article on corundum in the last issue of Antiquorum’s “VOX”, you will know that sapphires and rubies are the same mineral called corundum, and that sapphire is the generic name for all the “fancy colors” of the species, with the exception of red, when the stone is then called ruby. When there is no description of color before

the word sapphire, then we assume that it is a blue sapphire, the queen of all the sapphires. Of all the blue stones in this family, there is one that stands out and is incomparable to all the rest – they are the sapphires of Kashmir.

In the northwestern part of the Himalayas, on the Indian side of Kashmir, lie the remains of the most important source of all time for the most prestigious sapphire of all time. At an altitude of almost 15,000 feet, in the treacherous and rugged peaks of the Himalayas, we find the “Old Mine”. The stories vary as to the discovery of these gems, but it seems that an avalanche or landslide uncovered the first “pebbles” in 1880, give-or-take a year or two, with traders or possibly hunters to first spy them, although it is also probable that the

local villagers down below may have known of these pretty blue stones from washed-out gravel in alluvial deposits.

In any case, the Maharaja of Kashmir soon learned of these superb gems, whose rich color resembles the “blue of a peacock’s neck”. Being that the mine was in his territory, he sent his guards to the mining area and confiscated any and all of the extraordinary blue material. As Valentine Ball writes in 1885 (as appears in “Ruby and Sapphire”, by Richard Hughes), “The Maharaja of Kashmir then intervened by sending a regiment ...with carte blanche to harry the inhabitants who had, or who were suspected of having, any of the stones in their possession...[and if suspected, he was] thereupon despoiled, and if not arrested and confined, was placed under observation.” Legend has it that the Maharaja possessed an unbelievable collection of these fine gems, in huge amounts and in huge sizes too!! It was said that he had gems beyond belief, one being a crystal of gem quality that measured one foot long!! The best sapphire was mined from this source, but unfortunately, the mine was exhausted by 1887! A second mine, called the “new mine” was opened only a few hundred yards away,



Rough and cut Sapphires from Kashmir (Courtesy of Dr. Hanni)

but this did not have a great yield. Throughout the next few decades mining continued, but with very little to show for it. In fact, sporadic mining has continued up until only a few decades ago, but with no significant results! The sapphires found in the short lifetime of the old mine were of such spectacular quality that there have

been none to rival them since, and they are considered to be the *crème de la crème* of all sapphires, to which all others are compared. And while I am not an historian, it is important to understand the basics of the Kashmir sapphire's history in order to appreciate just how rare these stones really are.

The beauty of these sapphires is in their extremely rich color. Many in the gem trade still describe the color as "cornflower blue", but since I, and most people I know, have no idea what a cornflower is, that doesn't work for me. The peacock's neck plumage probably describes the intensity of color more accurately. Basically, the blue is extremely pure, without the undertones of green, gray, or purple. The most significant aspect of this sapphire's color is when you have the "velvety" texture in the stone; this is one of the most characteristic properties of the Kashmir sapphire. While this is due most likely to microscopic inclusions (see my article on Corundum in the last issue of the VOX), thought to be minute rutile, or "silk" inclusions, the overall effect is magical, creating a softness, and yet a strong color not often seen in other sapphires.

The color of the fine Kashmir holds up in all kinds of light, another magical property that no other sapphire can boast of, as even the fine Burmese stones tend to lose their rich color in evening light. The Kashmir stones also tend to be less included than many sapphires, despite the microscopic inclusions which account for that velvety appearance in the classic gem quality material just described; you don't find many "fingerprints", large rutile crystals or "silk", or other typical inclusions that are so common in other sapphires.

One does, however, typically encounter a very textured color zoning, little rivulets (or tiny "flags on poles"), certain small crystal clusters, and other types of inclusions which help to identify the country of origin. Generally speaking, I have yet to see a heavily included Kashmir sapphire. Since these sapphires have most likely been mined over 100 years ago, most people, even many in the gem trade, are under the impression that these sap-

phires have not been treated in any way, namely by heat enhancement (refer to the last "VOX" article on corundum). Unfortunately, this is not the case.

As I mentioned in my last article, the heating of sapphires not only improves the color of many stones, but it also "melts" or burns out many inclusions; that velvety appearance which the connoisseur holds in such high esteem is not appreciated by the average trader, and so very often these magnificent gems are removed from antique settings and heated until their magical velvet is melted away. As a lover of the species, I must say that I have seen less and less of these stones possessing this characteristic attribute, as unknowing or uncaring gem

dealers try to create what they consider "perfection" by ruining the softness and texture of these incomparable gems.

Kashmir sapphires were found in a variety of sizes. Although stories passed down from written documents attest to the finding of huge stones, weighing ounces and even kilograms (remember, 1 gram = 5 carats), none that large have publicly surfaced to my knowledge. The largest one that I have personally been involved with was just over 65 carats, which is one of the biggest I'm told! If one has patience, one can find the 10 carat or even the 20 carat Kashmir sapphire. They were often cut in cabochon form, especially in the "sugar-loaf" cabochon, which resembles a pyramidal shape, having 4 sides with softened "edges", which was a favorite shape, lending themselves well to this cut when

they possessed the "velvety" quality that I have described above. Otherwise, these stones can be found in almost any faceted shape – cushion, oval, round, and emerald-cut, to name the most popular.

Of course, like any gem material, not all stones are of the finest quality, or as we say in the trade, gem quality, but the percentage of gem quality Kashmir sapphires is higher than sapphires from other origins. Some fine sapphires from other geographical areas can resemble those of Kashmir, but they still do not possess all of Kashmir's qualities, especially considering how these beauties retain their color in so many different types of lighting. Often dealers may call a sapphire of a particularly beautiful color,

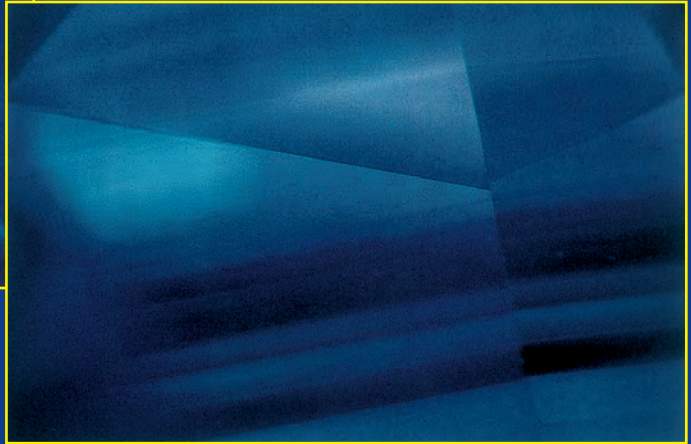


Ranbir Singh, 1829-1885
 Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir from 1856 until his death in 1885
 (From the Archives of American Gemological Laboratories, Inc.)



◁ Typical "rivulet" in Kashmir inclusion

▽ Typical color zoning in a Kashmir sapphire (not exclusive to Kashmir origin). Courtesy of AGL.



"Kashmir", referring only to its color, not necessarily guaranteeing it to be from Kashmir. It is best to have your purchase substantiated, if you are about to become the fortunate owner of one of these gems, by a professional laboratory specializing in colored gemstones and country of origin, such as AGL (American Gemological Laboratories) or SSEF (Swiss Gemological Institute).

It is amazing to think that basically the entire production of fine Kashmir sapphires comes from the last century, during a period that only spanned approximately 7 to 8 years, when the mining was not only quite primitive, but the harsh conditions of the environment only permitted the fittest to a mining season that lasted about 3 months!! And yet these stones are far from having been forgotten by time! Quite the contrary - these rare gems are so sought-after, that when they surface, they command a price beyond any other sapphire. I can't help but wonder if the old legends are true, and that there might be some more of these extinct gems left in some remote hidden treasure of the Maharajas.

My husband thought he had found such a treasure and was on his way to view a chest that was discovered in one of the Maharaja's palaces, hidden away in a remote spot. He had already arrived in India and was only moments away from the chest that was supposedly filled with 18,000 carats of Kashmir sapphires!! However, it seems that the Indian government had also been made aware of the treasure, and all was confiscated just prior to his arrival! I have heard many exciting stories, and perhaps time will bring to light some of them. In the meantime, I will continue to seek out these magnificent, rare gemstones which come from the place called Kashmir.

Just as a footnote, as I make reference to my past "VOX" article which describes corundum, those of you that have read it may wonder why there is no mention of any other colored sapphire from Kashmir? In fact, it is unusual to have no other varieties found in a given location, but the fact is, only the blue variety of sapphire was found in Kashmir!!

However, a few hundred miles away, on the Pakistani side of Kashmir, a discovery in 1979 revealed the red sibling - ruby (and only ruby) - deposits!! The highest ruby deposits in the world, at an elevation of about 15,000 feet again (!), were discovered and later visited by yours truly and my husband, Osvaldo Patrizzi! Yes, there are rubies from Kashmir, but not in the same locality!!! But then, that's another story!!

U.N. and Gemcore expedition in 1995, in search of Kashmir rubies.

