The rainbow world of colored gemstones offers its own special challenges to appraisers.

THE TRUTH ABOUT COLORED GEMSTONES

By Diana Jarrett

Recent spikes in colored gemstone sales indicate the public's growing admiration for pricey colored stones. While it's impossible to track these statistics, Barbara Wheat, executive director, International Colored Gemstone Association (ICA), offers insight. "Designers are using colored stones more now because of the variety of colors, shapes and cutting styles." Daring cuts rarely found on diamonds are rampant in the imaginative collections from designers who jump on ingeniously cut colored stones. "Luscious briolettes, buff tops, pineapple cuts and other wonderful fancy shapes and cuts are a designer's dream," Wheat points out.

Wheat also attributes the increased access to information on gemstones that is available today as a factor in the rising popularity of colored gemstones. People are better equipped to interpret the value of colored gemstones from "exotic locales, such as Brazil, Madagascar, Tanzania and Kashmir," Wheat finds. With no global force like De Beers advancing the cause of the colored stone market, the internet has proven to be the consumer's best ally in cultivating a taste for precious colored gems.

WHAT IS IT WORTH?

The emergent trend for big-ticket gems has produced an increased call for consumers and retailers alike to assess what they have on their hands. Gemological laboratories have adapted to this movement by creating gemstone quality reports. Consequently, appraisers are examining more costly gemstones and one-of-a-kind luxury jewels, at times becoming perplexed over establishing a cogent worth for the unique goods.

Undertaking colored gemstone valuation has its own peculiar challenges. Unlike diamonds, where pricing charts detail everything on a grid, colored stones have far less defined systems for analyzing quality to price. The few gemstone pricing guides are helpful. But unless appraisers have personally inspected a AAA-grade tanzanite or a top-notch African blue spinel, for example, they are hampered when assigning a value on that colored stone in their laboratory. Away from the sample specimen, can one be sure of a color match?

Accurate color description is paramount. Appraisers strive for "*apposite*" appraisals by systematically tying all the traits of that gemstone to its value. If the need to replace a cherished emerald occurs, simply calling it "green" won't do. According to *Gems & Jewelry Appraising*, by Anna Miller, the jewelry industry has wrestled with the conundrum of describing color in gemstones for decades. "Color is the name of the game in evaluating colored gemstones. Moreover, the intensity of the color is the number-one factor affecting price."

This page, top: *Opal and rubellite tear-shaped cabochon pendant/earrings in 22-karat yellow gold by Stephanie Albertson;* ***above:*** *Rose necklace with white and pink diamonds, pink sapphires and emerald foliate en tremblant, in white and yellow gold. Signed Elizabeth®, by House of Taylor Jewelry. Photo courtesy Diamond Graphics.*

NO UNIVERSAL COLOR SCALE

Color communication systems function as a private language that enables appraisers, dealers and retailers to express exactly what the color is of a stone they want or have when it can't be seen but is just expressed "on paper" — the way that the description "IF, D" diamond communicates a particular color even when you don't actually have the stone in front of you. Woefully, however, there is no one gemstone color "communication" tool that is universally utilized in order to express those colors in words. Some systems on the market, however, have tried to tackle that concern. The early Munsell color system, or the GemDialogue, created by industry veteran Howard Rubin, operate by way of a color-matching system. Of those, GemDialogue offers the broadest scope of color-matching possibilities, with 60,000 potential variations. The Color Toolbox, created by Rubin in cooperation with Gail Brett Levine, facilitates communication between appraisers using different color communication systems, making it possible for them to understand each other's color description.

A diamond is a diamond, appraisers may say, since all diamonds have the same refractive index and chemical composition. While conflict-free diamonds or Canadian diamonds may warrant special appreciation by informed collectors, generally, diamond origin is no big deal for consumers. With colored stones, however, origin matters, sometimes a great deal. For example, neon blue tourmaline from different locales varies greatly in price.

The Truth About Colored Gemstones

At Paraiba International, a 5.74-carat, neon blue Brazilian Paraiba tourmaline trillion retails for $99,000. An Africa Gems look-alike, a "Windex Blue" 3.17-carat Mozambique tourmaline, with comparable color to a Paraiba tourmaline trillion minus the Brazilian pedigree, sells for $4,822.

Relatively few commercial sights produce diamonds worldwide. Colored stone production, by contrast, is global, often hinging on politics or nature. Outrage at Myanmar's human rights policies was used to justify a moratorium on the trade of Burmese rubies in late 2007. Flooding at Tanzanian mines in March 2008 could affect the tanzanite supply in the future. Top appraisers keep an eye on global affairs that influence the supply of particular gemstones, attending conferences that review market conditions driving gemstone prices. And, because gemstone treatments are ever-evolving, appraisers must regularly get hands-on experience to recognize the characteristics of gemstones treated by various methods.

UNCOVERING THE TRUTH

Mark Cartwright, veteran jeweler and appraiser, shares an example of how appraisers still find themselves stumped on occasion. Presented with a "horribly abraded, round blue stone" in a flimsy, old 10-karat gold band, Cartwright was asked by a client to redesign the ring for his daughter. All signs pointed to this being a cheap, synthetic stone, begging for replacement. Cartwright wrestled with the ethical dilemma of yielding to his client's sentiment for the stone, since replacing it with a real gemstone would cost the owner a bundle. But, when the center stone was unmounted, Cartwright noticed "some color zoning, so I put it under the 'scope.' I put a drop of 1.76 immersion liquid on what was once the table and was stunned to discover classic Kashmir sapphire inclusions. The nearly-2-carat stone was Milk-of-Magnesia-bottle blue. We were both glad he hadn't followed my original advice of scrapping the stone and starting fresh."

After the stone's origin was confirmed by American Gem Laboratory (AGL), the precious sapphire was set in a ring for the client's wife. "I learned my lesson," says Cartwright. "No matter how obvious the 'sight identification' appears, I will never again offer an opinion of a gem's identity before testing it."

Charles Elias is another jeweler, gemologist and appraiser who appreciates the complexities facing appraisers today. "When dealing with large, fine, rare, one of-a-kind gemstones, you can pretty much throw away your price guides," Elias says, emphasizing that these cases warrant extreme diligence. "The last thing you want to face is a consumer damaged on the receiving end of an insurance claim who will not be indemnified for the value at which you appraised his prized bauble."

Dee Rouse Huth, speaking for the MasterValuer appraisal program offered through California Institute of Jewelry Training (CIJT), observes the ever-evolving nature of the gem industry. New colored stones are uncovered constantly, Huth says, and "With each new development, it lies with the jewelry appraiser to learn about the stone, research a value and compile backup data. This challenge is actually an exciting opportunity for jewelry appraisers whose focus is colored stones." ✦

This page, top: *22-karat yellow gold cuff with natural yellow sapphire, peridot and morganite by Stephanie Albertson. Photo courtesy David Lewis Taylor;* ***center:*** *4.11-carat raspberry pink Tanzanian spinel from PalaGems. Photo courtesy Wimon Manorotkul/Palagems.com;* ***bottom:*** *Colored gemstone cocktail rings handcrafted of 22-karat yellow gold and assorted colored gems by Stephanie Albertson.*