



eye on supply

Cobalt Magic

Blue spinel turns heads with new top-grade material on the market.

BY DIANA JARRETT

Well worth a fresh inspection under the loupe is some fine blue spinel currently on the market.

An ancient group of related minerals, spinel likely owes its name to the Old Latin *sintill* — from which the word *scintillation* was derived.

And a good descriptive name it is. If you haven't considered blue spinel for a fine jewelry piece, remember that its density assures a high polish when faceted. Rating an 8 on the Mohs scale, this gem doesn't need to be coddled in protective mountings, either.

Traditionally, spinel lovers were red stone aficionados, as spinel sometimes occurs in an intense red that rivals the finest ruby. Designers and collectors gave little notice to the blue variety of spinel. Even when found in excellent quality, a lack of availability in quantity or large sizes kept it out of the running as a feature player in high-end designer goods.

Much of the material previously offered was medium- to light-toned, and not very lively. Because it was often quite included, and those inclusions were dark, minimum care was given when faceting this stone.

We're not experiencing a revival of interest in fine blue spinel, but a welcome appearance of the high-end material that we couldn't get our hands on before.

Enter "blue spinel" into an online search engine, and you'll come up with dozens of online sellers of the inexpensive variety. To their credit, many dealers present several images of each stone, allowing for observation of the native cuts. Not only are they uncalibrated and usually deep in the pavilion, but they suffer great asymmetry. The price reflects these conditions, settling around \$35 to \$50 per carat.

However, at Tucson last year and again at the summer Jewelers of America (JA) show in New York, I took note of some glamorously saturated, rich cobalt to royal blue spinel in several loose-stone dealers' lineups. These stones, available in relatively large carat sizes, were surprisingly clean and well cut. The attention to finely proportioned and symmetrical faceting foretells the expected jump in prices.

JA New York is primarily a showcase for finished goods



TOP LEFT: Cobalt blue spinel, 4.18 carats, cut by David Clay Zava of Zava Master Cuts. TOP RIGHT: Two blue spinels in a matching cut; gems courtesy of Pala International. BOTTOM: Blue spinel in a trillion cut by Stephen M. Avery; mounting by Anna Blake. Photos by Robert Weldon.

from around the globe. As expected, I found numerous dealers offering blue spinel in modest quantity and better-than-average, moderately saturated blue. A step up from native cuts, they still lacked fine finishing. Louping revealed that the color was enhanced by prominent, dark inclusions, although they didn't create the "muddy" effect seen in other material. Prices were set competitively at \$115 a carat. Some stones just over a carat were offered at \$100 per stone.

A Thailand-based vendor showed me his clean, well-proportioned, pear-shaped blue spinel — a 3.16-carat beauty selling for \$385 a carat — and a 3.12-carat, emerald-cut, marine-blue stone at \$500 per carat. By the way, fans of Kashmir sapphire take note: The emerald-cut stone had all the allure of a Kashmir sapphire, minus the velvety translucency for which those gems are recognized.

Nice stones are coming from several sources, according to Mikula Kukharuk of Nomad's Co. in Bangkok, Thailand. Burma, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, and other East Asian locales provide much of the goods. But with careful, patient searching, Kukharuk told me, he had located fine stones in Africa and other places which he prefers to keep to himself.

In general, look for wholesale pricing to be around \$550 for desirable colors and fine-quality goods in blue spinel. You'll be happy to see carat sizes that show off its hue to best advantage. Due to the configuration of the rough crystals, expect to find many of the largest stones faceted into cushion shapes.

Every valuable gemstone has its imitative counterpoint, and that day has arrived for blue spinel. Sellers of boules — the laboratory-created "rough" — and vendors of faceted stones in all sizes and cuts abound. The price of these synthetics goes from \$0.50 to \$1 a carat when cut down to \$0.12 a carat for boules in quantity.

Robert James of YourGemologist.com writes that natural blue spinel is easily separated from its flame-fusion synthetic counterpart, which has a refractive index of 1.72 and is singly refractive. It also turns red under a Chelsea filter. A hydrothermally created synthetic blue spinel will likewise react with a strong red appearance under Chelsea filter. Here, cobalt is the colorant; producers of the flame-fusion variety won't release their list of ingredients.

Watch for the new, opulent blue spinel currently on the market to hold its rightful place amongst elite gemstones for designers who can choose anything they want — without respect to price. ○