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Trending in

# TUCSON



Platinum cufflinks by Mark Schneider accented with 18-karat yellow gold. Featuring a 19.12-carat and a 19.15-carat rutilated quartz, tsavorites (.22 ctw), and yellow and white diamonds (2.17ctw).

## Buyers snap up exotics and one-offs for bespoke pieces

By Diana Jarrett

Each February like clockwork, the faithful and the curious make their way to Tucson, Ariz., for the American Gem Trade Association's (AGTA's) GemFair and other shows to seek out new stones and jewellery. This year's events brought a steady stream of buyers, and not all were bargain

hunting. Many were steeled to pay dearly for important one-offs from favoured designers, and the turnout supported that stance. "We're up over five per cent in attendance from last year," said AGTA chief executive officer (CEO) Douglas Hucker. "It actually exceeded our expectations."

Veteran pundits noticed Thai and Chinese buyers early on picking up anything and everything in coloured stones. “The Chinese know they are not buying at the lowest prices, or even the best of species, but they can still make money back home,” says gemstone dealer Paul Levin, owner of California-based Tairona Co. Toronto native and gem cutter Sherris Shank found that easy to understand. “The Chinese have new money to spend and they’ve long valued gemstones,” she says. “They’ve also been focusing on buying rough, which has driven up the price on many coloured stones.”

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For many buyers, it all happens at the Tucson Convention Center or across the road inside the Gem and Jewelry Expo’s (GJX’s) billowing white tents. Yet, adventurous designers know they have to spread out farther to get a hold of off-the-beaten-path treasures. Montreal-based designer Claudio Pino took advantage of the more than 40 shows that occur in tandem with the AGTA GemFair and the GJX. “This year, I was not showing,” Pino said.



 18-karat green gold cuff by LJD Designs accented with alexandrite melee (2.56 ctw) and white brilliant diamonds (1.88 ctw).

“I was really busy shopping for stones everywhere, including the Pueblo Gem & Mineral Show. I found some pretty spectacular golden prehnite.”



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# TUCSON

Padparadscha sapphire and diamond ring by OMI Privé.



Peruvian pink opal, white shell, blue lace agate, and lemon chrysoprase bead necklace by Splendid Co.



A fair amount of trading always occurs on the fringes of the main events. Toronto designer Anne Sportun is branching out from her organic diamond collection with

the introduction of a colourful gemstone line this season. Sportun reconnects with her favourite purveyors outside the hub. "It's always fun exploring the periphery shows as well, but the best part about this yearly trip is the time I get to enrich my relationships with the people I've been working with for years," she claims. "They can source anything."

Vancouver gem cutter Lisa Elser relies on similar contacts she's nurtured over the years. Through her connections, Elser snapped up Afghani sea foam tourmaline and other desirable rough on her must-have list.

### Here's a first

Tucson is a stage to debut the quirky, the new, and the unpronounceable—oddities like natural peach topaz, Antero aquamarine, and trapiche sapphire and emerald. Blue amber, a Dominican variety of the resinous gem, thrilled jewellery artisans who liked seeing it change from golden amber when light passes through it or blue when the gem rests on a solid background.

Rubellite tourmaline was one stone buyers hustled to snag. In the past, two main sources for the rosy material have kept this gemstone in most favoured

status with designers. Historically, Brazil and Nigeria have produced enough rough to make it a commercially popular stone. With mines closing and sources drying up, however, there is little available in larger sizes or in top quality.


The furor over glass filling in the last few years has soured consumers to ruby. This, in turn, has sweetened rubellite's street cred. According to Shank, rubellite is a failsafe choice. "There's not much you can do to rubellite," she notes. "It doesn't undergo the treatments that ruby has been susceptible to." So when you buy rubellite, you get an untreated stone in a rich cherry hue.

Veteran cutter John Dyer brought imaginative gemstones in hard-to-find varieties like sherry and cognac zircon. "Zircon is a beautiful gem that is more sought-after all the time due to its extreme brilliance and dispersion," Dyer told *Jewellery Business*. Yet, his ever-popular tourmaline has been more challenging to acquire. "Beautiful tourmaline is getting very hard to find with the high demand from China."

### Do you see a pattern here?


A curious confluence of creativity happens each year amongst designers

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who pitch their wares at the Tucson shows. The very nature of their artistry lends itself to working within a vacuum. It would be hard to imagine they divulge to their competition what they are working on prior to these shows. However, simultaneous trending patterns can often be identified by simply walking the aisles on the first day.

Vendors were selling eye-catching stylish cuffs for less than \$90 Cdn made from sharkskin in natural tones and bold colours. But couture designers also had brightly coloured bejewelled sharkskin cuffs in the \$890 Cdn range.

Another trending pattern came to the fore among designers looking to ride the next wave in coloured stones. This year saw an explosion of bold collections created in analogous colour combos. Colours adjacent on the colour wheel create excitement by lending an impression of depth or movement to an item. For each designer, however, it's a personal prompting that inspires their analogous colour choices. U.S. designer Babette Shennan brought a wide array of brightly hued jewellery, including a blue and green gemstone ring inspired by the colours in nature she loves. An avid scuba diver, Shennan spends time in the tropics admiring marine life, especially tropical fish flaunting vibrant blues and greens.

### Everyday exotics

A theme reverberating at the seminars offered at AGTA's GemFair pointed to the prevalence of exotic stones in both designer and volume-manufactured goods. During the economic downturn of not that long ago, designers resorted to using unknown and inexpensive stones as a way to offer lower price points so customers would continue to buy. That was then. Nowadays, daring jewellery artists place matrix opal with diamonds in high-karat gold collections and geode slices as the bold centrepiece of pricey couture jewels. Celebrities strut

their stuff wearing exotic jewels on the red carpet, so it is natural designers would oblige their customers with a cultivated preference for out-of-the-ordinary stones.

The appeal of so-called exotics ultimately lies in their beauty as a fashion accessory. Women may not know what the stones are, but they easily gravitate to what they like. First-time exhibitor Splendid Co.'s wide use of unusual stones makes it a natural for upscale retailers whose clientele demand something no one else will be wearing. Designer Robin Franklin admits her designs are not for everybody, and that's fine with her. Each of her creations are strictly one-offs, such as a single strand made of Peruvian pink opal, white shell, blue lace agate, and lemon chrysoprase beads.

### Man, oh man

Men's jewellery has been for eons a pretty boring lot. A perfunctory cufflink, maybe a ring, and for hipsters perhaps, slender retro tie bars. Vendors aimed to change all that this year. A brave use of splendid colour coupled with inspired design put the gent's category front and centre. Mark Schneider Designs used spessartite garnet, crystal, tanzanite, and other unlikely stones in its men's collection. Its cufflinks were intentionally created with class and for fun at the same time.

Designer Brenda Smith believes men's jewellery is making a comeback "Why can't men express themselves with jewellery as women can?" she asks. Something in Smith's tire motif cufflinks struck a chord with male buyers, she asserts. "A lot of men stopped by to see them because as one 30-something male jeweller said, 'I wear cufflinks every day and I am looking for statements to express my individuality.'"

### New standbys

Many buyers bring a shopping list of tried-and-true items they know their customers will buy, such as pearls. However, once a customer has already acquired a creamy-

## Sterling Style



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22-karat yellow gold and oxidized sterling silver 'Double Ribbon' ring by Babette Shennan, with round brilliant sapphires and emeralds (1.91 ctw).



Aubergine Tahitian pearl strand by Baggins, Inc.

white strand, where do you go from there? Baggins Inc., winner of Best Use of Pearls at AGTAs 2014 Spectrum Awards, thinks it might be with rare natural aubergine Tahitian pearls with deep tones and endless lustre.

Sea Hunt Pearls' large multicoloured baroques had buyers ogling a couple rows deep at times. Most every pearl purveyor had 13- to 15-mm freshwater pearls ranging from just under \$1000 Cdn to about \$9970 Cdn, with each price hike being driven by the quality of lustre and the colours of the strand.

### Haute dang!

Many buyers willing to dig deep in their pockets for pricey goods signalled a renewed confidence not witnessed for quite a while. Levin saw his blue tourmaline snapped up, as well as orchid-hued tourmaline. He says his cash buyers from China didn't quibble over prices. "Many were getting pricey stones for custom-work clients this year."

Today, customers pay for imaginative design and excellent craftsmanship of well-made pieces, irrespective of the item's metal. First-time vendor and designer Laura Jackowski-Dickson of LJD Designs found buyers eager to stock up on her bejewelled sterling cuffs, some priced at more than \$5500 Cdn. "We had steady traffic admiring alexandrite-studded 18-karat yellow gold cuffs and other high-end pieces the entire time," she adds.

Around town, buyers shopped for specific customers for whom bespoke and custom jewels are the norm. Certainly the pervasive vibe was upbeat. With all its storied past, the Tucson experience is still one of reinvention every year. In 2014, its message is one of confidence from buyers who understand their customer's desire for personal expression through luxury jewels. ♦

*Diana Jarrett is an award-winning trade journalist and graduate gemmologist (GG). A registered master valuer, Jarrett is a popular conference and trade show lecturer. She writes a syndicated column called "The Story Behind the Stone" for the Southern Jewelry News and Mid-American Jewelry News and is also a writer for magazines such as Life in Naples, New York Mineralogical Club Bulletin, and the gem trade blog, Color-n-Ice.*