

The Gemstone of the Sea

by Sally Thornton

We are now onto the third in this series of articles on Birthstones so I am going to take a look at *Aquamarine*, the Birthstone for March.

Aquamarine, the lovely blue-green gemstone is, like *Emerald*, a member of the beryl family. It has been used in jewellery since the third century BC and is one of the most fashionable gemstones of today. For hundreds of years it was called "The Sailor's Stone," due to its sea-like colours, ranging from a pale sky blue to a deep blue-green, and was thought to protect sailors and people travelling over water.

The name *Aquamarine* means seawater, so it is no surprise to find that most of the legends behind aquamarine are related to the sea and water. Greek legend says that sailors wore aquamarine amulets engraved with Poseidon to guard them against harm and possibly prevent seasickness. When caught in a violent storm out on the high seas these amulets were tossed overboard to placate Poseidon's anger. Interestingly, Thai culture also contains a common belief

that aquamarine can ward off seasickness and prevent wearers from drowning.

Since antiquity, aquamarine has been seen as a gemstone of great vision. It was often used for the eyes in sculpted statues that symbolize power and wisdom. These statues were placed in strategic positions, often near the coastline where they could calm the wrath of Poseidon, thus insuring the safe return of those on ships at sea. According to legend, however, any man or woman who set eyes on these statues became a person of great wisdom, harnessing the ability to see into the future. This belief continued into the Middle Ages where aquamarine was called the "magic mirror" and soothsayers used it for telling fortunes and answering questions about the future.

Because of its association with water, aquamarine is considered to be a gemstone of purification and cleansing that washes the mind with fresh clear thoughts and promotes self-expression. Its calming effects make it a popular

gemstone for those who practice meditation, as it is also believed to eradicate fears and phobias.

Aquamarine was also thought to be a healing stone and aquamarine would reduce the effect of poisons. Again in the 14th century it was used medicinally and thought to be a cure for hiccoughs. For this remedy, the aquamarine was steeped in water, then removed and the remaining liquid swallowed by the patient. Whether this worked any better than a slap on the back it is impossible to know!!

One of the most remarkable qualities of this gemstone is the sizes it is available in. The largest aquamarine crystal ever was called 'Dom Pedro'; it weighed 26 kg and was cut in 1992 by Bernd Munsteiner.

Popular cuts are a trap cut or mixed cut which makes best use of showing off its deep blue colour and shine. Unlike the emerald, the aquamarine is particularly noted for their clarity and freedom from flaws. However, the inclusions in beryls and aquamarines are long hollow tubes and, if there are enough hollow tubes, cat's eyes or stars can be produced with proper cutting and these are highly prized by collectors. The stones are cut as cabochons rather than cut in a faceted style to produce this asterism.

Aquamarines receive their sea blue colouring from a trace amount of iron. However, most come out of the ground with a greenish tint which was found to disappear with heating, leaving it a pure blue colour. This pure blue has become more popular over the last century so almost all aquamarines in the market today have been heat treated to create this permanent colour change. I, myself, have lost an antique earring in which the aquamarine has a greenish tint and is not heat treated. For many years I have been keeping my eye out for a stone to colour match the remaining earring, but I am still looking!

One of the most beautiful pieces of 18th century jewellery was bought by the notorious Duke of Wharton (lampooned as "a wild Peer, so known for his rakish tricks") for Maria Theresa, Maid of Honour to the Queen of Spain whom he married as his second wife in 1726. Its tuft of five peacocks feathers are exquisitely set in aquamarines and rose diamonds and is now in a collection at Southside House.

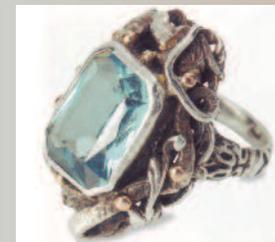
Queen Elizabeth II owns a matched set of aquamarine necklace, bracelet and earrings given to her by the Brazilian people shortly after her coronation in 1953. The Queen has added a matching tiara and sometimes wears the entire aquamarine ensemble for state occasions or diplomatic receptions.

But you don't have to be a reigning monarch or seduced by a rakish Peer to be adorned by this beautiful gem. The light colour of aquamarine leaves the modern jewellery designer free to bring out the brilliance of the gem and the pale fire is flattering to most skin tones, so even if you are not a mermaid you will want to add it to your treasure chest.

*"But oh what shall a March maid do?
Wear an Aquamarine to be brave and true."* Unknown source



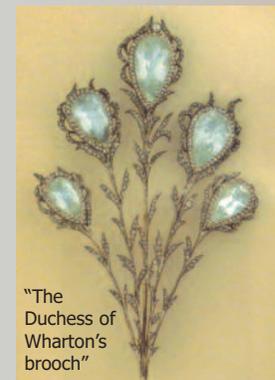
"Silver and Aquamarine Pendant by Roger Wagner c 1900"



"Silver and Aquamarine Ring c 1900"



"Note the more brilliant blue of modern Aquamarine"



"The Duchess of Wharton's brooch"



"Two long voluminous pendant Aquamarine Earrings by Cartier London c 1930"



"Five brooches set with Aquamarines, pearls and diamonds, convertible into a Tiara by George Fouquet Paris 1908"