

A Thornton

# The Jewel of Nobility

by Sally Thornton

In the second of this series of articles on *Birthstones* I am going to take a look at *Amethyst*: the Birthstone for February and often known as the Jewel of Nobility.

Gemmologists classify amethyst as belonging to the *Quartz* family and, usually for good reason, consider them to be its most striking member. Due to a combination of manganese impurities and the existence of iron in specific quantities, these beautiful gemstones occur in primary hues from a slight pinkish violet to a deep grape purple. In general, the most sought after grade is known as "Deep Siberian" which has an intense violet colour and red flashes, whilst the pale colours are sometimes called "Rose de France" and can be seen set in Victorian jewellery.

From ancient times, the colour purple has been associated with nobility. For this reason, the amethyst was once valued as highly as the diamond and was incorporated into the crowns of kings, the jewels of queens and the rings of bishops; its colour was perfect for their velvet robes.

The first King to wear the Amethyst as a royal emblem in England was Edward the Confessor in the early 11th Century.

The Greek word *Amethystos* can basically be translated as "not drunken" and traced back to an ancient Greek myth. According to this myth Dionysus, the god of fruitlessness and wine, was angered by the purity of a young woman named Amethyst who preferred to pay homage to the goddess Diana. Dionysus ordered two tigers to devour Amethyst but Diana came to the rescue turning her into white quartz. Overcome with remorse, Dionysus shed tears into his goblet of red wine some of which spilled onto the white stone absorbing the colour and creating the stone Amethyst. Hence the ancient Greeks believed that drinking wine from a cup of Amethyst would make them immune to intoxication.

The belief that Amethyst had sobering properties was also found in the early Christian Church. Amethyst was adopted as a symbol of the high spiritual state that its bishops must attain, and an amethyst ring became an important part of bishops' regalia. Wine goblets were made from this violet crystal and when water was served in such goblets it took the appearance of wine; when served to drunkards it undoubtedly had the desired effect. Even today the highest grade of amethyst is sometimes referred to by gem cutters as "Bishops Grade"

It wasn't just nobility and the clergy who admired amethyst; Leonardo da Vinci wrote that amethyst was able to dissipate evil thoughts and quicken the intelligence.



A Silver & Amethyst brooch of the Arts & Crafts Movement C1900



Amethyst pink sapphires and diamond ring set in 18ct Rose Gold £2495



Modern Amethyst and Diamond collection set in 18ct white and rose gold Earrings £355, Ring £479, Pendant £325

In India, amethyst is associated with crown chakra, or energy centre in the body, and meditation upon it is said to lead to mystical union with the universal consciousness. In Tibet, amethysts are considered sacred to Buddha and are often used to make rosaries. But the history of the use of amethyst goes back far further as the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia valued it highly. A cylinder seal engraved with the owners name has been dated as 18th Century BC.

If we go back only two centuries ago, amethyst was very popular in France and England. During the 18th century many affluent families invested large amounts of money in this gemstone; for example, an amethyst necklace for Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, was purchased at a very high price, estimated at the end of the 18th century to be around £2,000. The Victorians favoured amethysts, set in gold and often surrounded by pearls, featuring them in rings, brooches, necklaces and earrings. Catherine the Great was so enamoured by amethysts that she sent thousands of miners into the Urals in search of them whilst the Art Nouveau movement used them extensively in their jewellery.

Today, this beautiful stone is much more affordable and used to great effect in contemporary jewellery. This being said, the best grades still command high prices whilst the lower grade stones are often polished and tumbled to make beads and pebbles. Doublets are also very popular but my current favourite is an amethyst and pearl necklace from the London designers Dan Dower and Dianne Hall. Those who know me will often see me wearing it!



My Amethyst and Pearl necklace by Dower & Hall

I am often asked how to care for jewellery and with amethyst I always offer a word of caution. The colour of amethyst is stable only at temperatures below about 250°C or 480°F so it should be protected from extreme heat in order to prevent fading. The reason for this has not yet been discovered, but it is possible to re-colour them by means of radium radiation. So it is wise not to wear amethyst jewellery while sunbathing, in a solarium or in a discotheque. Sudden changes of temperature can also be harmful. If you have any doubt as to how to look after your amethysts or other jewellery please pop in to see us in the High Street, Kettering, where we will be happy to advise you or let our in-house goldsmith clean it professionally.

In fitful February, It's a verity That's the Amethyst, denotes sincerity



Necklet above and Amethyst Earrings below in the Art Nouveau style crafted for us by a specialist workshop in Germany



Part of set of Amethyst given to Lady Londonderry by Tsar Alexander in 1821



A Victorian style Amethyst set given by the 3rd Marquess of Exeter to his wife Sophia