

# The Kaleidoscope Stone

by Sally Thornton

October's child in darkness oft may grope,  
The iridescent Opal bids it Hope

Throughout this year I have been writing about birthstones and now, with the winter months almost upon us, it is time for us to look at *opal*, the birthstone for October.

As we have seen previously, the gem kingdom produces a world of beautiful stones but the precious *opal*, prized for its play on iridescent colours which change like a kaleidoscope when the stone moves, is surely a miracle of nature. If a rainbow could be captured and set in a ring then it would be called *opal*. Chasing the rainbow has been a pre-occupation of lapidaries for years.

*Opal* was known to many ancient civilisations and the name probably derives from "upala" the Sanskrit word for precious stone. In Arabia it was believed that *opals* fell from the heaven in flashes of lightning, thus acquiring their fiery colours, whilst the Romans regarded the rainbow effect seen in each stone as a symbol of hope.

In some societies, however, *opal* was called the "weeping stone" and said that it would bring tears to those who were not supposed to wear it. Even in Britain during the nineteenth century it was considered by some to be bad luck for anyone not born in October to wear *opal*. But this was largely because Sir Walter Scott portrayed *opal* as bringing bad luck to one of his fictional heroines "Anne of Geierstein" and Queen Victoria, who adored *opals*, helped to dispel this notion by giving *opals* to all of her daughters whether they were born in October or not. A little later, a matching Art Deco ring and bracelet in the form of a serpent carved in precious *opal* by the Parisian Jeweller Georges Fouquet was favoured by Sarah Bernhardt, the famous French actress, and once again brought attention back to this truly wonderful gem.

I think I can best explain this myth of the unlucky *opals* by recalling my early memories of my grandfather, Pat. When I was a little girl, Pat presented me with a small drawstring bag which contained several oval milky white *opals*. Grandpa then explained to me that *opals* were still considered by some to be unlucky but this really wasn't the case. He advised me that the *opals* I held in my hand had to be handled carefully and it was their fragility and susceptibility to damage that caused people to blame them for bad luck.

So what is *opa*? *Opals* are made up of silica and water usually containing between five to ten per cent water. Unlike most other gemstones, *opal* is therefore non crystalline, and may eventually dry out and crack. To explain how *opal* was formed can I ask you to imagine

prehistoric vegetation being compressed into rock and then at a later date a silica rich liquid seeping into some of these fossil areas and transforming them into millions of microscopic spheres. These spheres are very important as they give us the distinctive flashes of colour that make *opal* a unique gem. The colours we see depend upon the sizes of the silica spheres, red and orange colours are thrown up by larger spheres, whereas smaller silica spheres will tend to favour blues and greens.

Because of the way *opal* is formed it comes in a wide variety of colours and types, the most common and affordable of which is milky or white *opal* which shows a play of colour against a white background with tiny flashes of "pinfire" in pinks and greens. Jelly and crystal *opals* are transparent to translucent with a subtle sheen of colour but the most valuable *opals* are known as black or gem *opals* that feature large luminescent areas of one or more bright colours against a dark background. Most of these *opals* are usually cut in a cabochon, which has a domed surface, but can also be cut with facets.

You may have heard of the term 'Doublet' and this is when fragile slivers of *opal* are glued onto a backing of common colourless *opal* or glass. 'Triplets' are when this process is taken a stage further and the *opal* is protected by a capping of clear quartz or plastic; this process is carried out in order to offer *opal* jewellery at a more competitive price as "assembled" stones are valued at considerably less than a solid *opal*.

This brings us on to the value of an *opal* which depends on many factors such as the type of *opal*, body tone, brilliance, pattern, play of colour, quality of cut polish and size of stone to

name but a few and is far too complex for me to go into.

Ever since Grandpa gave me that little bag I have loved and been inspired by *opals* so much so that a few years ago I went on a course at the Gemmological Association of Great Britain dedicated to their study. I always try to have a variety of *opal* set jewellery ranging from precious *opal* set into gold to doublets set in silver. We also have a sample of boulder *opal* and *opal* pebbles for customers to buy and not forgetting a small carved *opal* seal!

As I mentioned, my Grandfather taught me the importance of caring for my *opals* and we at AA Thornton always try to pass this on to our customers. As we have seen, *opal* is a fragile gem so it should be cleaned carefully. It should never be immersed in an ultrasonic cleaner, metal polish, acids or strong solvents and contact with makeup should be avoided. Do not store *opals* in too dry a place or expose them to sudden changes in temperature or humidity, which can cause them to crack.

If you are in any doubt please ask our on-site goldsmith to clean and polish your jewellery.

Today, I still have the drawstring bag and all the milky white *opals*. I have learnt a lot since then and hope that by passing some of this knowledge on I may help you to appreciate and look after this special and unique gem.

