

A.A. Thornton

Topaz - A Popular Stone

by Sally Thornton

Born in November, happy is she
Whom the Topaz teaches fidelity.

To continue in my series of Birthstones this month I am writing about *Topaz*, the primary birthstone for November.

The word *topaz* probably comes from the old Sanskrit word *tapas*, meaning fire. It has, however, been claimed that it took its name from the legendary island of Topazius, the ancient Greek name for Zebirget also known as St Johns Island in the Red Sea. This may or may not be true, however, as the gem mined from this island is the green *Peridot* which I discuss in my August article that can be found on our website www.aathorntonjeweller.com. The modern *topaz* more probably equates in history with the stone described by Pliny as *Chrysolite*.

Topaz is an aluminium silicate that contains up to 20% fluorine or water and is found in a colourless state. In the past, it was thought by many people that all yellow gems were *topaz* and that all *topaz* was yellow. *Topaz*, however, varies from pale blue and colourless to yellow, orange, brown and pink. Oscar Wilde described the colours of *Topaz* "as yellow as the eyes of a tiger, *topazes* as pink as the eyes of a wood pigeon and green *topazes* that are as the eyes of a cat".

These ranges of colours are natural occurrences, but to make identification even more difficult colours can be changed or enhanced by irradiating or heat treating certain *topazes*. These processes produced the pink stones so popular in Victorian jewellery and the vivid blue now incorporated into many contemporary jewellery designs. However, as always, the untreated stones particularly the golden sherry colour and the pinks command the highest prices. Natural pink *topazes* are indeed



very rare so it is likely that most of those you will see have been treated and enhanced in some way.

In ancient times *topaz* was said to ward off epilepsy and asthma and *topaz* was often used to promote wisdom in its wearer. Over time, *topaz* accumulated an impressive range of alleged healing properties including strengthening breathing, preventing colds, enhancing creativity, bringing relaxation, controlling angry passions and restoring energy. This may explain the medieval custom of giving *topaz* rings to heads of state, diplomats, and royalty. For example, the gems in Hans Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII are most certainly golden brown *topazes*, as no other gem in that colour was considered suitable for royalty at the time.

Because *topaz* occurs in this wide range of colours it is understandable there have been many misunderstandings and, throughout history, it has been confused with *citrine*, which is even considered as an alternative birthstone for November. The colourless varieties of *topaz* are easily mistaken for other gemstones with probably the most interesting incident being that of a large gemstone discovered in the 17th century and named the Braganza diamond. The size of a goose egg it was, at the time, thought to be the largest diamond ever found and incorporated into the Portuguese crown jewels. This has, however, never been confirmed and it is now generally believed to have been a colourless *topaz*. Like diamond, *topaz* is a very hard gemstone, but can be split with a single blow.

As a result, it should be treated with care and you should certainly avoid knocks and other rough wear. *Topaz* is often imitated with glass and initial indications can be the lack of the hardness together with the cool and slightly slippery feel that should be found in the real stone. As I have advised on many other occasions warm, soapy water is the best way to clean *topaz* jewellery.

Topaz is a popular stone, particularly *Blue Topaz*, which is used by many contemporary jewellery designers and Dower and Hall, for example, have used it to striking effect set in silver which enhances the ice blue of the stone. I have a selection of loose stones that I can incorporate into a piece of your own design so do drop in to see us in the High Street for a browse or more advice on this wonderful stone.



Dower & Hall
Blue Topaz Pendant
and Earrings



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