

Amber - a gift from the gods

by Sally Thornton

*Oh ant, you were passing by a mighty tree
when a drop of amber fell down unto thee.*

*So typical when you live you're just a poor soul when
you're dead you're worth your price in gold.*

Marcialis, Epigrams, book VI

Previously, when I have written about gemstones and birthstones they are often only found in far flung and sometimes exotic parts of the world. However, over the next few months I shall be looking at some of the gemstones you can find around Britain.

One stone used by jewellers has quite literally, stood the test of time; millions upon millions of years in fact. What am I referring to? The beautiful honey toned stone called Amber.

The appeal of amber lies as much in its link with prehistory as in its warm and tactile beauty. Amber is a strange and attractive gem, its golden transparency lends it a quality which even diamonds do not share. For the artisan it provides a remarkable medium to work with and create some of the most beautiful objects for us to enjoy whilst, for the scientist, it provides a glimpse of the past indeed a window into history.

Amber is an opaque or translucent fossilised natural resin from an extinct variety of pine tree, submerged under the sea for some 60 million years. As the pine resin oozed out of the trees, it covered everything in its path – like insects and flora – and over the millions of years it underwent a number of changes. The resulting metamorphosis of this resin and its trapped items gives amber its extraordinary properties. It is these frozen moments in time which gives us an incite into eulogy of ancient times which makes it fascinating and compelling to study.

The most frequent inclusions found in amber are flies or fungus gnats and, on the Isle of Wight, deposits have identified a chiromid (midge) and a wasp. Occasionally, the more unusual items turn up such as a small lizard; indeed, the North American Natural History Museum has a famous example of a 25,000,000 year old gecko. More recently, tiny threads of spiders silk was found encased inside a piece of amber that was formed around 140 million years ago and was found by an amateur fossil hunter on a beach famous for fossilized dinosaur tracks near Bexhill in East Sussex.

Perhaps it was this that was the inspiration for the film Jurassic Park in which the scientists created in island full of Dinosaurs by extracting their DNA from a mosquito trapped in a piece of amber? In reality, however, the chances of this ever being possible are pretty well zero but it did make a fantastic film which resulted in a recent surge in awareness and demand in amber.

Amber has been prized by man well before Stephen Spielberg made the film, with the earliest worked examples dating back as far as between 11,000 and 9,000BC. To the Phoenicians, amber was a prime commodity whilst Etruscans used it for making jewellery. It was said during the days of the Roman Empire

that amber was more valued than a living slave and in medieval times the amber industry was ruled by the Teutonic Knights.

Greek legend said that Apollo wept tears of amber when he was banished from Olympus. They also discovered that amber can acquire a static electric charge when rubbed and so the word electricity is derived from *electron* the Greek name for amber.

Perhaps the most intriguing mysteries of amber was the creation of the 'amber room' in Catherine the Great's palace in Russia, a huge room totally lined and decorated with cut amber. In 1765, it was described as the eighth wonder of the world. The amber from this room was pillaged by the Nazi's in World War II and mysteriously hidden elsewhere. After many failed searches, in 1979, the Russian government commissioned it to be completely restored to its former glory and completed in 2003. But, there still remains a question where did the Nazis hide this treasure? Could it be at the bottom of an Austrian lake as some treasure hunters suggest?

Amber can still find be found around our coastlines and a few local people still walk the Norfolk beaches and collect small amounts, especially after the winter storms have driven amber ashore. This Norfolk Amber is the same as found in the Baltic and was probably transported towards Britain during the ice age by ice sheets moving out of southern Scandinavia.

It was during the Art Nouveau period of the early 20th century that amber started to be enjoyed for its decorative effect rather than for its intrinsic value and, in the 1950's, a bright bead craze including ropes of amber, saw the stone in the fashion spotlight.

At AA Thornton because of its popularity I always try to keep a wide range of Amber Jewellery. These include not only the more classical designs but also unique one off pieces which come to us directly from Poland. It can be found in varying shades of colours, yellow, orange, red, white, brown, green, blue and black, (perhaps the type of tree source or the result of decaying matter in a marsh environment). Amber is also used in the ever popular beads with unique sets available, which with their warmth can make a wonderful compliment to a bracelet of gold, silver and glass beads.

Although there are still deposits of amber to be found, with the largest found in the Baltic region and the Dominican Republic, extensive mining over the past ten years or so has made serious dents in supplies and it will not be around for ever.

So imitation ambers which have been around for centuries are on the increase, some even encapsulating a variety of wildlife! These fakes include reconstituted amber, green amber and copal, an organic material in its own right. So, how can you tell if you have real amber? In general, true ambers give the impression of lightness and warmth and a complex glowing lustre. Many, but by no means all, synthetics feel heavy and cold and appear to radiate a dull lustre. One older tricks of the trade is the hot needle test to identify real amber. By inserting the point of a hot pin, hot amber will give off a non acrid aromatic piny odour, although I don't suggest you try this one at home!

So amber is a wonderful and beautiful gem, it remains magical, mystical and like honey – a gift from the gods.

