

Over the years I have written about a wide variety of gemstones, the names of which, if not the properties and folklore, are likely to be familiar to many readers. However this month, I am going to look at the lesser known, but equally beautiful, rainbow gemstone; tourmaline.

The expression rainbow gemstone is I feel an apt description, for this stone shows the greatest colour range of any gemstone, with perhaps only corundum and beryl coming close. Tourmalines can be found in a staggering range of colours from a colourless transparent through red, pink, orange, yellow, green, blue and near opaque black. Indeed legend says that tourmaline is found in all colours because it travelled along a rainbow gathering up all its colours as it went.

These colours, like most gemstones, are influenced by its composition and any impurities it holds. Iron causes green and blue colouration, whilst pink is influenced by the presence of lithium. Some crystals are multicoloured, with different colours occurring at either end, or forming a core and rim. The later, when found with a red or pink centre surrounded by a rim of green, is sometimes known as 'water melon' tourmaline as it has the colours of the fruit which has just been sliced open, although it reminds me of a piece of seaside rock!

However, the tourmalines most remarkable property is its strong pleochroism, as the deepest colour is always seen when looking down the length of the crystal. It is because of this that some green and blue tourmaline will appear almost black in this direction. So, as far as a jeweller is concerned, each stone must be considered from this point of view before cutting.

It should be of no great surprise therefore, that to the crystallographer, the tourmaline is one of

the most interesting of minerals. These beautiful crystals, which form in granites and pegmatites, occur as elongate crystals with a distinctive rounded triangular shape in cross section. The eminent Victorian thinker, John Ruskin remarked of Tourmaline that 'the chemistry of it is more like a medieval doctor's prescription than the making of a respectable mineral'.

Known in antiquity in the Mediterranean area, it was not generally to be found in northern Europe until the Dutch imported it in 1703 from Sri Lanka. They gave the new stone a Sinhalese name Turamali, which is usually accepted as translating to mean stone of mixed colours.

One striking peculiarity of tourmaline is that when the stone is rubbed or heated, perhaps in sunlight, it acquires an electrical charge and it readily attracts small pieces of dust, paper or hair. Due to this tourmaline was for a long time also known as aschentrekker, as the stone was used by the Dutch to pull ash out of their meerscham tobacco pipes!

It was not just the Dutch pipe smokers who admired Tourmaline which has been prized as a gem through history. A pink tourmaline cabochon has been discovered set in a gold ring of Nordic origin dating from AD1000. For many centuries the Chinese engraved items such as snuff bottles and carved figures from tourmaline and there is a superb intaglio in zoned purple and yellow tourmaline depicting the head of Alexander the



Pink cabochon Tourmaline stud earrings £175



Carved zoned Tourmaline butterfly wings

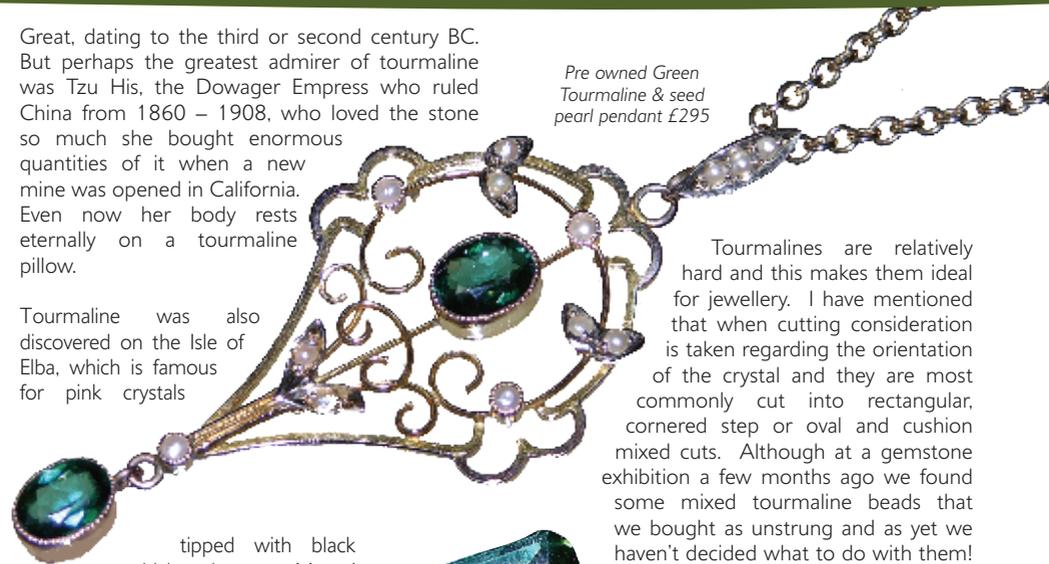
Great, dating to the third or second century BC. But perhaps the greatest admirer of tourmaline was Tzu His, the Dowager Empress who ruled China from 1860 – 1908, who loved the stone so much she bought enormous quantities of it when a new mine was opened in California. Even now her body rests eternally on a tourmaline pillow.

Tourmaline was also discovered on the Isle of Elba, which is famous for pink crystals

tipped with black which are known as Moors' Heads, but fine gems come from other localities worldwide, including the Ural Mountains in Russia, California in the USA and the Minas Gerais and Paraiba in north east Brazil. In fact the tourmaline from Paraiba in Brazil that appeared in the gem markets in the 1980's has earned the status of its own denomination. This Paraiba tourmaline is noted for its extraordinary vivid colour range of intense bright colours of electric green to neon blue and can reach values of around tens of thousands of pounds a carat.

Although pink, intense red and green tourmalines are the most popular, care must be taken as it is easy to confuse them with other more familiar stones. The gemstones in the Russian crown jewels from the seventeenth century once thought to be rubies were in the rich red variety of tourmaline. But the Russians should not feel too embarrassed, as when the green stone variety of tourmaline was first introduced into Northern Europe in the seventeenth century, they too were frequently mistaken for emeralds. To continue with the confusion even today in South America, the green variety of tourmaline is still referred to as Brazilian Emerald

Pre owned Green Tourmaline & seed pearl pendant £295



Loose green tourmaline



Zoned teardrop loose Tourmaline

Tourmalines are relatively hard and this makes them ideal for jewellery. I have mentioned that when cutting consideration is taken regarding the orientation of the crystal and they are most commonly cut into rectangular, cornered step or oval and cushion mixed cuts. Although at a gemstone exhibition a few months ago we found some mixed tourmaline beads that we bought as unstrung and as yet we haven't decided what to do with them! They would make a lovely necklace or double bracelet and are just waiting for the right customer, so we can make it up to their requirements. I would anticipate that the price for a necklace would start from as little as £95 depending on the length and type of clasp.

If you would rather chose something that is already made up, how about some lovely pink cabochon stud earrings for £175. We also find that we regularly have one or two pieces of tourmaline jewellery in our pre-owned display and as I write this we have an interesting green tourmaline and seed pearl pendant for £295.

I do hope you have enjoyed my brief ramblings and if you now feel you would like to capture a piece of that rainbow, then do call in to see either myself or one of the others in our team and let us see how we can help you.

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