



This month I shall take a look at the exceptional gemstone “Tanzanite” and why some experts describe its uniqueness as being ‘one in a million’.

Sams Tanzanite & Amethyst Pendant

Tanzanite had remained almost entirely unnoticed for five hundred and fifty million years. It was only as recently as 1967 when Manuel de Souza, a tailor and part time gold prospector, was wandering the Merelani Hills, which are part of the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, stumbled across some rough stones with shades of blue and violet.

I said almost entirely unnoticed and this may be because when the Asian, European and Arab travellers arrived in the early Victorian era, it seems they overlooked the rich Maasai folklore surrounding these stones. Generations tell of land being set ablaze by a bolt of lightning, with the heat from this magic fire from the sky transforming otherwise dull crystals into shimmering blue stones. Indeed this “magic fire” is not far from the scientific truth and I will return to this later.

When Manuel de Souza first collected these stones he thought they were Peridots, whilst others suggested they may be sapphires. Samples were sent to the Gemmological Institute of America and the British Museum, where it was confirmed that this was indeed a new gem and a variety of Zoisite.

It was called Blue Zoisite, although another name “Skaiblu”, a Swahili-language borrowing of the English “Sky Blue”, briefly became popular.

As word spread regarding this ‘geological phenomenon’, jewellers around the world showed interest in using this beautiful gemstone. Just over a year after Manuel de Souza made his discovery, Tiffany in New York launched a jewellery collection naming the Gem “Tanzanite” after its country of discovery, and it was proclaimed ‘the most beautiful blue stone to be discovered in over 2000 years’. The name Tanzanite has been accepted ever since.

Tiffanys were not overstating the beauty, as Tanzanite is unique for its dramatic colouring – a kaleidoscope of royal blue, violet, indigo and burgundy. The rough tanzanite crystals display these three colours when viewed from different angles (axes) and it is this pleochroism that influences the final colour of the stone. An intense blue colour commands a higher price, so skill is required when the tanzanite is cut and polished as this will determine whether the gem will show more blue than violet.



£545

When looked at closely, Tanzanite can also appear to alter its colour when viewed under alternate lighting conditions. The blues appear more evident when subjected to fluorescent light and the violet hues can be seen readily when viewed under incandescent.

However one of the most exciting elements of Tanzanite is its rarity, as this gemstone is only found in this one small area of Tanzania – and nowhere else. Furthermore it is thought that there is only limited amount of mineable seams left and these are likely to be exhausted within our lifetime. Its single source and limited supply mean that tanzanite is at least 1,000 times rarer than diamonds. It is by far the most important stone of the zoisite species.

Tanzanite’s success lies in its colour and as with many other coloured gems it undergoes a transformation when gently heated. This heat treatment accelerates what would have occurred naturally in the earth, which results in a permanent and stable colour that will not fade. The brown and honey Tanzanite turn into blue-violet stones, and the stones that were originally ink blue become the most expensive intense blue. So perhaps there is some truth in the Maasai folklore.

I am often asked advice about certain gemstones and whether they are suitable for every day wear. Unfortunately, tanzanite has a similar hardness to emerald and is relatively soft gemstone that will chip quite easily. So much so that one of our suppliers based in the Birmingham jewellery quarter who produce specialist items for us, only allow their most skilled and experienced goldsmiths to set Tanzanite. In order to preserve its beauty therefore, it is best suited for occasional wear and when not being worn tanzanite jewellery should be kept in protective packaging. It can be cleaned by soaking in lukewarm, slightly soapy water, but avoid any ultrasonic cleaners. As always if you are

apprehensive about cleaning your jewellery do not hesitate to ask me, one of the sales staff or our on site goldsmith who are always happy to offer advice.

When I mentioned that this article was about Tanzanite, Sam who has been part of the AA Thornton team for almost 10 years, mentioned that she had made a Tanzanite and Sterling Silver pendant. Sam is one of our sales assistants and entirely through her own initiative attended the University of Central England in Birmingham one day a week for around five years to study the practical aspects of Jewellery, which included a course on stone setting.

The Tanzanite pendant was not the first or the last piece she made. Sam crafted it completely from scratch forming the sheet into tubing then hand pierced the claws into it and as she says “from a setting perspective cutting the notches into the claws so they were even and ready for the stones to sit flush and level was quite difficult. I have always liked Amethyst so I started with that, but when I found some Tanzanites I jumped at the chance to use them as the two colours go perfectly. Tanzanite is my favourite stone as it has so many shades running through it, it is quite versatile with what you can wear it with.”

I do hope you have found this interesting and if you think that Tanzanite might be for you do call in to see us. We always keep a selection of Tanzanite pieces and are only too happy to design something specifically for you.



£820



£535



£1,100

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