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DISCOVER

The New Art Class of Natural Treasures

An exclusive interview with Dr. Robert Lavinsky, scientist and proprietor of The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals in Dallas, who has pioneered the transformation of breathtaking multimillion-year-old minerals as an Art Class.

BY ROBIN JAY & KYLA COKER, GRADUATE GEMOLOGIST & GEOLOGIST



The world's finest aquamarine from Marambaia, Brazil, weighs 7-kilos and is valued at \$5 million.

Since walking away from the science research lab, molecular biologist and mineral expert Dr. Rob Lavinsky has singlehandedly reinvented and impacted the mineral collecting world as it emerges from a hobby to an Art Class.

Not only has his work been recognized by the scientific community, his business has brought the beauty of nature's art—precious minerals—into the hands of people who have never before had the opportunity to experience it except by seeing in the world's major museums.

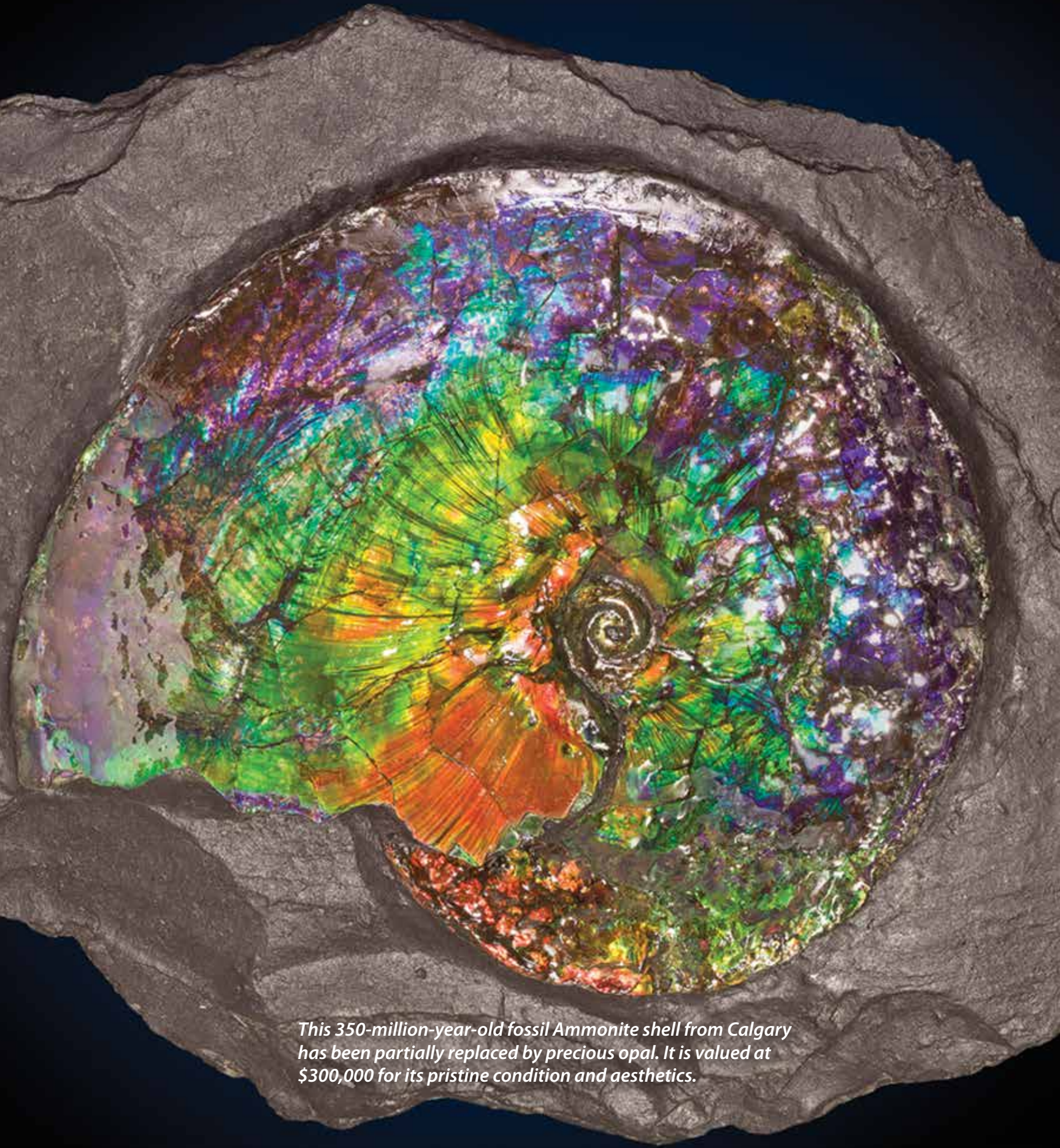
Dr. Lavinsky's personality is vibrant, genuine, and passionate, with the sort of confident intensity that comes alongside natural brilliance. As a child, he was a book-smart "science nerd." He still is. But he's incredibly business-savvy, too; he learned how to trade minerals at the age of 12.

THE ART OF MINING MINERALS

A modern Indiana Jones type, he has a host of adventures to his name, each one recounting travels across the globe in search of the finest minerals. He also has some of the best runners on the ground to be his eyes and ears in remote countries and mines all over the world, including Madagascar, Brazil, India, Australia, Pakistan, Russia, China, Canada, and Italy. They provide him with up-to-the-minute details



Tanzanite, aquamarine, emerald, ruby, sapphire, tourmaline, garnet, and quartz—all relatively familiar gemstone names. But, rarely are they seen in their pure natural form exactly as they came out of the earth except in major museums, such as the Smithsonian or Dallas's Perot Museum, both of which have many of his specimens on loan or exhibit.



This 350-million-year-old fossil Ammonite shell from Calgary has been partially replaced by precious opal. It is valued at \$300,000 for its pristine condition and aesthetics.

on the best new finds. With just one photo, he might exchange millions of dollars for minerals and crystals that just emerged from a remote mine. Once, he dropped everything and hopped a plane to Australia to compete with the Melbourne Casino for the right to purchase the largest gold nugget in private hands and came away with it after a handshake and a drink.

These minerals and crystals that Dr. Lavinsky trades are kept in their natural form and are more valuable and rare without being cut into gemstones. Tanzanite, aquamarine, emerald, ruby, sapphire, tourmaline, garnet, and quartz—all relatively familiar gemstone names. But, rarely are they seen in their pure natural form exactly as they came out of the earth except in major museums, such as the Smithsonian or Dallas's Perot Museum, both of which have many of his specimens on loan or exhibit.

Rob established the first high-level online presence for the mineral collecting world in the mid 1990s, catapulting his business into the first truly worldwide dealership in the trade. His website helped drive the growth of the trade in fine minerals as it educated people around the world. This eventually led to the creation of a large art gallery display of crystals (10,000 sq. feet) in Dallas (shown bottom right page) and a smaller gallery in Shanghai, China (top right). Today, as with any collectible art, people collect minerals for many focuses, including their favorite countries of origin (as does Rob with his China collection), historical locations, chemistry and science, size or simply color.

But his first job was simply to help the local mineral dealer in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio, while in junior high school. By the age of 14, he was setting up swap tables at local min-

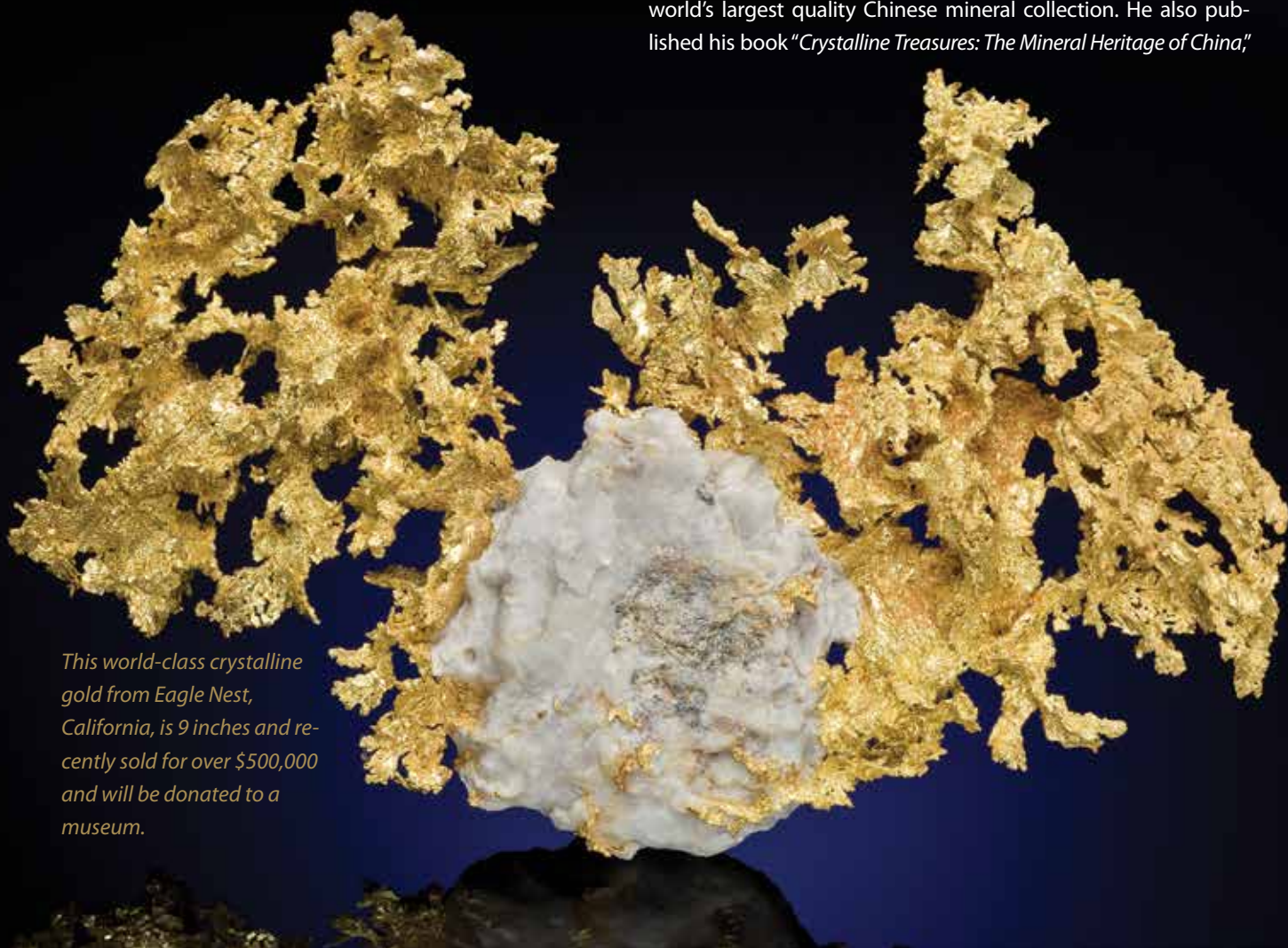


Dr. Rob Lavinsky with the tallest gold nugget called 'Thunderbolt'.

eral shows where they allowed unofficial dealers to trade in marked "monopoly money" and spend the earnings with the real show dealers.

He simultaneously built his mineral collection as he built his business acumen, never imagining that one day it would be his full-time occupation, livelihood, and passion. He went on to study at Rice University before completing his doctoral studies in molecular biology and cancer research at the University of California at San Diego—always buying and selling minerals on the side (publishing his thesis in *Nature*). Over time, the minerals took off as much or more than lab work, so he turned in his petri dishes to enjoy dealing in the beautiful crystals every day.

Rob began his personal collection of Chinese minerals nearly 20 years ago even before the market realized how underappreciated Chinese mineral specimens were at the time; and now has the world's largest quality Chinese mineral collection. He also published his book "*Crystalline Treasures: The Mineral Heritage of China*,"



This world-class crystalline gold from Eagle Nest, California, is 9 inches and recently sold for over \$500,000 and will be donated to a museum.

in 2013 and the Chinese government has since asked him to help educate them on minerals through this book and talks given in China. They republished his book in Chinese and have distributed it to communities in rural China and through the Ministry of Land and Resources. With their new understanding of minerals and the economic value they can bring to miners, their mission is to educate and empower rural mining communities to more sustainably harvest minerals for longer-term gain.

In fact, mineral mining exemplifies the term “fair trade” as you might normally think of it for agriculture. Dr. Lavinsky has educated miners around the world in order for them to be able to look for pieces that have value and preserve them for collectors so that all parties benefit. One mineral in specific, stibnite (see page 68), is mined as the primary ore of antimony. When it is crushed, it would be worth a few dollars per kilo. Instead of crushing it, the mineral as a specimen can be worth up to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The tragedy is that most minerals over human history have been found and crushed to make products ranging from steel flux to eyeliner, iPhones, and gemstones. “I have to get miners to deal on a more local and personal level and to appreciate what they are mining, collect it more carefully, and then sell it to me. I have to actually educate miners in developing countries to value their minerals in order to preserve them from going to the crusher or being cut into gems for human baubles,” says Dr. Lavinsky.

Part of the challenge is that the crystals are fragile and hard to find and must be extracted more slowly for the specimen trade than would occur with the bulk and brutal mining activity that characterizes most economic mining. But, in part through Dr. Lavinsky’s efforts, these rural miners have learned the value of their unique natural resources, and how to carefully extract their true value over time. As a result, he has empowered and changed communities around the world as most mining for specimens today occurs in remote or developing nations where mining is not as heavily mechanized.

Minerals have an inherent magnetic quality, drawing one into their raw, natural beauty while creating a connection to the earth. These crystals are nature’s true art form, revealing a brand-new world of awe, wonder and appreciation—and investment. Fine minerals are an asset class that is only increasing in value as proven by the growth of the market and the success of recent auctions by Heritage Auctions in Dallas. The investment lies in the rarity and the beauty of these natural treasures that makes them each unique works of art.

A small handful of museums have extensive mineral collections, including the Smithsonian Institution, Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas, American Natural History Museum in New York City, and Houston Museum of Natural Science. With the lack of extensive funding, these museums directly rely on private collectors to donate their pieces for display and work actively with the collecting community, as in other art fields.



The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals in Shanghai.

But, aside from these museums, few people are exposed to the opportunity to enjoy or even collect these minerals. Dr. Lavinsky wants to change this.

MINERAL TREASURES ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC

Art and history museums, such as the Smithsonian Institution, offer us all a place to share in a sense of wonder at the accumulated treasures of the ages. Whatever museum you are in, you are looking at the labors of love of countless people who saved and preserved art and cultural goods over uncounted years. When we walk in the door, from the moment we enter we are aware that somebody (ourselves or others with more means, perhaps) can “buy this stuff.” And yet, despite this shared sense of awe and wonder at the history and the value, how few people actually get this sense of realization when they walk into a natural history or science museum? After all, where can you see anything OLDER and presumably more rare than in a natural history museum with fossils dated to hundreds of millions of years ago? Some of them are truly beautiful, as natural works of art preserved forever in stone. But mineral specimens and gems were also formed in the depths of the earth that long ago, and yet almost nobody gazes on them with the same awe and wonder as they look at fossils or manmade art except, interestingly, children too young to be told otherwise. Did you know that the Smithsonian was actually founded by the gift of the natural history collections, including MINERALS, from James Smithson of the British Empire? He was disillusioned with his home country at the time and their museum situation, and decided to bequeath his life’s treasure hunting to the new country of the USA. The core of his donations was his minerals and fossils. Thus, the Smithsonian itself



The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals in Dallas.



was born of a mineral collector's love for nature and desire to share it. The mineral Smithsonite was later named in his honor.

This modern-day pioneer has created an intricate spiderweb of connections across the globe — from mine to market — and has no intention of stopping as this asset class continues its rapid growth. Rob's business, The Arkenstone, has recently held its first exhibition in Florida in Palm Beach (media hosted by *South Florida Opulence*), and will be a participant in the December Palm Beach Arts Show.

"There is admittedly a huge inertia barrier to entering a new field as young as ours, and without trends of documented prices in the auction market. At the same time, though, that makes it MORE of a challenge and a hunt, and offers the thrill of acquiring "sleepers" and values on pieces you could not get on comparable items in the real Art World out there. I have staked my own life and livelihood on that certainty. Our Van Goghs cost a fraction of what other fields of Art can value their treasures at, and we have the added bonus of having new Van Goghs we can chase after that come out of the ground each year. To me, our field offers

the chance to own something significant, especially at the current price points, compared to almost any other field of art one might collect which offers the collector the same visceral thrills of handling a 3-dimensional, unique object. However, first people must see and be inspired by the beauty. Investment comes next. Welcome to my world!"

MINERAL EXPLORERS LAUNCHES ON PBS-TV



In 2013, he was recognized for his efforts to educate and expand the appreciation of minerals, his contributions to museums through philanthropic donations, and his sourcing of mineral specimens for scientific projects when the newly discovered mineral species Lavinskyite (from South Africa) was named in his honor. He also helped produce and stars in cameo in the recently released PBS television series "*Mineral Explorers*", which has been picked up for a second season by PBS this year.

Stay tuned for quarterly articles about Dr. Lavinsky's adventures and the exquisite and exciting business of minerals. ●

Top left: Stibnite, Hunan Province, China

Bottom left: This Tanzanite from Merelani Hills in Tanzania is now in the Midland Museum (Texas).

Below: Crocoite, Red Lead Mine, Australia, is now in the collection of Dr. Steve Smale, world-renowned mathematician and mineral collector.



SPECIMEN PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE BUDD PHOTOGRAPHY

The Golden Age of Collecting & Investing in *Fine Minerals*

BY DR. ROBERT LAVINSKY

Left:

Perhaps the finest known example of a rare hot pink tourmaline with a blue top, from a famous 1972 find in San Diego's mountains. This piece, part of the Kitt collection, is considered the iconic example of the find and of an American tourmaline specimen for its balance and aesthetics.

Lower right:

World-class cluster of gem Aquamarine crystals with Garnet and Quartz, 20 cm tall, from Pakistan. Found in 2013, now in the Kitt collection.

fine minerals are specimens of naturally crystallized beauty that mesmerize those of us who collect them. They are regarded for every reason that a fine Rodin sculpture might be: provenance, condition, context and rarity. These are beyond mere 'scientific objects' to be put on a shelf. And, they are millions of years old.

The shocking reality is that they exist at all, to enjoy, given the rigors of survival.

TRACING THE HISTORY OF MINERAL VALUE

In the days of the European Royalty's 'Grand Tours' around the Continent, fine mineral specimens were gifted as a matter of course, between educated members of the royal class. Cabinets of 'natural curiosities' were in many palaces of the times, and some even survive to the present. The Archduke Stephan von Habsburg-Lothringen (1817-1867) was one of the greatest collectors of all time. In the early 1900s, the action in the mineral collecting world shifted to the USA, following the energy and dynamism of technology and new wealth. Notables such as Thomas Edison, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan (the gemstone 'Morganite' was in his honor!) were among the top collectors early 1900s, spending millions in inflation-adjusted dollars. J.P. Morgan's collection still forms the core of the American Museum of Natural History in NYC to this day. After his donation, the era of fine minerals, and the appreciation of these treasures of Nature, withered.

Today, we live in a 'Golden Age' for this hobby-turned-asset class. Fine minerals are being seen as an Art class by top collectors of other forms of beauty, exhibited as masterpieces in homes and

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Left:
A case from the Jerome Shaw collection, showing major fluorites and an azurite formerly in the collection of Andrew Carnegie.

Photo: Silvia Pangaro

Right: The world's best specimen of Rose Quartz, 33 cm tall, known as 'The Madonna.' Sold by Heritage Auctions in 2013. Mark Mauthner Photo, courtesy Heritage Auctions. Now in the J. Shaw collection, via Arkenstone.

Below:
Kitt collection prize-winning case at the Tucson 2015 Gem & Mineral Show, for Best-in-Show.

Photo: Christi Cramer (Mineralogical Record)



museums (such as the Smithsonian, Houston Museum, Dallas' new Perot Museum), and sought after with increasing zeal by top collectors who are building another round of world-class collections as did the industrial royalty of the early 1900s.

CASE IN POINT #1: THE JEROME SHAW COLLECTION

Jerome Shaw founded and sold a major insurance company and then pursued a second career as a gallery owner (101 Exhibit in L.A.) and art investor. A lifetime collector of decorative and fine arts, his collections were exhibited at several major museums. He went to the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show with his collections curator Nathan Reiskin to learn more about his new hobby. Cautiously, he went to higher levels of collecting in the field (I met him halfway there). Jerome told me he treats minerals just like any other field of art he has collected over the years: He buys what he likes, what gives him pleasure to look at. He

still treats it as an investment and intends to make a profit in the long run, by following the strategy of spending 80 percent of the money on 20 percent of the specimens to help him keep focus on value over time. He has the space to add the "fun pieces," but the money is in the specimens that other major collectors would want.

CASE IN POINT #2: THE BARRY KITT COLLECTION

Barry Kitt came into my office like an excited kid in 2010, entranced by having seen his first tourmaline cluster in the Smithsonian and the realization that 'YES, you can actually own such things!' He realized that he had the immediate opportunity to gain entry into minerals at the top end of the field. He then made the hard-nosed decision that as an investor in other things, he should buy minerals the same way: ONLY the best. He also considered the trend toward investors looking for investable hard asset categories and he realized that these natural mineral treasures, as an asset class, were virtually unknown by the mainstream investor community. He has actually taught me a lot about applying these logical principles to build his small but focused collection that is constantly being upgraded as any opportunity might arise. He buys pieces that correspond to a uniform size range and meet his own individual assessment for incredible beauty. To his credit, even after only 5 years in the field, he has managed to buy, or trade, an incredible number of famous old pieces while also chasing down some of the new "Van Goghs" that come to our market. He exhibited for the first time at the Tucson Mineral Show, the largest mineral show in the world, in Feb. 2015, and won the top prize for a mineral collection on exhibit at the show.

The role of the Internet has been pivotal in educating savvy tangible investment collectors. Market giant Heritage Auctions noticed this asset class and added it as an art class to the auction world. In only 20 years, my rather opaque hobby has turned into a worldwide sport and an emergent asset class. ●

For more information about mineral collecting, visit www.irocks.com.

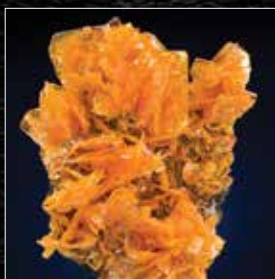
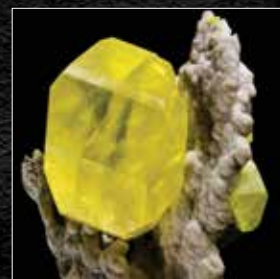


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Fine Minerals | Precious Gemstones | Rare Crystals



The Arkenstone Gallery features thousands of natural crystals, gems, and geodes that continue to delight collectors, curators, and aficionados alike.

Left image: Wulfenite; Middle image: Diopside on Calcite; Right image: Sulfur

COLLECTING NATURAL WONDERS

BY DR. ROBERT LAVINSKY

Dr. Lavinsky is a scientist and an operator of fine mineral mines, as well as two museum-style showrooms (in Shanghai and Dallas) of natural mineral crystals from around the world.

Gem crystals are nature's works of art. They are often breathtakingly beautiful and inspiring, and they are collectible like any other high art. Created over millions of years in the dark depths of the earth, they emerge into the light to bring us pleasure and wonder. But finding them and bringing them out of

their original homes can be difficult and dangerous. The journey from the depths of a mine to become part of a treasured collection in a museum or private home, or a centerpiece of fine jewelry, is a long and complex one that can take a year or more. It is a process, and a whole world, really, that many people are unaware of.



*Natural tanzanite crystal,
ARKENSTONE specimen*

To convey a better understanding of the complexities that are involved, I recently helped complete a documentary video, done in conjunction with French National Television and Cartier of Paris, that tells this fascinating story for a well known African gemstone species: Tanzanite. It has been entered in the May 2016 Cannes Film Festival. I believe people should understand where these beautiful objects come from, because surely they will then appreciate them even more, and understand my own passion for them.

UNIQUE VALUE

These minerals have value for many reasons. In earlier times, they were gifts given and received by royalty and the wealthy upper classes. In the 20th century, collectors like JP Morgan, Thomas Edison and Andrew Carnegie coveted them. Now, these natural treasures are often crushed to make common products like eyeliner or mobile phones. And, of course, they are fashioned into jewelry. Those of us who love these mesmerizing minerals, however, would prefer to see world-class specimens preserved and displayed in museums and private collections, something that is happening more and more today due to outreach and education.

TANZANITE

Each mineral is unique. Consider tanzanite, a breathtaking crystal that exhibits rich tones of sapphire blue, deep violet and warm strawberry red, changing almost magically as the light around it changes. It is found in only one place in the world, the East African country of Tanzania, for which it is named. Eons ago, the precious crystals grew in the depths of the mountain that later was pushed above the earth, and today we know as Mount Kilimanjaro. Given that the mines are up to 1.5km deep in the mountain's flanks, it is unsurprising that these treasures were not discovered until 1967. Today, the crystals are found in a single deep mine now controlled mostly by a corporate conglomerate with government oversight on the slopes of the Lelatema Mountains. Most are made into jewelry, including an exquisite line by Cartier and Van Cleef and Arpels (see photo top right provided by Bob Kane of Fine Gems Intl.). But of

course, this unusual and precious mineral is also sought by collectors in its natural and original, dramatic crystalline form. In fact, several natural tanzanite crystals of high quality have recently traded at prices of \$1-3 million. These prices are higher than those for record-setting cut gems from the same material - an irony not lost upon those of us who collect the crystals.

COST

People are often surprised to learn that a crystal in its natural form can cost more than a piece of jewelry. Here's why: An independent miner who harvests a crystal might take it immediately into town in search of the instant reward it can offer. The buyer, however, is likely to pay only for the part of the crystal that will be used in the product to be made from it. But if I am in a mine in Thailand, Madagascar, China or somewhere else in the world and a miner offers me a crystal, I would purchase and pay for the whole object, because I plan to keep it intact. The miner earns more, and I save a precious crystal from being crushed. It is much more common to find broken or damaged crystals from which to cut gemstones. But finding a pristine and aesthetic complete crystal is significantly more difficult, and it is much more challenging to find and remove these intact crystals without harming the natural shape.

Determining the value of colored stones is a complex process. Many variables are in play,

including subtleties of color saturation, brightness, and provenance of point of origin. Each crystal is unique, formed tens of millions of years ago through eons of heating and cooling, and there will never be two exactly alike.

Collecting these beautiful objects is a fascinating hobby. It is available to all kinds of people at different economic levels. I myself started collecting "rocks" that sold for a dollar, and I now routinely sell fine mineral specimens that cost \$10,000 to \$100,000. But an individual who can afford just a few hundred dollars to a few thousand can get something uniquely beautiful in which he or she can take as much pride as a fine painting, and is still worthy of museum displays or philanthropic donations. As with many collections, part of the reward is the joy of the hunt. In the world of minerals, there will always be something new and beautiful to discover each year for any level of collector. ●



NATURAL TREASURES

*Emerald Crystal
from Colombia*



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