

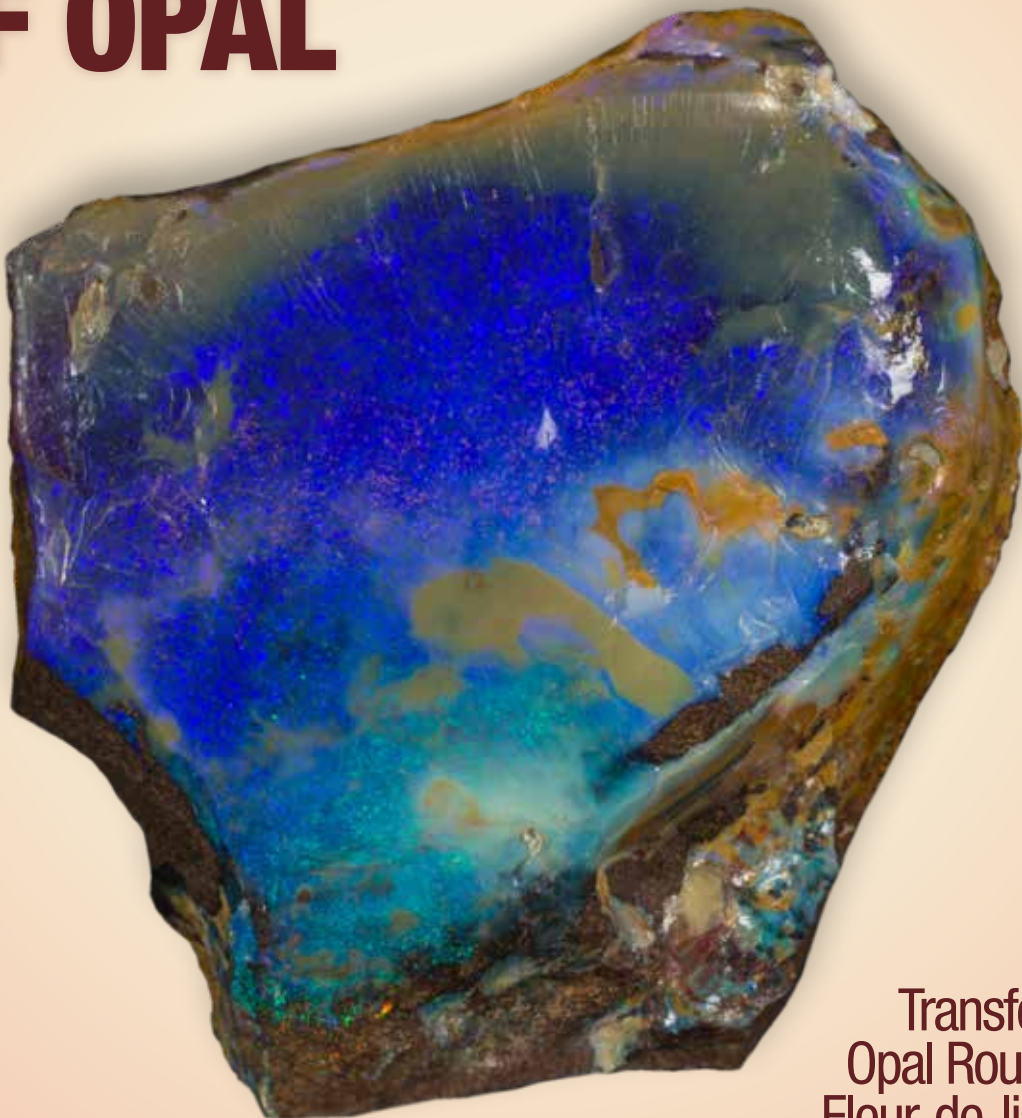
Studying the Science of Opal Colors | Cutting to Reveal Koroit Opal Flash

Illustrious Opals

Limited-Edition Series from the Publishers of Rock & Gem

Issue No. 1

EXPLORING THE ALLURE OF OPAL



Transforming
Opal Rough Into
Fleur-de-lis Form

Welcome to the first issue of Illustrious Opals!

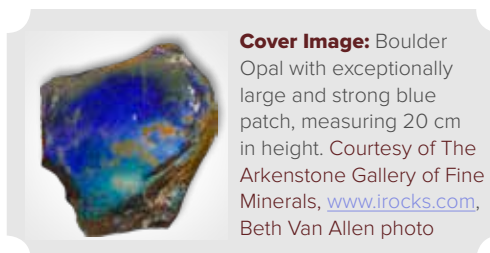
This digital reference is brought to you by the team that oversees the Rock & Gem brand, which includes the monthly magazine - in publication since 1971, websites (www.rockngem.com and www.myrockhub.com), and a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The idea to create a limited-edition, topic-specific, print/digital hybrid reference series came about through conversations with members of the rockhounding and lapidary community, research into popular and often-searched topics, and the desire to explore a singular subject in a concentrated manner. Our plans include developing another limited-edition series with four digital issues and monthly components in our print magazine, and focused on a different topic, beginning in January 2021.

This edition is the first of four Illustrious Opals issues slated to be created and made available in 2020. A schedule of release for Illustrious Opals' future issues appears on the last page.

We are grateful and excited to be partnering with the following sponsors to bring you Illustrious Opals:

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Outlaw Rocks



We hope you are in good health, safe, and continue to grow and learn,
Antoinette

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CAPTIVATED BY OPAL GEM COLORS

INTERNAL STRUCTURE IS THE KEY TO THE SPECTRUM OF HUES

BY BOB JONES

The colors in the sun's light spectrum are different wavelengths precious opal can reveal.

Everyone loves precious opal because of the array of colors we see in this unique gem. They span the entire color spectrum from red longwave energy to blue and violet short-wave energy. Every specimen showing a color is not only different, and each gem can change colors, patterns, and brightness as you handle it.

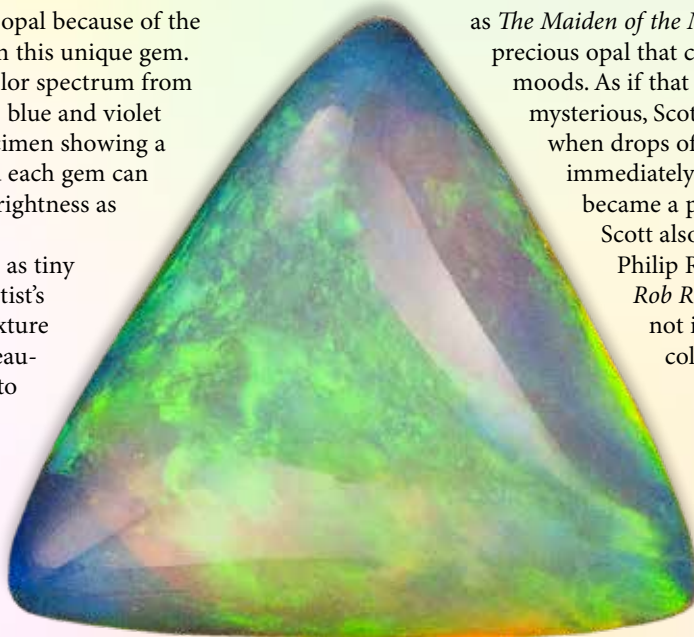
Opal's color patterns can be as tiny as pinpoints, as broad as an artist's brushstroke and any color mixture in between. As if that is not beautiful enough, it is not enough to please us. Mother Nature has added an aura of mystery in an opal gem with colors that can appear, disappear, shift and move by merely moving the gem around or changing the source of light! No wonder the ancients thought of opal as a magical stone.

Even in the literature, only two centuries ago, opal was thought to be magical with evil properties based on observations of the stone itself. Consider the tale *Anne of Geierstein*, by Sir Walter Scott, written in 1829. In the story, also known

as *The Maiden of the Mist*, Anne owned a "magical" precious opal that changed color according to her moods. As if that was not enough to make opals mysterious, Scott revealed the gem was evil when drops of holy water fell on it. The opal immediately lost all color, and its owner became a pile of ashes. Keep in mind Scott also made noted mineral collector Philip Rashleigh a villain in his book *Rob Roy* simply because the man did not invite Scott to see his mineral collection.

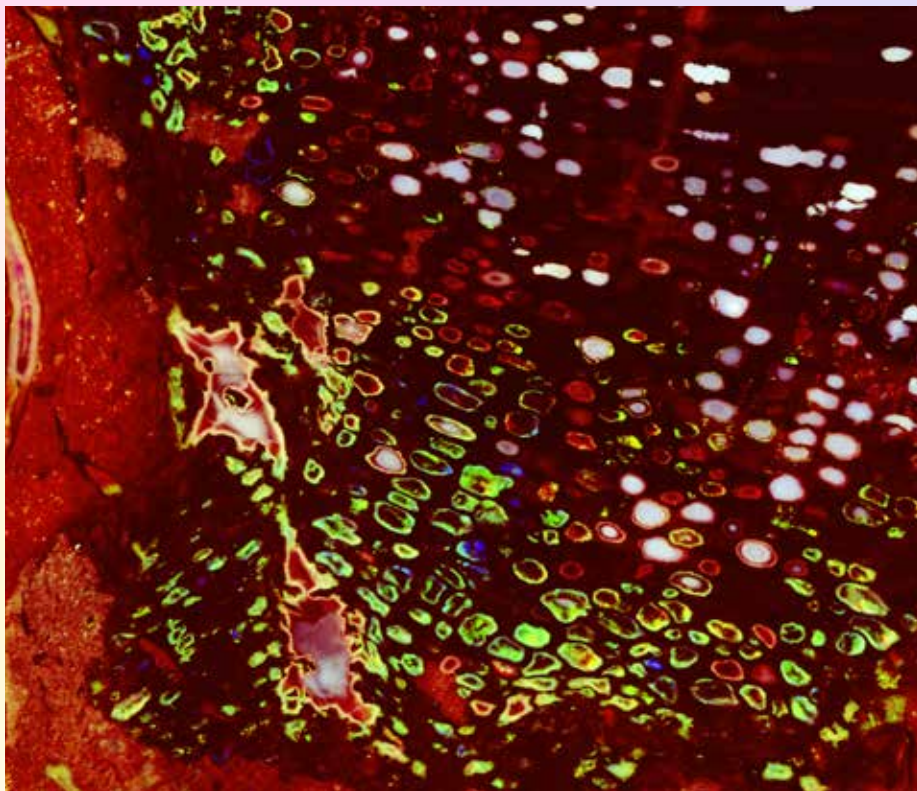
The truth about precious opal has nothing to do with magic or evil. It's all about opal's unique internal structure that can produce the array of colors we see. Before that can happen, opal has to form under certain environmental conditions. It develops from a silica solution that finds its way into quiet

seams or small openings in a host rock, usually sandstone, but sometimes it even occurs in types of volcanic rock. It can form in a variety of matrices—shell, wood, and bone, as long as the environment and silica-rich solutions are right.

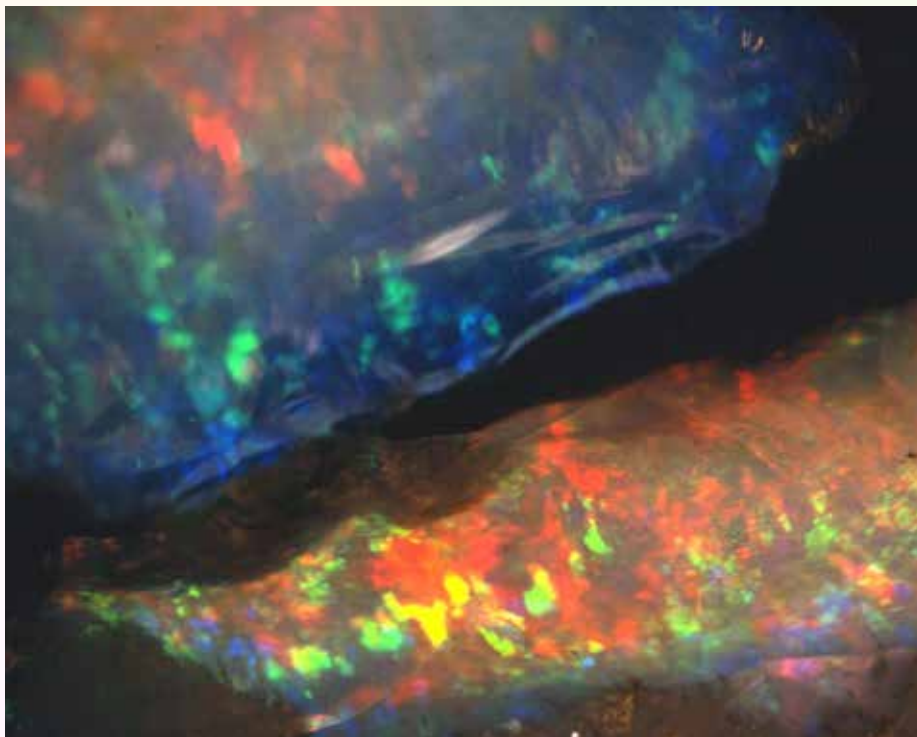


The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals, www.irocks.com
Faceted Welo opal from Ethiopia, the Amhara Region specifically.

CAPTIVATED BY OPAL COLOR



Precious opal with the right conditions will develop in a quiet spot like the cells of old open wood. *Hodson*



These large specimens of precious opal from Virgin Valley, Nevada exhibit every color of the spectrum.

To develop, precious opal must have an absolutely quiet, stable environment with no disturbances. This environment is necessary for it to develop in an orderly way. The temperature of the silica solution has to be low, around average ambient temperatures we enjoy. This condition allows the silica in solution to develop an odd form of quartz called cristobalite. This silicon dioxide comes in two forms: beta and alpha. Beta cristobalite forms in volcanic rock and can crystallize enough to form “Snowflakes” in obsidian. Alpha cristobalite establishes at cooler temperatures and does not crystallize but solidifies in tiny spheres or globules.

The spheres of cristobalite in precious opal are extremely sub-microscopic, remaining unseen by scientists even when using powerful optical microscopes. It was not until precious opal was subjected to the scanning electron microscope in 1964 that scientists were able to peer into precious opal and see its spherules. We realized that opal was made of a sub-microscopic layered sphere that could create what color we might see! How tiny are these little spheres? According to measurements made on opal color, the range is from 1,500 angstroms to 3,500 angstroms. But what’s an angstrom? It takes ten million angstroms to make one millimeter! Human hair may be a few millimeters thick! The other condition needed was for these spheres to be arranged in an orderly way.

Do we see this anywhere else? Yes. We see it when a rainbow appears in the sky, or when we come upon an oil slick. Additionally, take any computer disc and move it about in sunlight and the colors of the rainbow appear. This occurs because the rain droplets, oil and the computer disc help to bend and spread white light so we can see colors. Each of these sources of rainbow colors simply split, diffract, spread, or bend white light in perfect alignment, so we see its colors from red to blue. Precious opal does precisely the same thing, thanks to its cristobalite spheres, which are perfectly aligned like the grooves on a disc.

CAPTIVATED BY OPAL COLOR

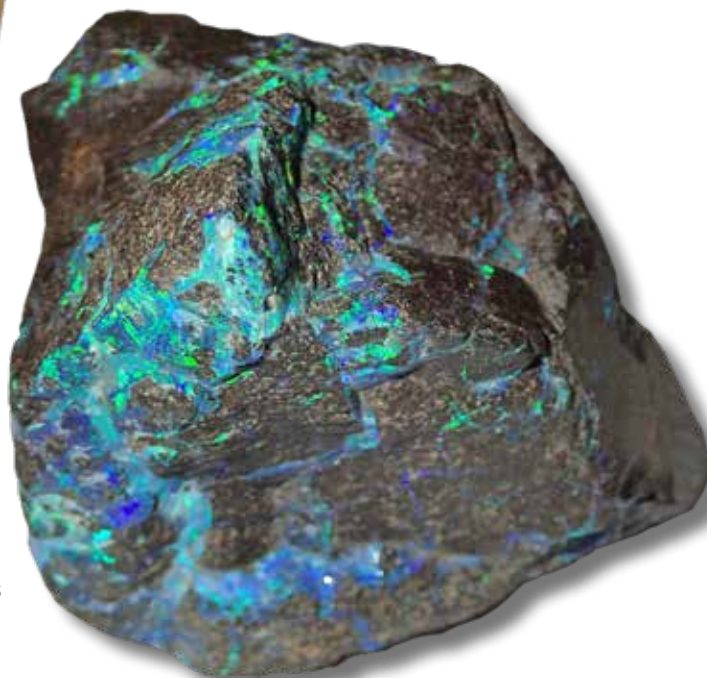


This dried opal-CT specimen illustrates my discussion about the species of opal that consists of incredibly tiny cristobalite-tridymite aggregates called leptospheres, which is different from Australian precious opal, consisting of amorphous hydrous silica colloids.

James St. Joh, Wikimedia Commons

A specimen of boulder opal from Queensland Australia's Koroit Opal Field, consisting of a brilliantly colorful spiderweb-like network of precious opal veins within a host rock.

James St. John, Wikimedia Commons



Opal can diffract ordinary light splitting it into different component colors of varying wavelengths. Light itself usually forms from violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red. The blue end of the spectrum has the shorter wavelengths with red representing the longest wavelengths of energy. As wavelengths shift, so too does color shift. Several factors come into play when light enters an opal stone. There may or may not be any play of colors, just ugly gray. That means the spheres are the wrong size, too big, too small, or in disarray, certainly not orderly. There may also be water in the stone causing the light to scatter. This means the sphere's

size and systematic patterns are critical and must be within specific size and arrangement to diffract light and reveal light's colors.

Sizes in between 1,500 and 3,500 angstroms result in the blending of colors and can account for the other colors we enjoy. Plus, the colors you see also tell you something about sphere size.

It is essential to realize as the spheres form in an orderly pattern, they don't all align in one horizon. At different angles, they give us such beautiful effects as a harlequin of colors, pinpoint colors, broad mixed patches of color, and so on.

The angle at which the incoming light strikes the opal's diffraction grating is critical as well. The reason is due in part because of a cristobalite sphere's layering and the angles of viewing and light source. This results in each completing diffraction or split in unison. When your viewing angle changes, you see another "mystical" feature of the fantastic beauty of precious opal. Moving the light source can cause the same effect. Fine opal does not have a predictable color pattern that never changes. It changes with any factor, like the viewing angle, angle of light, and even the viewer's position. No other gem has such a fantastic feature.

CAPTIVATED BY OPAL COLOR



Combined with violet sugilite, precious opal beads add to the beauty of this grouping of Randy Polk jewelry.



Skilled artist Jessie Monongye created this coral and precious opal necklace pendant.

Also, the gap between sphere layers or clusters can influence what we see. Opals can have some original silica moisture trapped between sphere layers, which can affect color, especially background color. The presence of moisture is essential to the stability of the gem. For that reason, under adverse conditions, moisture can affect the opal. Jewelers recommend you wear and handle opals for a positive outcome. By interacting with the opal, it allows the oil on your skin to act as protection. Case in point, my mother-in-law owned a valuable opal set and kept them locked in a safe, out of reach of any hands, for years. When she finally removed the opals from the safe, what she discovered was a group of cracked opals, due to lack of moisture.

With that, I must say, precious opal is one of the most gorgeous gems, and if you handle with care now and then, it will never become mysterious or evil!

Bob Jones holds the Carnegie Mineralogical Award, is a member of the Rockhound Hall of Fame, and has been writing for *Rock & Gem* since its inception. He lectures about minerals, and has written several books and video scripts.

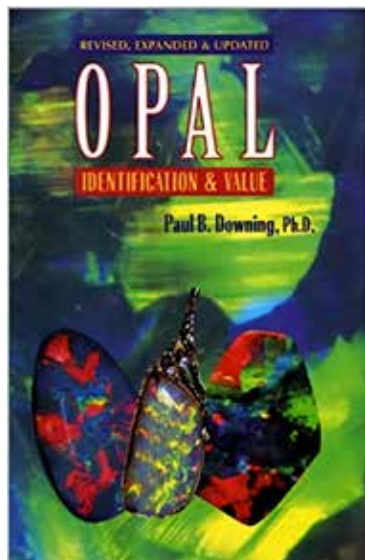


RECOMMENDED READS

DIG IN AND DISCOVER MORE ABOUT OPALS

We've found that books, much like restaurants, auto repair shops, and entertainment venues, that are presented as good recommendations are often incredibly helpful. Keeping that in mind, we are including a Recommended Reads column in each issue of *Illustrious Opal*. If you have a favorite opal book, please send your recommendation and why it's a favorite, to Antoinette at arahn@beckett.com.

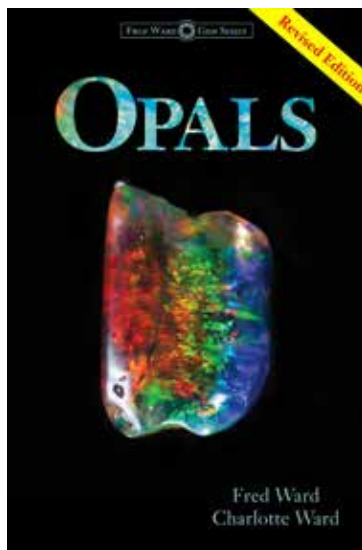
The first book on the list is often among the top five on lists about opal books, and with good reason, as *Opal Identification and Values*, by Paul B. Downing, Ph. D covers a lot of ground in little more than 200 pages. He defines opal, explains various types of opal and how to identify one from the other, he explores gemstone color, fire color and pattern, types of opal found in different localities around the world, and price and value associated with a myriad of opal.



Author Paul B. Downing is a noted international opal expert, who has given countless presentations about the topic, is an award-winning opal gemstone cutter, member of the National Rockhound and Lapidary Hall of Fame, and author of additional books about opal. *Rock & Gem* Senior Consulting Editor Bob

Jones had this to say about Mr. Downing, "Downing is eminently qualified to not only write about this color gem but to create this definitive text on opal."

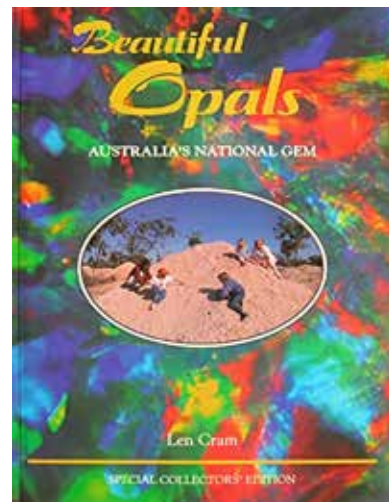
As is sometimes the case, rockhounding and an appreciation of gems can become a family tradition. Such was the case for Fred, and Charlotte Ward, and their children Christopher, Lolly, and David, who each contributed to the third edition of *Opals*, published prior to the death of acclaimed photographer Fred Ward in 2016. This book contains incredible photographs and design, featuring thorough details about the locales, identifying particulars, discovery, and appreciation of opal gemstone.



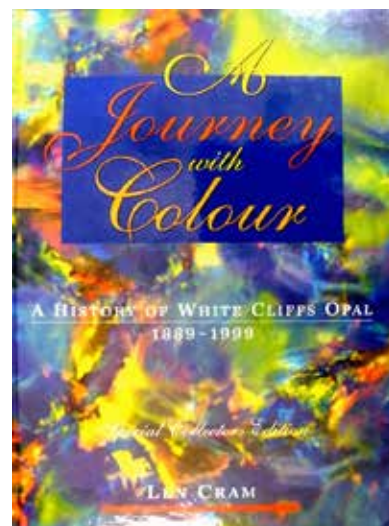
The Gemmological Association of Australia had this to say about *Opals*, "Beautifully photographed...researched with Ward's usual thoroughness...easily understood."

Any books written by Len Cram, are wise selections to add to a personal library. This Australian native, born and raised in Sydney, spent his entire adult life in Lightning Ridge, New South Wales, Australia. Talk about residing where the opal action is! It's the perfect location for this self-taught scientist and researcher, who has earned academic credentials and contributed to the

growth of interest in opal while working from his shed-lab in the Australian bush. His scientific work includes intricate knowledge of opal formation and devising a method to grow precious opal.



Mr. Cram has authored a number of books about opals, many of which are touted by professionals and enthusiasts within the opal industry and community. Among the books is his series of *Beautiful* titles and *A Journey With Colour* series. His books take readers on a historical journey, a geological adventure, a scientific exploration, and a mindful examination of the presence and wonder of nature.



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GETTING TO KNOW:

ROYAL PEACOCK OPAL MINES

The Royal Peacock Opal Mines provides a full hookup RV Park that serves as an oasis in the high, dry desert of northern Nevada. The Royal Peacock also offers dry camping and rentals.

BY ANTOINETTE RAHN

Often when spouses are seeking to purchase an extra special gift for their love, they may cast an eye to electronics, jewelry, dream vacations, home décor items, tools, sports equipment, and countless other items. The late Harry L. Wilson, a life-long resident of Virgin Valley, Nevada, took a completely different path when purchasing something special for his beloved, Mable.

“My grandfather, Harry L. Wilson, purchased the mine for his wife, Mable Wilson, in 1944,” explained Julie Wilson, the elder Wilsons’ granddaughter. “My grandfather raised horses and cattle and was not very interested in the opals, but my grandmother loved the sparkle and bling of the opals, so he purchased the claims for her.”

Little did the late Mr. Wilson know what that purchase would mean, not only to Mable, but to generations of the Wilson family, and countless rockhounds around the region and beyond its boundaries. Perhaps he did know, seeing as he knew the area, knew about operating a business, and knew that anything his wife considered special was worth the investment.

As time went on, the entire Wilson family would come to know and appreciate the specialness of the claims, which is Royal Peacock Opal Mines, located near Denio, Nevada.

Next in line to take the mine to new heights was Julie Wilson’s father, Harry W. Wilson. The second-generation Mr. Wilson opened the mine in 1968 for commercial digging, ex-

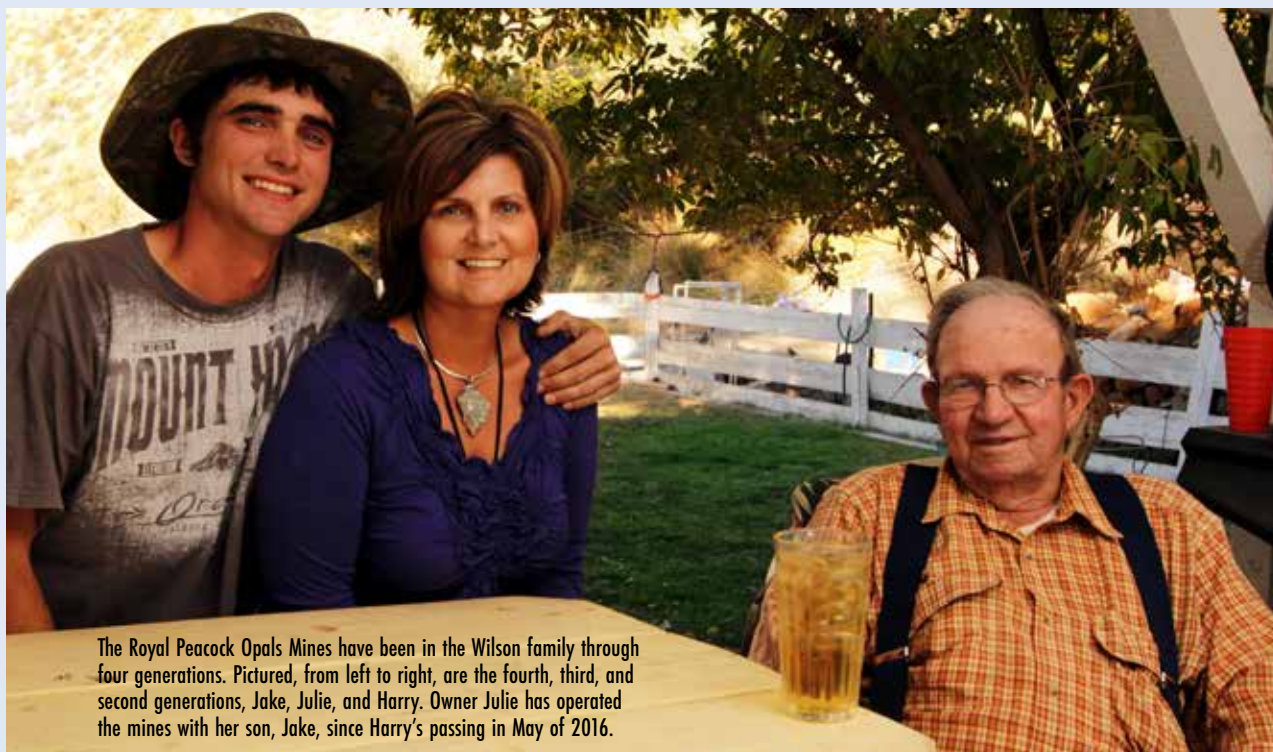
plained Julie. However, it was a challenge to keep employees, in large part, because the location was incredibly remote, even more than it is today, Julie added. In 1973, Harry W. changed gears and opened the mine to fee digging. Until his death in May of 2016, Harry W. simultaneously operated the mine and ran the family’s ranch.

As history shows, it’s never been just one Wilson family member going it alone when pursuing their aspirations — it’s a family effort, whatever the project or dream may be.

“My parents operated the mine together, as the rest of my family did, for as long as I can remember,” said Julie, about her late father and her mother, Joy, who is a stroke survivor and one of Julie’s biggest fans.



Spanning 160 acres, the Royal Peacock Opal Mines are the largest private land holding within the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge. After 60 years of mining activity, the Royal Peacock Opal Mines has produced and continues to produce world class gems.



The Royal Peacock Opals Mines have been in the Wilson family through four generations. Pictured, from left to right, are the fourth, third, and second generations, Jake, Julie, and Harry. Owner Julie has operated the mines with her son, Jake, since Harry's passing in May of 2016.

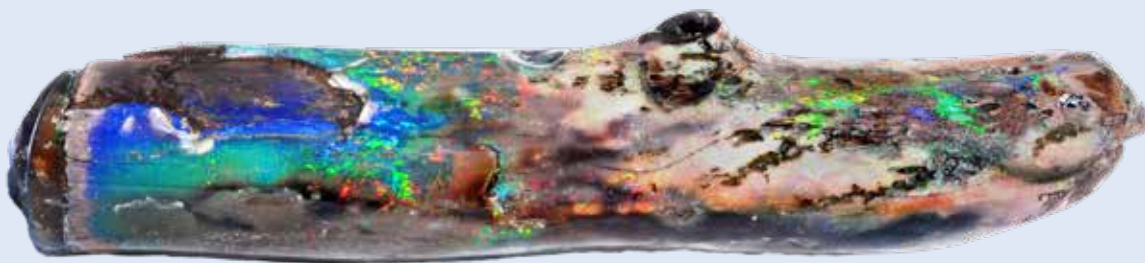
Today, Julie is the sole owner of Royal Peacock Opal Mines and works beside her son, Jake Anderson. While Julie manages the gift shop, handles dig reservations, upkeep of facilities and rentals, and serves as the general insurer of top-notch treatment of customers; Jake oversees mine safety and digging operations on the hill. Besides, Jake is the company's primary opal jewelry designer, and the skill and creativity behind the polishing, setting, and preparing of stones they sell. Joining Julie and Jake are employees, Craig Greeninger, a

seasoned and knowledgeable rock-hound who guides customers during digs, answers questions, and actively assists with mine safety. Also on staff is Laurel Witzel, who assists Julie and has quite literally grown up at the mine, helping at Royal Peacock Opal Mines for the past six years, beginning when she was 11.

When visiting this Nevada mine, it's likely visitors will find opals including precious black crystal, crystal, and common dendritic and fluorescent, Julie explained. While there are many

privately claimed land parcels in Virgin Valley, there is presently only one other commercial mine.

With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting businesses and individuals far and wide, and in many ways, the Royal Peacock Opal Mines team adjusted their process, worked with customers to adhere to restrictions, and proceeded safely and cautiously. Thus far, the season is going very well, with the mine's annual Memorial Day weekend barbecue and dig event a social distancing success, Julie confirmed.



Found in the tailings at Royal Peacock Opal Mines in 2009, this beautiful opalized log was named 'Freda's Log,' after the late Freda Wilson, the sister of Joy Wilson. This seven-pound log measures 18 inches long and 5 1/2 inches in circumference.



Using a pick and shovel, diggers work through the 18-million-year-old opal bed looking for fossilized tree limbs. These fossilized trees include fir, pine, oak, chestnut, maple, elm, and cryptomeria, a relative of the sequoia. Aside from tree limbs, other parts of the tree known to be opalized are roots, bark, and seeds. Bones from the Miocene era also have the potential to be opalized and dug from the bank.



Raking and sifting, diggers search for the prized precious opal in the tailings. Most opals found in the tailings have already gone through the natural drying process and do not need to be placed in water.



Owner Julie Wilson showing a rare piece of conk wood to customers in the gift shop. Within the gift shop there are numerous pieces of beautiful specimens and jewelry for sale as well as cold drinks, candy, ice, and ice cream. The gift shop also serves as the office for Royal Peacock Opal Mines where customers come to register for digging and camping.

“We have had a lot of customers and a lot of great opals found,” she said, adding that feedback from people has been fantastic, many of whom were grateful to be able to get outdoors someplace remote and safe, after being cooped up for weeks.

This uncommon and largely uncertain year has also reaffirmed a couple of things for the Royal Peacock Opal Mines team. “Our team has learned that no matter what, the show must go on. We have also learned to adapt to different people’s requests in what they are comfortable with,” Julie added.

While Julie’s father and grandfather would likely not have predicted how things would look in 2020, they equipped and inspired their children and grandchildren to carry on traditions and seek innovative ways to grow.

5 FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT

ROYAL PEACOCK OPAL MINES

- 1 Virgin Valley is the only place in the world that produces jet black opals with intense red fire.
- 2 The Royal Peacock Opal Mines is known to produce fossilized opalized camel, horse, and pig bones.
- 3 Virgin Valley is the birthplace of the volcano that now sits beneath Yellowstone National Park.
- 4 Virgin Valley contains the only known deposit of green fluorescent opal in the world.
- 5 The black opal from the Royal Peacock Opal Mines is the Nevada State Precious Gemstone.

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CUTTING STONE

BY RUSS KANIUTH

KOROIT BOULDER OPALS

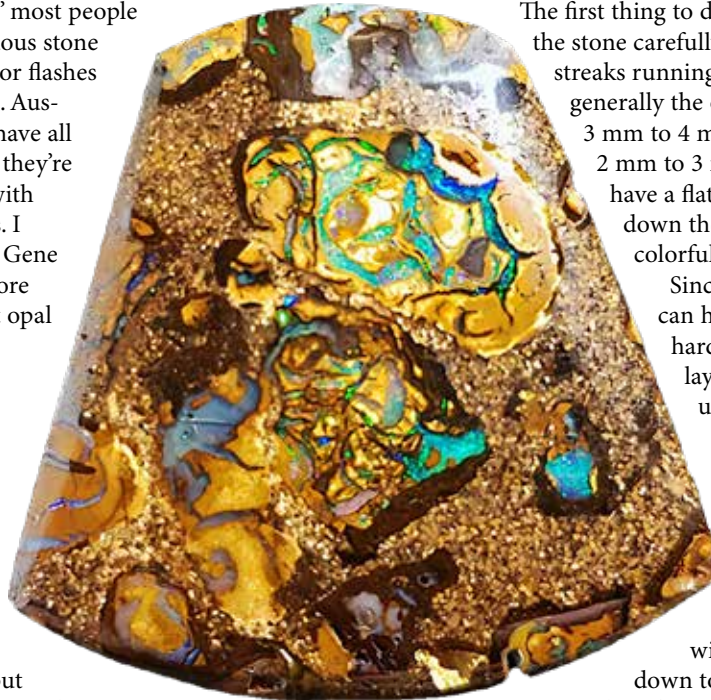
When you say “opal,” most people think of a continuous stone sparkling with color flashes from edge to edge. Australian Koroit boulder opals have all the precious opal flashes, but they’re contained in a rusty matrix with many variations and patterns. I spoke to Comet mine owner, Gene McDevitt, and he gave me more information about the Koroit opal field and the material itself.

Koroit opals are found in a unique geological area in South West Queensland, Australia. The mining area itself is only approximately 10 miles square and seems to contain nothing but dirt and poisonous snakes. Underground, however, is something entirely different. The opals can be anywhere, but often exist between the surface and 70 feet underground, where the sandstone and clay interface. The opals reside within concretions at this layer.

The matrix generally consists of ironstone, a type of sandstone rich in iron, and other minerals such as manganese. The patterns vary so much that no two concretions are alike. The pattern that most lapidaries look for is called “the grassy pattern.” It almost has a Celtic design to it, filled with precious

opal with brilliant colors. Other patterns will have a swirly mixture of colorful lines that contrasts nicely with the dark matrix stone.

Before cutting your first high-grade Koroit boulder opal, the standard recommendation is to first experiment with lower-grade material. This material is unlike any other and does take a little time for one to become familiar. After cutting a few batches and getting used to cabbing this material without wiping out all the opal veins, it would be time to step up to a higher grade.



The first thing to do before cutting is to examine the stone carefully, both dry and wet. Look for streaks running through the stone; these are generally the opal veins. I start by cutting 3 mm to 4 mm below that line and about 2 mm to 3 mm above it. This way, I will have a flat back. Then, I start to grind down the top until I start reaching the colorful opal layer.

Since the mixture of the matrix can have such drastic differences in hardness and the opal is in thin layers, I would suggest never using a coarse-grit wheel on this material. Start on the 220 grit to achieve your shape.

Often, you won’t have much choice in what shape you’d like it to be; the stones are generally small, and there’s always the chance that pieces will crumble off until you get down to the substantial portions that are best for cabochons.

Here is where you start to experiment, by grinding down until you hit color and seeing how far down you can go to shape and dome the cab without grinding away all the opal. Once you have achieved a desired shape and dome, continue your path through the higher-grit wheels, but go slowly and gently, as even the lighter grit wheels will remove matrix and opal.

This material will take an incredible polish without using any polishing compounds; in fact, I suggest not using any. Koroit boulder opal is notorious for having natural pits and vugs, and polishing compounds could fill in these spaces, giving an unwanted look and finish to your cabochon. The more ironstone matrix you have in your working material, the more of a mirror polish you can expect in your final product.

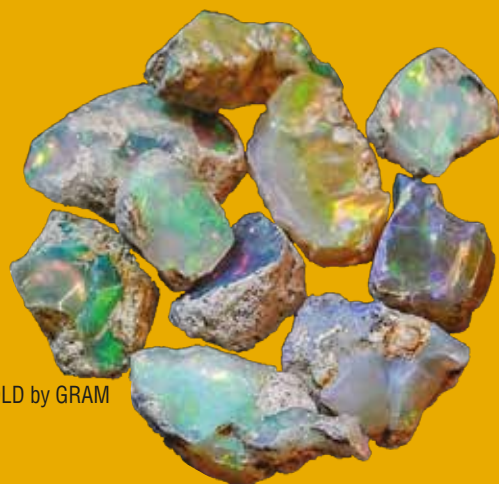
Editor’s Note: This article first appeared in Rock & Gem, as a What to Cut column.

About the Columnist:

Russ Kaniuth writes the monthly What to Cut column for Rock & Gem. He is the owner of Sunset Ridge Lapidary Arts and the founder and administrator of the Cabs and Slabs Facebook group. See more of his work at [f/SunsetRidgeLapidaryArts](https://www.facebook.com/SunsetRidgeLapidaryArts).



Ethiopian Opal Rough



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4-0016	B grade	\$12.00	\$9.00

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Stock No.	Description	Each Pound	+5-24 Pounds	+25 Pounds
7-0093	Botswana Agate	\$9.60	\$6.70	\$5.25

Rock Rascal Model J Trim Saw Complete



Stock No. 9-0003S

\$335.95

Lake Superior Agate Rough - 8 oz pkg



Stock No.	Description	Each Pkg	+3 Pkgs
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LSA-QUARTZ	Quartz grade	\$15.50	\$13.64

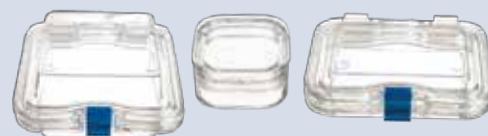
Amethyst Faceting Rough



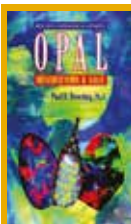
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OPALS IN THE NEWS

BUILDING A MODERN SHRINE TO OPALS

As many know, Australia has long been a hub for access to opals. Climate and the continent's geology created optimum conditions for the formation of opals, which dates back millions of years. As the primary source (90%) of all extracted opals today, it makes sense that a shrine to opals is built in Australia.

The shrine, the mission of the Australian Opal Centre, will not only be located in Australia, but it will be near the legendary Three Mile opal field, in Lightning Ridge, New South Wales. The center, according to information on the Australian Opal Centre website, will house permanent opal exhibitions, gallery space, an extensive opal vault, research library, educational devices, and laboratory and underground garden. Construction of the new facility is currently underway.

Structurally, the building will measure two stories in height, with part of the center built into and protected by the earth. This design will allow the facility to utilize technology to collect rainwater and solar energy through a unique operation.

The \$33 million construction project is set for completion in 2021.



Before current restrictions in response to COVID-19, field trip hunts for opalized fossils that include sorting through tailing, was just one of the many events sponsored by the Australian Opal Centre, and the group looks forward to offering again in the future. Australian Opal Centre

To learn more about the Australian Opal Centre, visit www.australianopalcentre.com.

OPAL-FOCUSED FILM LEADS NETFLIX OFFERINGS



This precious opal specimen, which consists of extremely tiny cristobalite-tridymite aggregates called leptospheres, was found in Ethiopia, within Tertiary-aged volcanic tuffs. James St. John, Wikimedia Commons

It's not every day a gem, mineral, or fossil, is at the forefront of an item of mainstream entertainment, be it a movie, song, or book. However, it does occur, and an example is a relatively new movie, entitled "Uncut Gems."

The movie, which premiered in theaters in August of 2019, became available to Netflix subscribers in May of 2020, and in short order, it currently became one of the most viewed films on Netflix.

The premise of the film centers on a piece of Ethiopian opal, still in its matrix, which is smuggled into New York. The film stars Adam Sandler, portraying jeweler and gem dealer Howard Ratner, and explores various situations related to the handling of and interest in a single substantial opal.

As with various facets of storytelling, there are details within the movie that some question. Yet, many others are hopeful that the film may intrigue viewers to explore the topic of opals further.

Sources: <https://www.gia.edu/gia-news-research/real-gemology-ethiopian-opals-uncut-gems>

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OPALS AT AUCTION

BIDDING ON OPAL BEAUTIES

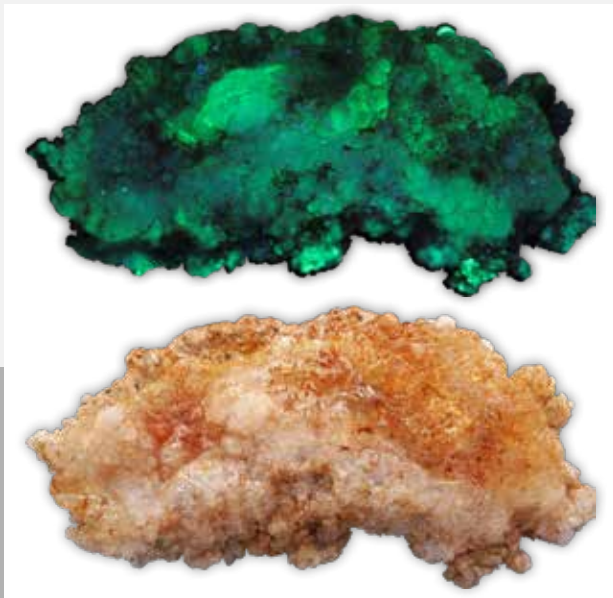
There are, as you would expect, a variety of ways to acquire opals. If safety and opportunities allow and you are up for an adventure, possibly one of the greatest of your lifetime, you can travel to one of the various destinations around the world known to be a source of these magnificent stones. Of course, you can keep it close to home and connect with a dealer who works directly with opal miners, such as one of our various respected sponsors. Or, if you'd rather 'shop at home,' you could check with your local mineral shop owner to see if they can help expand your collection with an opal addition or two.

Plus, as you're well aware, you can shop until your heart's content online. Perhaps now, more than ever before in light of stay-at-home and social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, you are more comfortable

navigating the internet. While you are online, another great option to consider, as you seek to acquire opals, is through auctions.

If you've ever participated in an auction, you know the price a piece may command is dependent on many factors. Some of the influential aspects are authenticity, quality (or condition depending on the item), rarity, source/location of origin, provenance (again depending on the item), and the reputation of the auction house. Also, perhaps the most fluid of these is the price at least two people are willing to pay – resulting in a bidding battle.

In each issue of *Illustrious Opals*, we'll feature some examples of opals that sold at auction, in a range of prices in the past year, which demonstrates the availability of opals for a variety of budgets.



This example of a Hyalite opal is uncommon, fascinating, and impressive on many levels. A recent discovery, collected in 2019 at the Etienne Mine in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, it boasts a number of translucent spherical groups, presented in a rich reddish-orange color that blends into gold, due to a small amount of iron oxide that presents in what appears to be “capillaries,” according to the auction item description. This is how the its nickname, “Blood Vessel Opal,” came to be utilized.

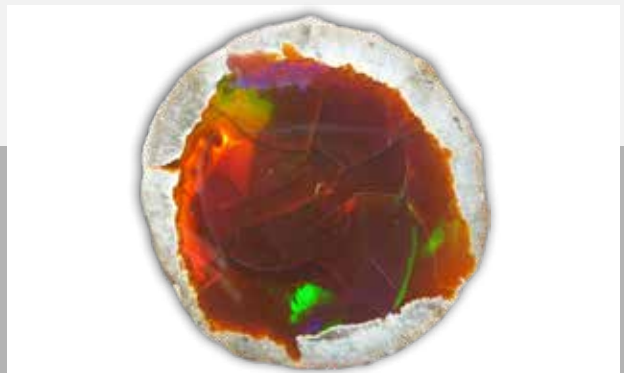
Lot Specifics

Dimensions	7.6 x 3.6 x 1.6 cm
Weight	50.2 grams
Price	\$375
Sold May 2020 —	www.mineralauctions.com

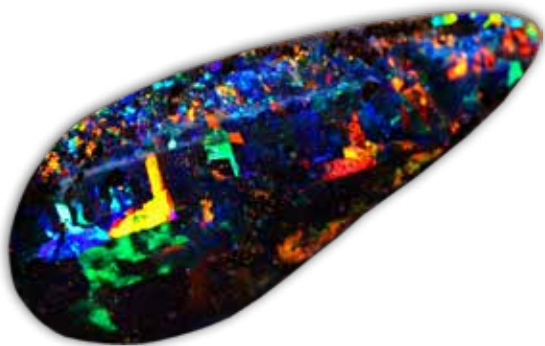
This nodule of opal from the Menz Gishe district, She-wa Province, of Ethiopia, presents extraordinary flashes of reds, oranges, and greens, under the right light, amidst its overall deep brownish-red tone.

Lot Specifics

Dimensions	2.4 x 2.2 x 1.4 cm
Weight	8 grams
Price	\$260
Sold May 2020 —	www.mineralauctions.com



OPALS AT AUCTION



Mined in Queensland, Australia, this multi-fire boulder opal is a free formed cut and polished stone.

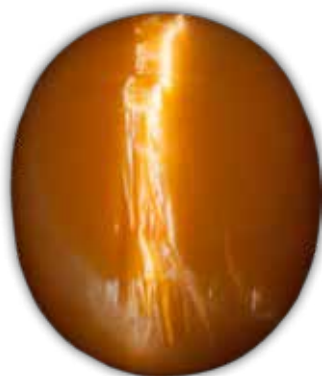
Lot Specifics

Dimensions 24 x 10 x 5 mm
Weight 11.85 cts
Price \$720
Sold 2020 — www.opalauctions.com

This pink opal with druzy chalcedony present is formed, as explained in the auction lot description, by bubbling water near volcanic ash that dissolves the silica and forms in nodules.

Lot Specifics

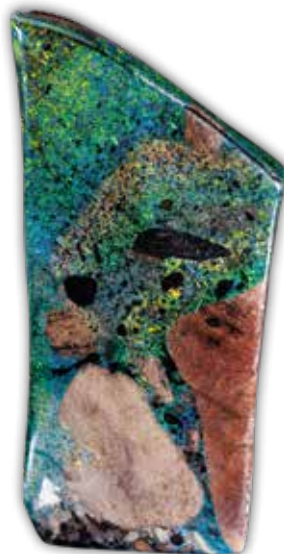
Dimensions 70 x 70 x 50 mm
Weight 1,235 cts
Price \$250
Sold 2020 — www.opalauctions.com



This seldom-seen orange opal specimen features a natural cat's eye pattern, which indicates a high level of chatoyancy. According to the auction lot description, the pattern is the result of inclusions within the stone that are oriented in the same direction, and when light strikes them, the inclusions reflect the light, creating the cat's eye pattern. This specimen was mined in Brazil.

Lot Specifics

Dimensions 14.54 x 12.2 mm
Weight 9.84 cts
Price \$750
Sold 2020 — www.ha.com



A unique opal specimen, this stone was discovered in the opal deposit of Andamooka, South Australia, which is a locality first documented in the first quarter of the 20th century. As explained in the auction lot description, this opal forms within the veins of quartzite rock, and as this example demonstrates, a treatment with acid, water, and heat results in the fiery points of colors present.

Lot Specifics

Dimensions 6-7/8 x 3 x 1-1/2 inches
Weight 3,000 cts
Price \$1,912
Sold 2020 — www.ha.com

OPAL TERMS TO KNOW

As with any area of interest, there is a lexicon and specific terminology within the field of opal. Some of the terminologies extend beyond the study of opals. As various *Rock & Gem* contributors have explained, even if terms do not apply directly, understanding a specific aspect of one area helps with the process of understanding another.

This column will appear in future issues of *Illustrious Opals*. However, each column will focus on a unique aspect of opal study, to help enhance and expand your appreciation of the “Queen of Gemstones.” With that, we’ve selected some of the more unique terms in the field of opal study. Let’s get started!

Play of Color: The phrase often used to describe the flashes and bursts of bright colors that occur when light interacts within the structure of opal.

Mineraloid: This is the proper geological category of opal. The primary difference between a mineraloid and a mineral is the lack of an ordered atomic structure that leads to the formation of crystals. Mineraloids are considered amorphous, with the inability to form crystals.

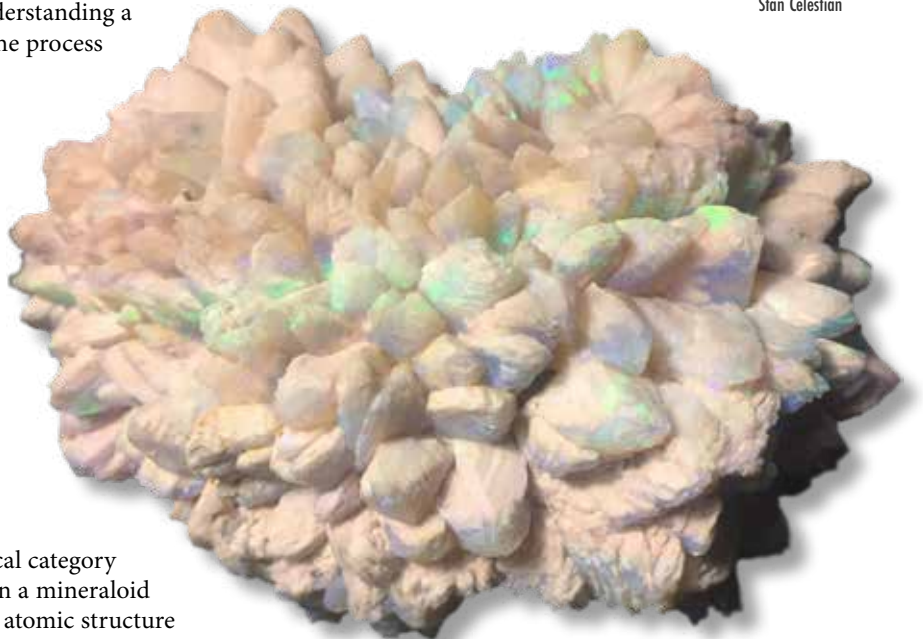
Ribbon: A type of pattern wherein color runs in stripes throughout.

Pineapple Opal: This type of opal is a double pseudomorph formed under glacial conditions millions of years ago. However, it is only found in White Cliffs, Australia, which today boasts an incredibly hot and arid climate. The name pineapple is believed to have originated with miners who worked the White Cliff area in the late 19th century. The miners reportedly took to calling the opal specimens pineapple, after the shape of the clusters that often appear to radiate from the center of this type of opal.

Cachalong Opal: This describes an extremely porous type of opal, which often presents in milky to blue and creamy white hues.

Pineapple opal, an example of a pseudomorph after lkaite, found in White Cliffs, New South Wales, Australia. On display in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, Gem and Mineral Hall.

Stan Celestian



Nobby: This opal appears in a naturally formed lump shape, and it is found only in Lightning Ridge, Australia.

Ballroom: This term appropriately describes the space within a mine where dirt has been removed, in the search for opal.

Diaphaneity: Defines the quality of the transparency of an opal, which allows for the ability to transmit light.

Mullock: The piles of opal dirt after extraction from a mine that sits atop the surface on opal fields.

Bogger: An item of equipment that resembles a miniature front-end loader, and it is air powered. It is used to collect dirt from a recently dug section of a mine and empty it into a bucket, which transports the dirt to the surface.

Sources: Geology.com; uniqueopals.ch; Gemsociety.org; Mindat.org; opalquest.com

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CARVING ***AN OPAL*** ***FLEUR-DE-LIS***

BY HELEN SERRAS-HERMAN



Rough opal before the carving process, exhibiting green and blue play-of-color flashes and sand pockets. Helen Serras-Herman

Over the years, I have carved many different gemstones for my projects and themed collections, but I have also carved gems as custom commissions for clients all over the country.

Besides the gem material dissimilarity, the other important difference was that I had carved the first in my own material. In contrast, the opal material of the second commission piece belonged to the customer.

The Fleur-de-lis Design

The fleur-de-lis (plural fleurs-de-lis) is a stylized design of an iris or a lotus flower, used extensively in heraldic engraved gems. It is also sometimes spelled as fleur-de-lys. It literally means “flower of the lily,” and over the centuries it has been used for ornamental and symbolical aspects in many civilizations. Fleur-de-lis designs have appeared in early Mesopotamian cylinder seals, ancient Egyptian reliefs, ancient Greek Mycenaean pottery, and in Japanese emblems, to name a few.

During the last millennium, the fleur-de-lis has been part of many European coat-of-arms, decorating shields and flags. Still, it has traditionally represented the French monarchy, signifying perfection, light and life. According to 20th-century prominent French historian Georges Duby, the three petals represent the medieval social classes: those who worked, those who fought and those who prayed. The three petals are also often associated with the Holy Trinity.

Today, fleur-de-lis appear on military insignia, sports emblems, universities’ coat-of-arms, scouting organizations, media logos, and other organizations. The fleur-de-lis design also appears in historical and mystical fiction literature and movies.

Commission Work

Commission work offers the possibility of executing design ideas that you may have never considered. Or, you may use materials with which you have no previous experience.

Commission work also brings a feverish state of creation and an agony of emotions until you are finished without any drama, and you hear that the client is pleased.

It also brings excitement, stimulation and inspiration for future projects to develop.

With several commission pieces created over the years, I still have the toughest time calculating the time and energy required for each project, in order to reach a price upfront that will not shock and deter the client, and on the other hand cover the expenses and offer me emotional satisfaction. Every artwork is very different from the previous one, and new challenges arise with every project. However, as difficult as it may sound, you have to come up with a price that you are comfortable with and stick with it, whether you come ahead at the end or not.

Following exact patterns or designs is extremely time-consuming. You have to stop your work every few minutes to check the design and calculate the size of the piece or the dimensions you have to follow. That additional time, compared to freeform carving, has to be included in your time management.





Carefully carving the opal in the pre-determined fleur-de-lis design. Andrew Herman

Carving the Opal

The rough opal, somewhat previously preformed, was a large piece, weighing 91.2 grams, of grayish color with some green and blue flashes and a little bit of red color. There were also cream-colored bands with no play-of-color, and a lot of sand pockets. We did not have a definite origin of the material, but it looked like opal from Lightning Ridge from New South Wales, Australia.

Large pieces are rare to come by today. It was a beautiful piece, and it

would probably have best lent itself to a freeform organic carving, after cleaning out the sand pockets and then bringing out the play-of-color.

In this carving project, I had the additional challenge with the rough material not being mine. Using your own rough gives you more control of the quality, and reduces the heart palpitations that accompany you until you finish carving somebody else's material successfully.

Even if the gem material is not a conventional fragile one, carved delicate, stretched-out arms of the fleur-de-lis

design are subjected to breakage at any-time, and extra care must be given while carving them.

I examined the opal, and did a number of drawings mapping out the inclusions and laying over the fleur-de-lis design. I also took photos, and thought about this project for a couple of months before I put on paper all of my thoughts and reservations. I had to point out upfront any possible problem areas and risks involved, before I begun any carving, and then, after promising to do my best, asked for a go ahead from the customer.



Sanding the opal fleur-de-lis during the 3,000-grit stage of the process. Andrew Herman

It is always difficult to carve a pre-determined design on material with inclusions, diverse colors and patterns. The depth of the sand pockets was unknown and they could have run throughout the opal. The cream-colored bands with no play-of-color had to be partly incorporated into the final design. The goal was to try to keep the beautiful blue and green flashes of the play-of-color. The best color in the opal was on the top of the stone, but while planning the carving, had the sand pockets ran too deep, I could have turn it around and carved the fleur-de-lis on the bottom side.

The spike-shaped dark band on the left pushed the entire design towards the right, and the right-hand arm of the fleur-de-lis had to roll over a bit on the side. The arms of the fleur-de-lis were not going to be as symmetrical as perfection would demand, and as I would have liked.

My plan for this fleur-de-lis carving was to be a high-domed relief design, leaving some background around it. However, the client, wanted the background removed, so I consented and changed the carving. That is when working the design to the gem material's best advantage and your own design aesthetics, versus following the customer's wishes, diverge. But, you have to honor and fulfill your client's requests as best as you can, as there may also be setting design reasons behind their wishes.

Presentation of the opal fleur-de-lis as a high-domed relief design, before finishing the piece. Helen Serras-Herman



Finished carved opal fleur-de-lis. Helen Serras-Herman



I normally execute my carvings going back and forth between my Foredom flexible shafts and my 6-wheel lapidary machine (a Genie by Diamond Pacific). The 3,000 grit sanding step is very important for black and white opals to remove all fine scratches. Finishing with cerium oxide always gives a great polish to the opals.

At the end, I finished the project with an attractive carved opal, weighing 31.7 grams (158.50 carats), and even more importantly, with a lesson of how to approach such commission work.



Helen Serras-Herman is a regular contributor to Rock & Gem. She is a 2003 National Lapidary Hall of Fame inductee, and an acclaimed gem sculptor and gemologist with over 37 years of experience in unique gem sculpture and jewelry art.

For more information, visit her business at www.gemartcenter.com

 Gem Art Center/Helen Serras-Herman



EXPLORING THE HOUSE OF TIBARA

This macro photograph, taken by Tim Thomas, is a black opal discovered in Lightning Ridge, Australia, a rare find there and anywhere. Photography and world-class stones, when they can be found, demonstrate what The House of Tibara is about.

BY ANTOINETTE RAHN

Life-long learning and innovative collaboration may be trendy terms these days. However, neither concept is new for the husband-wife duo of Tim and Barbara Thomas; it's how these retired educators and business owners have always lived their lives.

The Thomas' are owners of The House of Tibara. See, a great example of their collaborative spirit exists within the name of their company, which is a fusion of Tim and Barbara's names. The couple's passion for opals, gem and mineral shows and lapidary developed early on in their marriage, by way of a show, travel to Australia, and interactions with people who

cherish opals. In the early 1970s, the newlyweds traveled to Lancaster, California to visit family. During the visit, they attended a show hosted by a local gem and mineral club. Similar to other October birthday celebrants, Barbara's fascination with her opal birthstone influenced the couple's interest in the rough opal displayed during the show.

Fascinated by what they saw at the show and the warm welcome of club members, they attended more shows and established a relationship with an opal dealer who advised they "buy some opal and a case," which they did. That same dealer freed up some space in his booth and invited the Thomas'

to use the booth space to sell their opals.

"It didn't take much time for us to decide to do some part-time work to build a nest egg for the retirement years," explained Tim. "In 1974, we started building the House of Tibara."

The part-time plan worked well for the pair, both of whom taught high school. Ten years into their part-time opal business, they were attending nearly 20 shows a year as dealers. About that same time, both moved from class-room educators into administrative roles. This shift required an assessment of the time they had available and the goals they held for themselves concerning their business.

Assessing and adjusting is something the Thomas' have done various times in the course of operating their business, and each experience provides an opportunity to learn and grow. An outcome of one such assessment resulted in the couple scheduling ten trips to Australia. While during these trips, the couple learned more about opal while attending a few yearly Australian Opal Symposiums and visiting opal mining areas of Lightning Ridge, Coober Pedy, and Quilpie. During these trips, the couple met many interesting miners (some of whom have been mining since or before WWII). Locals abundantly extended invitations to the Thomas' to visit mines and buy opal, in addition to providing directions to various opal mine dumps.

Another assessment resulted in the couple attending the ten-day Tucson Gem and Mineral Show as dealers for 12 years. This opportunity led to a collaboration with the TGMS, wherein the couple taught classes during the show. As the years went on, the Thomas' attendance at the show became an even greater affair, with the couple's two daughters — equally skilled in art clay and knowledge of gems, including opals — helping care for customers. At Tucson, the couple met an



A prime example of the collaborative relationship House of Tibara has with artisans is this cuff created by Valerie Jo Coulson (www.valeriejocoulson.com) of Pennsylvania. Coulson did a hollow fabrication in 22k gold that features opals purchased through the House of Tibara, including two Queensland black boulder opals and inlaid with Coober Pedy opal, black jade, and chrysoprase. Coulson calls this striking piece of jewelry, "The Gauntlet."

opal miner who introduced them to fine boulder opals and invited them to visit the Hayricks Mine. Barbara accepted the invite as Tim's calendar was full.

The Hayricks mine consists of a flat-top butte, similar to the ones seen in the western United States. More than 300 feet from the plain, flat top with a diameter of two football fields and 60 feet up from the plain is a layer of rock where the "boulders" exist. Also, 60 feet down to the plain is filled with rockfall from previous above-ground

mining. Large 350 horsepower shovels tease the boulders out of the boulder layer until the rockfall happens and needs to be removed.

The visits to Australia led to the opportunity for the Thomas', who by then had retired from their careers in education, to become part owners of the mine. This opportunity, like many things in life, was a learning experience.

"This would have been great except after months of working the miners couldn't get to the boulder opal layer, because of the fallen debris that began to pile up in front of the boulder layer," Tim said. "We got some nice pieces of boulder opal, but not what we have expected."



Tim Thomas entering a mineshaft in the Lightning Ridge, New South Wales, Australia.



Even hard at work, Barbara Thomas takes a moment to smile for the camera. As one-half of the House of Tibara, Barbara enjoys all the aspects of running the business, and furthermore, enjoys creating new items through metalsmithing and art clay silver.



Grouping of high-quality boulder opal stones, from Hayricks mine in Australia.

However, the first collaboration taught the Thomas' many things and helped set them on the path to business success. Among the positives to come from that first partnership was more opportunity to sell their boulder opal, invitations to visit other mining areas, and the inspiration to know what is possible with access to even greater knowledge, and the right partners and equipment, Tim added. This philosophy led the couple to collaborate with Ameritool, the company that produced some of the tools the Thomas' used.

With the valuable knowledge, skills, connections, and reputation they've established over the years, the Thomas', who have been married for 51 years, continue to do business with curious minds and a spirit of helping others to keep learning. This mindset is essential when meeting a customer or mine owner for the first time or the fiftieth. Keen curiosity, an eye for detail, and a passion to learn is also crucial for identifying best selling inventory, as well as business practices.

"Our most popular product, of course, is rough opal, then finished opal or the tools necessary to carve and cut or finish an opal," Tim said. "However, probably the most important product we (sell) is our experience, and information, and patience with people who really (want) to cut opal well and have millions of questions. Once they learn that we are willing to answer their questions, we have a customer."

Whether it's looking back at times they trekked the rough terrain around Australian opal mines, demonstrated proper techniques for cutting, grinding, and polishing opals in front of a crowd gathered around their booth at a show, cast an attentive eye while photographing opal specimens, or working with clients seeking to purchase opals online during the COVID-19 pandemic, for the Thomas' it comes down to having a deep appreciation for opals and a passion for helping others experience that for themselves.

"We don't know of another stone in nature that has the variety of colors in it and patterns that you can find in opal," said Tim.

That, in and of itself, is a pretty good reason to become a fan of opal.



A section of the Hayricks boulder opal mine, located in central to northern Queensland, Australia. Scratches on the face of the mine were made by a large diesel backhoe used to scoop material daily.


5 FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT


HOUSE OF TIBARA

- 1 The Thomas' not only use their decades of experience as teachers, but their specialties (mathematics and administration leadership – principal) for Barbara, and (psychology, chemistry, and biology) for Tim, have been exceedingly helpful in running their opal business.
- 2 Logging more than a dozen trips to Australia's premiere mining region, the Thomas' have spent time in a number of notable places, including Dead Bird Mulga's Rush, Lightning Ridge proper, Sheepyards, Glengarry, and the Coochran, among others.
- 3 Both Barbara and Tim bring creative talents and skills to their business. Barbara in metal work and art clay, and Tim in lapidary, opal cutting and polishing, and photography.
- 4 Among the intriguing and inspiring characters the Thomas' have met through their opal business was respected opal authority and author Len Cram, who showed the couple how he "makes" opal.
- 5 During the first time 'roughing it' in the mining region of Australia, visits to the outhouse revealed several brown frogs present. Upon mentioning it to the miners, Barbara was told as long as the frogs were there, the brown (and very poisonous) snakes were not.

LEARN MORE >

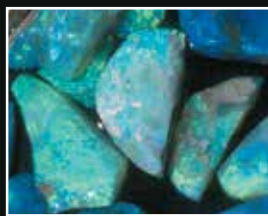
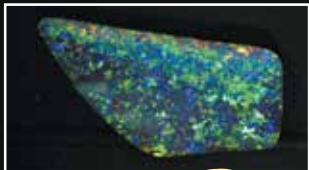
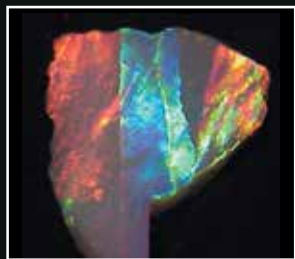
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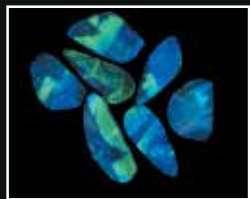
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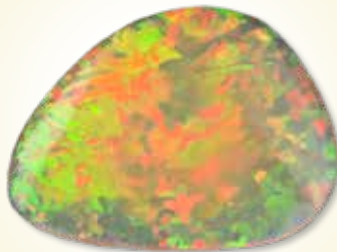
IN AWE OF OPALS

As the closing pages of *Illustrious Opals*, we think this the perfect space to feature the Opal Showcase, which features examples of rough, and cut and polished opal, and opal in lapidary art and jewelry, as selected by the sponsors of *Illustrious Opals*. We hope you enjoy the variety displayed in this first issue.

THE ARKENSTONE GALLERY OF FINE MINERALS



Opal specimen extracted from the Opal Butte mine, Oregon. Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals



Faceted and polished opal with origins in Tsehay Mewcha, Wegeltena, Delanta Worenda, South Welo, Ethiopia. Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals

The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals has been a pioneer of the online mineral market since the mid-1990s and has significantly contributed to the expansion of today's growing interest in mineral collecting. The Dallas-based business, led by founder and owner, Dr. Rob Lavinsky, has the most diverse gallery of collectible mineral specimens, open by appointment.

www.irocks.com
info@irocks.com
972-437-2492

A&S OPALS, LLC



Freshly cut black opal gemstones, mined and cut during a recent trip to Australia, and ready to come off the dop sticks. A&S OPALS, LLC.



A&S Opals, LLC, is the manifestation of a dream that began when the owner, Adam Sawicki, was just a child. The goal of his work, as defined by Sawicki is to share his knowledge and passion for one of the world's most beautiful and mysterious gemstones. He does this by offering a vast selection of opals at his online shop and additional services, including cutting, evaluating, repairing, and re-polishing of opals.

www.aandsopals.com
aandsopals@gmail.com

KINGSLEY NORTH



A grouping of Grade A Ethiopian opal rough, presenting with a consistent flash of deep colors like turquoise, deep blue, and sometimes yellow and orange. KINGSLEY NORTH



Groups of Coober Pedy opal cut and polished stones. KINGSLEY NORTH

Kingsley North is located in the picturesque and geologically rich, Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The company is a household name wherever lapidary work takes place. In business since 1977, today the company offers lapidary equipment, tools, and supplies, beads, cabochons, findings, displays, among other items.

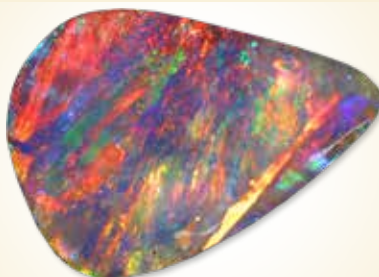
www.kingsleynorth.com
sales@kingsleynorth.com
800-338-9280

OPALS SHOWCASE

THE HOUSE OF TIBARA



A grouping of Yowah finished opal stones encircled by various round and asymmetrical boulder opal beads, all worked by The House of Tibara. THE HOUSE OF TIBARA



An uncommon polished stone of boulder opal, presenting with a significant amount of red, which is a highly prized and priced color within opals. THE HOUSE OF TIBARA

Tim and Barbara Thomas, owners of **The House Of Tibara**, are retired educators who buy, sell, create, and educate others about opals. They frequently attend and sell inventory, and their creations at mineral shows across the United States. In operation since 1974, the Thomas' provide opal rough from around the world, finished stones, jewelry, and beads.

www.opal-tibara.com

tim@opal-tibara.com

barbara@opal-tibara.com

559-299-5123

VILLAGE SMITHY OPALS, INC



Parcel of top-grade rough Coober Pedy opal, 4.5 ounces, from Turkey Ridge Opal Field, Australia. VILLAGE SMITHY OPALS, INC.



Parcel of rough Coober Pedy opal, 9 ounces top grade, Opal Valley Opal Field, Australia. VILLAGE SMITHY OPALS, INC.

Village Smithy Opals, Inc has served the opal enthusiast market since 1997 as the source of one of the largest selections of rough opal available online. Founders and owners are self-proclaimed "opalholic" Steve Newstrom and his business partner and wife, Darlene. The couple regularly travels to Australia on buying trips and share their knowledge through presentations to club and community groups.

www.villagesmithyopals.com

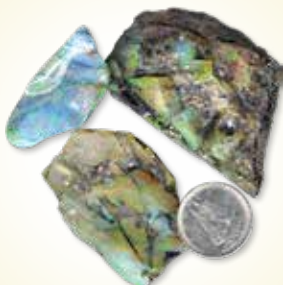
info@villagesmithyopals.com

406-651-4947

OPAL RESOURCES CANADA, INC.



Hand-crafted 18k gold pendant featuring two opal gemstones. OPAL RESOURCES CANADA



A parcel of boulder opal from British Columbia, Canada. OPAL RESOURCES CANADA

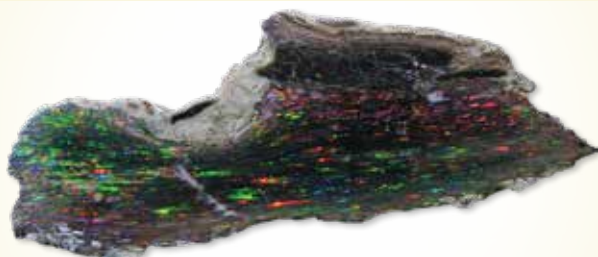
Opal Resources Canada, Inc., is a one-stop-destination for exploring opals. It is the site of the only precious opal mine in Canada, with formal mining operations and mine-your-own public access. Also, opal cutting services and jewelry-making services are available, as well as a physical and online shop for purchase of rough and cut opal and jewelry.

www.opalcanada.com

okopal@uniserve.com

250-542-5173

ROYAL PEACOCK OPAL MINES



Dubbed "The Shoe," for its resemblance to a little old man's shoe, this specimen of opalized conk wood boasts great color flashes. This unique formation occurs when opal replaces the cavities in wood that have been impacted by fungal disease in a living tree. ROYAL PEACOCK OPAL MINES

Located in Virgin Valley, Nevada, **Royal Peacock Opal Mines** is a fee digging destination and gift shop, which has been in the Wilson family for four generations. Carrying on the legacy, commitment, and love of opals of past generations is owner, Julie Wilson, and her son Jake Anderson.

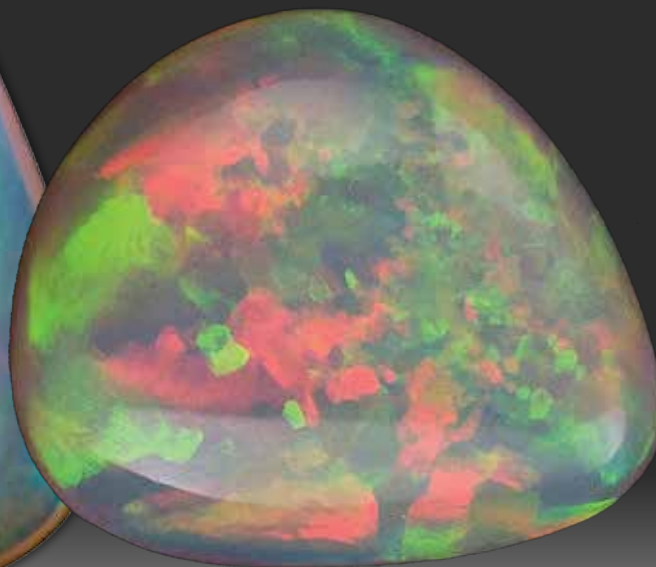
www.royalpeacock.com

autumn@royalpeacock.com

775-941-0374



*Thank you for reading
Illustrious Opals !*



Cut and polished opal from South Welo, Ethiopia.
Photo Credit: The Arkenstone Gallery of Fine Minerals, www.irocks.com

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