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Silverhorn Lariat necklace is made of 18K white gold with 74 carats of freeform aquamarine beads, pearls and 40 carats of diamonds. Earrings are 18K white gold with two 12.5mm South Sea pearls and diamonds weighing 2.67 carats. The mineral specimen is aquamarine in a quartz matrix, from a location near K2 (the second-highest mountain on Earth after Mount Everest) in Pakistan. Opposite page: Necklace is made from pink opal beads weighing over 870 carats, with an oval pink tourmaline clasp weighing 18.67 carats and 32 diamonds totaling 0.64 carats. The mineral specimen is a rough pink opal from Peru.



ROMANCING THE STONE

Dazzling Gems and the Tantalizing Tales Behind the Treasures

BY CLAUDIA LAPIN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEHOSH

Fabled gems once made their way hidden in caravans crossing vast deserts, as secret cargo of primitive ships bound for the courts of Europe. Mere centuries have passed since the leap from utilitarian pins fastening furs to a desire for personal ornamentation. Our fascination with the rare and the beautiful, the freak of nature “inhaling light and breathing fire,” creates a truly unstoppable demand.

Lust for great gems continues with record-breaking prices at auction: staggering sums are bid for colored diamonds, important rubies, sapphires and natural pearls. Despite a world made smaller by low airfares, the Internet and cell phones, an adventurer may still need to swashbuckle his or her way through often dangerous terrain to procure the best of the best. We're connoisseurs of the best of the best in Santa Barbara; for a town our size, there's an astonishing collection of world-class gems, rock hounds, gem cutters, enthusiasts, designers and jewelry fabricators to form a rich tapestry of talent.

In fact, Santa Barbara's so loaded with treasure that a real sleeper lies practically unknown. The Department of Earth Science at UCSB safeguards a collection of gems and minerals gathered by a world authority on the subject, author/collector Peter Bancroft, who wrote the definitive tome on gem crystals.



They're displayed in a drab and unremarkable case in the foyer of Webb Hall. Sixty-two precious specimens—all prize-winning—are shockingly wonderful. A huge Mogok ruby, an enormous opal rock, a very rare bournonite, a fabulous red spinel, a big alexandrite and leaf-like gold nuggets from Placerville are among the exquisite goodies. All it takes to view the Bancroft Collection is a place to park your car.

Silverhorn in Montecito is a legendary player in the world of fine stones. Owners Carole and Mike Ridding even sold minerals and gems to Bancroft

Silverhorn Left: This ring is handmade in platinum, featuring an exceptional color pear shape paraiba tourmaline. This stone weighs 13.50 carats and is from Brazil. There are 285 diamonds in the setting with a total weight of 1.55 carats. The necklace and earrings, on model Kelly Dowdle, are described on page 54. **Tresor Opposite top:** This parrot brooch is from a private estate in California, made in 18K yellow gold and accented by emeralds, rubies and diamonds. The body of the bird is a beautiful natural Abalone pearl showing an iridescent blue green color. **Bryant & Sons Opposite bottom:** This 18K aqua and diamond pendant with a cushion cut aqua weighs 5.18 carats, with a double diamond halo with diamond bail and 0.77 carats in diamonds.



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Gauthier Top: This rare 44.00 carat cat's eye aquamarine oval pendant is set in 14K white gold with 0.42 carats of diamond accents. The matching ring is a 22.05 carat cats eye aquamarine oval. Middle: This very rare 5.03 carat Burmese Ruby is set in 14K white and yellow gold with 1.01 carats of baguette diamonds and 1.10 carats of diamond pave accents.

Bryant & Sons Below: This 18K platinum, ruby and diamond bracelet alternates fine, cushion cut Burmese Rubies (19.42 carats) with round cut diamonds (8.50 carats). Opposite top and on model: This channel set tsavorite and diamond eternity necklace has 13.25 carats of tsavorite and 11.05 carats in diamonds. The tsavorite and diamond bracelet is set in 18K gold with 6.95 carats of square cut tsavorites with prong set diamonds totaling 2.99 carats on each side. The 18K gold tsavorite and diamond ring has 2.20 carat cushion cut tsavorite as the center, with 0.55 carats in diamonds. **Daniel Gibbings** Opposite bottom: This Blue Sky Ring was built to fit and preserve the natural shape of the natural aqua crystal, which is set in 18K yellow gold with cabochon rubies.

before his collection was donated to UCSB. There are always cutting-edge designs in the showroom—exciting things seen nowhere else. Behind-the-scenes, the upstairs studio is a blend of sophisticated works in progress, tools of the trade, high-fashion jewelry photography and boxes of leftover rough material. They often cut their own stones in house, but occasionally send them to specialists in Idar-Oberstein, Germany, long considered the Holy Grail of gem cutting.

Mike bought one unforgettable blue paraiba tourmaline at the Brazilian mine, at a time when most American buyers were unwilling to pay what seemed like high prices—a mistake in hindsight: paraibas shot up in value rapidly, never to decline. He sold it as a rough stone to a dealer in Germany, but Mike never forgot the most amazing swimming-pool neon blue cabochon he'd ever seen. Never able to get that stone out of his mind, Mike inquired about it for years. He'd sold it to a cutter who sold to a friend at a special price for his marriage, but the marriage failed. It later resurfaced for sale in Frankfurt, mentioned quietly to prevent hard feelings on the part of the cutter who'd tendered a bargain. Mike bought his stone again, so sensational that it's matched only by the beauty of the setting he conceived (page 56).

Another recently found stone, tsavorite, or green garnet, was first identified in 1967 in Tanzania by a British geologist





Tresor Inset top: This dragonfly brooch was made using Old World techniques of *plique-à-jour* enamel. The brooch measures more than five inches across and is accented with opals, diamonds and demantoid garnets. The tail of the dragonfly articulates, giving this work a life-like feel. **Gauthier** Above: This 14K white gold necklace features a 66.16 carat blue green beryl set with 6.50 carats of diamonds wrapped around it. It is also shown on the model (opposite). **33 Jewels** Left: This brooch and fringed necklace set is from Victorian Era England, made of 15K yellow gold, hand cut cushion shaped quartz crystals and black enamel. **Daniel Gibbings** Opposite top: This Rising Snow Pearl Pendant is made from a large Australian pearl set with an 18K yellow gold cap and bail with diamonds, on an 18-inch chain.



in search of other deposits. Tanzania denied him a permit to export. Figuring the seam might extend to Kenya, he located a gem-bearing area within a few years and set up a claim, living in a tree house for protection from animals. He protected his stones from theft with python snakes. None of this prevented his murder over a claim dispute; however, he'd managed to make a large sale to Tiffany & Co, who named it in honor of the Kenyan park Tsavo and launched a campaign for public awareness. Tsavorite competes with emerald due to its durability, with fewer inclusions and higher brilliance. Despite the campaign, tsavorite never achieved widespread distribution like tanzanite, another modern stone.

Bryant & Sons, on State Street for 50 years, has both an incredible huge tanzanite ring and a wonderful tsavorite suite consisting of necklace and bracelet that showcase the brilliant green garnets, set off by a line of diamonds on either side (page 59). A tsavorite ring of significant size complements the suite. In addition to offering exquisite gemstone creations, Mike Bryant now fashions wedding rings for second-generation customers, sometimes with the same stones.

A relative newcomer to State Street, Scott Gauthier of Jewelry by Gauthier is well known in Arizona. Scott likes

to compare the tangible riches of a fine stone to a great work of art, noting how different a real Picasso is compared to a poster. The best protection for value, he feels, is to own the highest-quality stone possible. He once competed with a handful of buyers for important stones, but now finds himself up against buyers from Russia, China and India. It's an exciting time that demands quick decisions and quick action, with prices constantly changing. He says the instinct to stop for a beautiful sunset is the same guiding principle when selecting a colored stone: the eye will guide you. It's hard to go wrong in a room full of knockouts, but his five-carat unheated Burmese Ruby ring (page 58) has to be a contender for investment grade—an impossibly fine color, tremendous brilliance and huge!

Jeremy Norris, of Tresor in Montecito, has lent the Smithsonian his monumental collection of abalone and conch pearls. The tiny flame pattern occurring on some conch pearls is exquisite, unique in the gem world. A good natural strand can easily cost a quarter million dollars or more. When Santa Barbara still had a thriving abalone business, Jeremy bought a toolbox full of abalone pearls from a fisherman, which he quickly sold at a nice profit. This far exceeded his pay as an opal cutter, and he was hooked. Jeremy's a true treasure hunter, always hoping to find what he calls the miracle.

Even now, when infrastructure has improved and remote places are theoretically connected, Jeremy tells hair-raising stories of chasing treasure. One good strike must pay for all the dead-end forays. Trust is key when dealing in cash or accepting goods on memo due to cash restrictions. Once he chartered a light aircraft to a remote island between Haiti and the Bahamas. Acquaintances of friends led to unknown parties down a distant track; a deal was struck, but upon return to the airport, weather prevented his departure. Every islander knew he was in possession of rare pearls and cash, so he spent a sleepless night as every barking dog and rustling branch set him on edge. Nothing happened. He made it out and home safely.

But things do happen. The web informs remote miners of prices on Bond Street, Place Vendome and Rodeo Drive, so the stakes are high. A villager may be able to sell directly at the great auctions in Basle or Hong Kong. But it's not all over yet. Jeremy has travelled for decades to the Sea of Cortez, Peru, the Caribbean and places he won't reveal—all in search of serious pearls. And he has a brilliant eye. Once again, Santa Barbara's home to a treasure trove of gems.

Glen Espig of Oliver & Espig (founded with partner Ingerid Ekeland in 1974) has cultivated personal relationships for decades in pursuit of colored stones. By the time the stones reach here, he feels, they've been picked over many times. So he's gone to the source; travelling in war zones, he once had child soldiers aiming at him. He's wondered whether he'll be shot behind a tree or taken to a mine—all in pursuit of lovely stones. So far, so good.

He owns a thrilling collection of paraibas, large colored sapphires of every hue and a monumental, museum-grade, nearly unknown natural Burmese zircon. Glen adores a stone with a story, an irreplaceable lineage. His passion is for perfection in cutting. Glen has a streak of melancholy in letting go of a rare, fine gem. Occasionally, a favorite comes back for a visit, just

(Continued on page 74)

