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Aurélie Turrall
Jewellery Specialist

L FOR LAPIS LAZULI

Lapis lazuli is one of the oldest stones recorded, a favourite gem for amulets and scarabs in ancient Egypt. Lapis lazuli artefacts have been found at excavations of the Predynastic Egyptian site Naqada (3300–3100 BC) and was used for Tutankhamun's gold mask.



Mask of Tutankhamun



A Lapis Lazuli Scarab Ring

It has been mined as early as 7570 BC in Afghanistan and is mentioned in the Old Testament, referred to as "sapphire". Exodus 24:10: "And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone..." Scholars agree that the Latin reference to the blue gem "lapidis sapphirine" is in fact lapis lazuli, not sapphire.

The name comes from the Latin lapis, "stone," and the Persian lazhuward, "blue." The mineral is formed of multiple components: lazurite, sodalite, calcite, and pyrite – nicknamed "fool's gold" and appear as gold flecks.

Lapis lazuli is known for its intense blue, with the most prized colours ranging from greenish blue to violetish blue and highly saturated medium to dark tone. If other minerals are present, it will alter its appearance and may have an impact on the desirability. Specks of "gold" pyrite are highly acceptable, however if there is an excess of white calcite the gem will be less valuable. The lower grade lapis lazuli is green and dull in appearance. The more lazurite, the deeper the blue, often referred to as royal blue. The more pyrite, the greener the gem.

Afghanistan, and more specifically the northeastern province of Badakhshan, has always, and still does, produce the most prized lapis lazuli. In fact, the trade name for the highest quality lapis lazuli is nicknamed Persian or Afghan and contains very little or no calcite or pyrite. The conditions to access the lapis lazuli are ruthless.

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Unfortunately recent events have pushed the mineral to now be classified as a conflict mineral as the “6,500 year old lapis mines are driving corruption, conflict and extremism in the country. Global Witness has found that the Taliban and other armed groups are earning up to 20 million dollars per year from Afghanistan’s lapis mines, the world’s main source of the brilliant blue lapis lazuli stone, which is used in jewellery around the world.”

Other trade names include Russian or Siberian. These variations contain pyrite and might contain some calcite. Chilean is another trade name with obvious calcite traces and often green. Though the names refer to geographic locations, the stones may not be mined there.

Lapis lazuli's use has always been very versatile. It can be cut into beads, inlaid in rings, fashioned into bowls and carved into ornamental objects.



Lapis lazuli carving Elephant by Erwin Klein, sold for \$562 at Bonhams in May 2017, L.A. "Naturalistically carved from a single piece of Afghani lapis Lazuli, with inset white agate tusks and toenails and tiny diamond eyes."



Van Cleef & Arpels
"Two Butterfly Between the Finger ring"
retailing for £18,900



Ultramarine

Due to its intense blue colour, the gem became a favourite amongst Renaissance painters. Lapis lazuli was crushed and the blue pigment was named ultramarine, from the Latin “ultramarinus”, meaning beyond the sea.

The 17th century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer used this very expensive pigment in abundance in his paintings.

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The Milkmaid, Vermeer



The girl with a pearl earring, Vermeer

Several others made use of ultramarine in their iconic artworks.



Titian's Ariadne makes use of ultramarine to depict the sky and draperies

The use of lapis lazuli was synonymous with great wealth. It is not surprising that in the Medici Chapel in Florence the gem is heavily represented, such as on the Altar of the Chapel of Princes.



Lapis lazuli continues to be amongst jewellers' favourite choice of blue gem throughout the ages.



A rare 1982 Patek Philippe watch, selling for £60,000



Pomellato "Nudo ring", retails for £3,150

However due to its classification as a conflict gem, will demand, availability and use in jewellery continue to thrive?

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