

Amethyst:

The quartz that would be king

By David Federman

What ruby and sapphire mean in terms of beauty and prestige to goldsmiths, amethyst means to silversmiths. As such this abundant purple quartz has quickly become the new crown prince of precious stones in the domain of sterling.

Idealism is very expensive in the gem world. You want ideal red, you'll have to pay a small fortune for a superb ruby or spinel. You want the most majestic blue, prepare to fork over vast sums for a true-blue sapphire. You want the deep, lush green of paradise, you'll have to empty your bank account for a supreme emerald or fine jadeite. Pick any colour of the rainbow and try to find a gem which shows it at its best and the cost will most likely be costly – very costly.

Only one colour breaks this rule of exorbitantly priced gem idealism: purple. This colour is at its manifest best in amethyst – a plentiful quartz now found in so many locations a list of them would fill this page.

Amethyst is synonymous with ideal purple the way ruby is synonymous with ideal red, sapphire with ideal blue and emerald with ideal green. But while superb ruby, sapphire and emerald cost thousands of dollars per carat, superb amethyst is readily available to consumers for under US\$100 per carat. Is it any wonder that amethyst is a leading staple gem with silversmiths?

"Except for even cheaper and more abundant blue topaz, amethyst is the reigning precious stone in the silver world," says gemmologist and author Joel Arem. But he quickly adds: "This wasn't always the case. Two centuries ago, amethyst was as rare as ruby



Jewellery by Village Silversmiths

and nearly as expensive. Even today we recall the phrase 'Royal purple,' an allusion to the value attributed to purple gems. So today you have a unique situation. Because it is so plentiful as a result of the discovery of huge deposits in South America, amethyst is quite inexpensive, yet retains the 'regal reputation' it enjoyed when it was a rarity."

No doubt about it, the beauty of amethyst has a resonance that only precious stones like ruby and sapphire enjoy. Indeed, connoisseurs debate the aesthetic characteristics of superlative amethyst with the same passion and particularity that they do the merits of top-grade ruby, sapphire and emerald. For Arem, that ideal is codified under the term "Siberian," once reserved exclusively for Russian stones but now a generic term for stones with a unique colour-change property similar to that of alexandrite.

As the photos Arem took especially for this article show, "Siberian" amethysts look bluish-violet in normal/fluorescent illumination and turn reddish under penlight. Colour-change is not a phenomenon that is normally associated with amethyst, but Arem believes it could become a very important selling point. What's more, whether bluish or reddish, amethyst is, in Arem's words, "stunning in both colour states." The end-result, Arem hopes, is "a quartz that could have a 'chameleon-like' reputation for colour change that rivals that of alexandrite – but for a fraction of the cost." In this writer's opinion, colour-change amethyst far more frequently looks better than alexandrites, many of which display hues that are marred by muddy brownish-purples



Jewellery by Sam Patania

and unattractive olive-greens. Every "Siberian" amethyst I have seen is attractive.

Shoestring splendour

Given its low price and, pardon the pun, sterling reputation, amethyst is the chief staple gem for many silversmiths who want their work to have asset, as well as aesthetic, value. Tucson-based Sam Patania is one such maker.

"To keep producing all my designs here in America, I have to rein in the cost of materials," he says. "That pretty much rules out diamond and precious stones like ruby and sapphire. But amethyst is so affordable I can use it regularly without having gem costs significantly elevate the price of my pieces. In this way, my customers get a gem that has as much beauty, desirability and stature as any of the classic precious stones they may know and want."

No wonder amethyst is the chief gem Patania is using in what he calls his "national line." Known primarily for Southwestern-style jewellery, Patania, who is a third-generation Arizona silversmith, sees amethyst as a way to broaden his appeal beyond his traditional regional base.

John Bajoras, who operates four silver-only jewellery stores in Massachusetts and will soon open a fifth in New Hampshire, sees amethyst as a "high-recognition gem as well-known as ruby or sapphire, but far less expensive." He

continues: "The silver market needs to offer gems that have the same high name-recognition and appeal as any of the more pricey traditional precious stones. Nothing serves this function better than amethyst."

A family name?

It is a tribute to amethyst's high name-recognition that many are trying to broaden the name amethyst from a specific quartz variety to a new alias for quartz. The trend is understandable and therefore inevitable. Because amethyst is a quartz, a name with connotations of abundance to the point of surplus, even surfeit, many lovers of this gem try to ignore the species name and pretend that amethyst can serve as a family, rather than a varietal, name.

The same thing has happened, for different reasons, with sapphire. Once viewed strictly as blue corundum (the name sapphire itself is eponymous, deriving from the Latin word for blue, 'sapphirus'), sapphire has finally emerged in its true incarnation as the family name for all members of the corundum family, except ruby.

Amethyst is made-to-order for inventive marketing. The name itself is derived from Greek for "not intoxicated", because in ancient times it was widely believed that the wearer of an amethyst could not be victimised by the downside result of excessive alcohol consumption. In this regard, the name is far sexier than

"purple quartz." This is why Arem, Bajoras and Patania worry about the movement to adopt amethyst as a comprehensive family name for all transparent, facetable quartzes. This has already happened with a heat-greened quartz now marketed as "green amethyst." While its greenish colours are pretty, they certainly lack the drama and mystique of amethyst.

"The finest fancy-colour corundums vie in beauty and rarity with blue sapphire," says Arem. "So correctly harnessing the name sapphire to all colours of the corundum spectrum does not present any threat to the power or prestige of the name. But 'green amethysts' aren't exemplars of the colour green the way fine amethysts are for purple. When you think of the finest green, you think of emerald. So why hijack a name with so much prestige and debase it by selling stones unworthy of the market name they have been given?" Bajoras is more succinct: "Green quartz already has a name: prasiolite. Stick with it."

The green debate

Lucille Clarke, a silversmith in Maryland, thinks such objections are unfair and snobbish.

"I use purple and green quartz, and call both proudly 'amethyst'," she says. "I'm in favour of any marketing device that gives me a fighting chance to sell my jewellery. I don't