

Gems Made in the U.S.A.

While the country isn't in the same league as global producers, a large variety of beautiful stones are found within its borders.

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7 MIN READ

In the 1970s, when Jaymus Perry was growing up on the Navajo Nation reservation near Buell Park, Ariz., he and his siblings used to fill coffee cans with the raw peridots and chrome pyrope garnets that they found and sold the gems to local trading posts for spending money.

“The sooner we could fill up the cans, the sooner we could play,” Mr. Perry, now 56, recalled during a recent phone interview from his home in Durango, Colo. “We were just happy to receive funds — \$50 in 1974 sure went a long way.”

Mr. Perry could not have foreseen that, five decades later, he would still be selling the same gems — like the chrome pyrope, a deep red garnet that also goes by the name anthill garnet because ants unearth the sparkling pieces and drop them on the surface.



Rough and polished chrome pyrope garnets, also known as anthill garnets. Columbia Gem House

Unlike Southeast Asia, East Africa and Colombia, the United States is not a large or historically important producer of gems. But what the country lacks in gemological richness, it makes up in a startling variety of gems mined coast to coast, from Oregon sunstone to Maine tourmaline.

Some of those gems have been a staple of the global jewelry trade for decades, “but no one talked about where they came from,” said Eric Braunwart, founder and president of Columbia Gem House in Vancouver, Wash., one of the country's largest cutters and distributors of American-mined gems, including anthill garnet and Arizona peridot (the latter, known for its Jolly Rancher-green hue, is widely used in mass-produced jewelry).

Mr. Braunwart said he noticed a change about four years ago, when the environmental and #MeToo movements and, later, the Black Lives Matter protests, encouraged consumers to ask more questions about provenance.

“Young people decided they needed to know more about what and who they were supporting financially,” he said.



A Paonne Montana Sapphire Solitaire Set from the jewelry brand Young in the Mountains.

Mariele Ivy, founder and designer of the Denver-based jewelry brand Young in the Mountains, was one of them. In 2016, after learning that lapis lazuli was a source of income for the Taliban, and malachite came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where human rights abuses are legion, Ms. Ivy made a vow to shun gems mined overseas. “Twice I’ve done fund-raisers where I sell lapis I already own and 100 percent of profits went to Women For Women in Afghanistan,” Ms. Ivy said on a recent phone call.

For the center stones of her engagement rings, Ms. Ivy now uses either recycled diamonds or Montana sapphires in blue, green, pink and lavender hues that she buys directly from Lewis & Clark Sapphires, owned by Neal and Debbie Hurni.



Lewis & Clark Sapphires runs a mining operation off the Missouri River near York, Mont. Louise Johns for The New York Times

The couple runs a two-person mining operation that spans 70 acres “on the upper benches of the Eldorado Bar, just off the Missouri River, only about 40 minutes from the capital city, Helena,” Mr. Hurni explained on a recent phone call.

“People are definitely attracted to the knowledge of where the stone comes from,” he added, “but also to be a part of something they can feel a connection to.”

Diamonds and Sapphires

Easy access to gem supplies and to information on mines’ sustainability track records are among the primary reasons that American-mined gems are drawing growing interest among jewelry lovers. But there also is another, more primitive allure: Like most gems, American stones are dazzling.

One example: Since October 2021, visitors to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., who enter its gem hall through the northern entrance, are welcomed by an 8,000-pound group of glittering quartz crystals from Arkansas.

Around the corner is an exhibition, which opened in June, called “Great American Diamonds.” It features four diamonds discovered in the United States: two from the Crater of Diamonds State Park near Murfreesboro, Ark., and two from the Kelsey Lake Mine in Colorado, which closed in 2001.



The Uncle Sam Diamond from the “Great American Diamonds” exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. Department of Mineral Sciences, photo by James Tiller and Brittany M. Hance, Smithsonian Institution

One of the Arkansas stones, the 12.4-carat pinkish-brown Uncle Sam Diamond, “is being seen for the first time since the ’60s,” Jeffrey Post, the museum’s curator-in-charge of gems and minerals, said on a recent phone call.

He said the gem, a rare Type IIa diamond (“maybe a few tenths of a percent of all the diamonds produced in the world”), underscores one of the fascinating aspects of gemstones. “They can sit somewhere in a vault for long periods of time and pop out again, as they were,” Mr. Post said. “They have a sense of permanence, and because of that, they tend to carry stories.”

Some of the best belong to Montana sapphires. Here’s one from “Yogo: The Great American Sapphire” by Stephen M. Voynick: In 1895 in Yogo Gulch, in central Montana, a gold prospector named Jake Hoover found blue stones collecting in his sluices. He sent the pebbles to an assay office. From there, the stones were forwarded to Tiffany & Company in New York, where its chief gemologist at the time, George F. Kunz, declared them to be fine blue sapphires and dispatched a \$3,750 check to Mr. Hoover.

Mined in fits and starts over the past century, Yogo sapphires are renowned not only for their color, but also for the purity of their crystals. “They’re very clean stones with very few inclusions,” said Brecken Farnsworth, co-owner of Parlé, a multigenerational jewelry business in Pocatello, Idaho.

“But the crystals are small and flat, which makes getting a one-carat stone a big deal,” she added. “The biggest one we ever sold was a blue 3.69-carat that sold at retail for \$180,000 two years ago.”

Yogo is one of four sapphire deposits in Montana. The others are Dry Cottonwood Creek, best known for its orange and yellow sapphires; the Missouri River deposit mined by the Hurnis and a handful of small operators; and Rock Creek, also known as Gem Mountain, where Potentate Mining, headquartered in Canada, extracts a steady supply of sapphires beloved by designers for their teal overtones.

Debbie and Neal Hurni, the owners of Lewis & Clark Sapphires, at their mining property on the Eldorado Bar, just off the Missouri River in Montana. Louise Johns for The New York Times

There is no denying that Montana — also known as the “Treasure State,” a nickname that even appeared on its auto license plates in the mid-20th century — is gemologically blessed. But almost every state in the union produces some sort of gem material (at the very least, the state gemstone).

Most deposits, however, are not commercially viable; those that are tend to be concentrated in the West. “It’s less populated so you have better access and you have more of a history of mining,” Mr. Braunwart said.

Around the States

Tiffany & Company was instrumental in promoting Southern California’s gem industry in 1903, when it introduced a pinkish-purplish variety of spodumene to the world.

Mr. Kunz “acquired the rough gemstone from a mine in California and cut the stone in his studio,” Victoria Reynolds, Tiffany’s chief gemologist since 2020, wrote in an email. “He was immediately drawn to its lilac color and remarkable vibrancy.” Tiffany named the gem in his honor: kunzite.

In addition to kunzite, the region’s deposits of igneous rocks called pegmatite also contain pockets of red tourmaline, morganite and spessartite garnet, but finding them is difficult because they are “very capricious,” said Bill Larson, a longtime miner and gem dealer who owns Pala International, a dealership in Fallbrook, Calif.



Benitoite gems are found only in San Benito County in central California. Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times



Arizona peridot is known for its green color. Columbia Gem House

He should know. In 1968, Mr. Larson purchased three tourmaline mines located in the foothills of northern San Diego County — Stewart Lithia, Tourmaline Queen and Pala Chief — and mined them, with varying degrees of success, until he sold his interests in 1980. (Since then, Tourmaline Queen has been closed; Pala Chief still operates, and Stewart Lithia has some operations.)

He was not the first person to see potential in the region's bright red tourmaline crystals. In the early 1900s, much of the output of the Tourmaline King Mine in the area "ended up with the empress dowager in China, where it was mostly used for carvings, beads and buttons," Mr. Larson said.

Farther north, in San Benito County in central California, is the world's only known source of benitoite, a bright blue gem coveted by collectors. And Oregon produces different varieties of sunstone and jasper.

Idaho, also known as the "Gem State," is rich in gems and minerals, which may surprise some people. "Everybody just thinks of us for potatoes," said Ms. Farnsworth of Parlé. (Her father-in-law, Frank Farnsworth, founded the company, then known as Idaho Opal & Gems, in 1973, when he began mining opals in Spencer, Idaho.)

The state also boasts a large production of star garnets, the state gem — "so large that most of them are crushed up and made into sandpaper," Mr. Braunwart said.

In the Midwest, Michiganders take pride in Petoskey stones (the state stone), the fossilized remnants of prehistoric coral (which Columbia Gem House cuts for the Detroit-based watch and jewelry brand Shinola to use for everything from watch dials to adorning bill clips).

And in the South, a small pearl industry operated in Tennessee in the late 1800s, when freshwater pearls were discovered in the region's waterways. Today, there still is a periculture operation in Birdsong Creek, just off the Tennessee River in northwestern Tennessee

America even produces emeralds — from mines near Hiddenite, N.C. "Every few years they hit a pocket, but I wouldn't hold my breath," said Mr. Post of the Smithsonian.

As for other green gems, the defunct Plumbago Mine near Hanover, Maine once yielded fine green tourmalines; jewelers say that a beautiful specimen or cut stone still surfaces in an estate sale occasionally.

The nation's gem miners, however, would be the first to tell you that digging for colored stones offers few assurances. That is because most of America's gem deposits — the blue topaz fields of central Texas, the singular red beryls found in Utah's remote Wah Wah Mountains and even the dozens of turquoise mines that dot Arizona, New Mexico and Nevada — are prone to cycles of boom and bust (mainly the latter).

And yet, people continue to plumb the earth in search of precious materials. As Mr. Larson said, "You keep hoping to get to the end of the rainbow."