



FEATHERSTONE QUEENSLAND
OPAL PENDANT NECKLACE
PLATINUM, DIAMOND NECKLACE
WITH MAJOR MARQUISE
QUEENSLAND OPAL, SAPPHIRE,
SPINEL & PARAIBA TOURMALINE
PENDANT.

Obviously... *It's* *Opal*

By Naomi Sarna

Shakespeare and ancient Romans alike called opals "The Queen of Gems". This Queen who preens in a play-of-colour opal is nature's gemstone kaleidoscope. Twisting and turning these fabulous gems present the full spectrum of colors that create flash and spectacular patterns. A Sanskrit word is thought to have been the original name for opal, 'upala' meaning 'precious stone'.

Many myths surround opals. Some believe they are lucky only for people born in October. Some jewellers are said to have refused to set opal as they are soft and break and clients get very upset when this happens! To avoid setting them and to support the previous story, some jewellers said opals were unlucky for anyone not of October birth.

Queen Victoria loved opals, and (ignoring the myths) at their marriages gave her daughters important opals. Lucky or unlucky, opals are fascinating and prized gems.

Art Nouveau jewellers were greatly attracted to opals as a part of their celebration of natural forms and colours. Lalique, Fouquet, and the Belgian jewellers Wolfers Freres loved opals which repeated in a slightly different way the extremely delicate enamels these jewellers used in their organic jewels.

The same way a rainbow forms in the sky, light passes through drops of water which act like prisms in opals. These prisms are actually sphericals, millions of very tiny balls of silica and water which flowed between rocks and formed the cushions of brilliant colour. Curiously, the more uniform the balls are, the higher quality the colour. Small sphericals produce blues and larger ones make fiery reds. Colours may include biting greens, lush purples, bright yellows and oranges as well.

The silica particles settled in fissures in host rocks all over the world including Mexico, Ethiopia, Nevada, in the United States and especially Australia. Over the eons this silica gel hardened into the amorphous structure we call "opal".

Opals may be as much as 15 or 20% water; thus the light that jumps and joyfully bounces around in the watery prisms is what makes it so full of colour. Opal is considered neither a crystal form of silica nor a mineral because of its loose forms, and therefore is classified as a mineraloid.

The sources of many of the world's opals are recognisable by their particular colours and patterns. Australian white opal is often what people think of as opal, but the fabulous oranges of Mexican opals, boulder opals, pink, blue, white and green opals with no play-of-colour are also opal. In my latest article for Unique, we will focus on play-of-colour opal.



FEATHERSTONE CITY
OPAL & BLUE TOPAZ
EARRINGS
PLATINUM, TANZANITE,
PARAIBA TOURMALINE,
BLACK OPAL CITY TOP
WITH DIAMOND, PEAR-
SHAPE BLUE TOPAZ
DROP.



Opal colours are patterned because of the size and distribution of the water and silica sphericals. Sometimes the patterns of colour are tiny specks; sometimes flashes or patches of patterns come up. Highly prized solid flashes, fine pin fire, and Chinese writing or lattices are unusual. However, most rare are harlequin patterns in the extremely brilliant colours and patterns that are formed out of distinct patches of colour.

When the silica rich water seeps into a fossil and replaces the organic material, something very special occurs. This process can take many millions of years, but tree branches, clams, bird bones or ancient pine cones can become fossilised and then opalised, becoming doubly precious not only as a fossil but as a brilliant opal.

Numerous varieties come from Australia especially White, Black or Boulder opal where the layers are thin, and when the rock is split, two matching halves show a brilliant blue in many examples. Play-of-colour opals have proven their value as one of Nature's treasures to the many generations of discerning jewellery designers who are fascinated by the changing character of colours in these gems.

The body colour determines how an opal is classified. The black opal is only from Lightning Ridge, Australia and the body colour is black or grey. A white opal is predominantly white in overall colour with flashes of colour throughout it. Coober Pedy is the home of the typical Australian white opal.

Crystal opal is, as the name suggests, fairly crystal clear and can have almost fluorescent flashes of colour dancing throughout. These opals are often found in Ethiopia.

Because of the water content, some opals are very fragile and will crack when they are removed from the earth and dry out. They are still interesting, especially when they are put in jars of water, but for jewellery purposes, they are generally not useful.

A particular type of opal may be saturated with sugar and then subjected to a sulphuric bath which carbonises the sugar, creating a black background for the play-of-colour. Opals are generally not enhanced, not filled with oil or epoxy or heated to change the colour. Because they are relatively soft, softer than quartz, opals are not the best choice when considering a jewel for daily wear. The Queen is best worn on special occasions when abrasion is kept to a minimum. Harsh chemicals can destroy the polish of an opal and they should be cleaned with mild detergents and dried with soft cloths. An opal used for jewels can last for many generations with proper care.

Frequently opals are capped with a layer of clear quartz. This is called a doublet. If there is a lower layer added, perhaps of lapis or onyx, it is called a triplet. These opals are much less valuable than a pure opal gem, but they are also much harder to scratch and if the bottom layer is coloured, it enhances or contrasts with the natural colours of the opal.

It seems that playfulness is a characteristic of the highest quality makers of unusual opal

jewels. Each of the designers is an internationally awarded artist, and their gems and jewels are frequently presented in museums and galleries throughout the world.

Llyn Strong not only uses opal for her award winning jewels, she specialised in surrounding opals with an exuberance of complimentary colours. It is a special pleasure to listen as she describes her jewels, in a luscious voice with a rich southern accent. She talks about the unique

designs she creates by hand that have components which can be added or removed for various looks.

In her wonderful store in Greenville, South Carolina, Llyn has created special processes to produce unique, exclusive and deeply personal jewels for her clients. Many have collected her creations for over 35 years, many of which reflect the clients personality. She has an intuitive understanding of what to do with the opals that will be a perfect match for the client.



FEATHERSTONE HELENA OPAL OPAL EARRING
MATCHING PLATINUM, DIAMOND, AUSTRALIAN BOULDER OPAL HELENA TOPS AND LARGE AUSTRALIAN BOULDER OPAL TEAR DROPS WITH DIAMOND FRINGE.



OPAL TEAR DROPS WITH DIAMOND FRINGE
FEATHERSTONE PLATINUM & DIAMOND LINE TOPS, AQUAMARINE KITE BELLIES AND LARGE AUSTRALIAN OPAL TEAR DROPS WITH DIAMOND FRINGE
AVAILABLE AT BERGDORF GOODMAN, PRICE UPON REQUEST

Deirdre Featherstone comes into a room with flowing blond hair the Pre-Raphaelite painters would have painted, dressed in black motorcycle leathers and wearing her signature very large platinum, diamond, flashing opal earrings, and a necklace of opals that says I Love You! If there is a character which is opalescent, it abides with Deirdre. Long treasured by collectors, Deirdre's opal jewels are frequently created to be taken apart and worn in a variety of way. In her Soho New York shop, she surrounds herself with all the colours of the rainbow, seeking to compliment the opals she adores.

Years ago Deirdre discovered her love for working with platinum and naturally had to pair it with diamonds and opals. Her pieces regularly show up at the Oscars and other high events.

Llyn Strelau, living and working in Calgary, Canada, presents immaculate jewels and constructions of gold, platinum and opal. Always with a diamond twinkle in his eyes and an astonishing moustache twirling up at the ends, Llyn is self-taught and often creates designs remarkably free from traditional concepts.

Currently Llyn conceptualises his designs, develops prototypes and works in close collaboration with talented bench workers. He has added computer-aided drafting and fabrication methods to his design arsenal in recent years. 2016 saw Llyn move to a new loft-atelier, entering a new era of consulting with clients by appointment to design and create bespoke pieces, thus exploring new avenues of creativity.

Again, like Llyn Strong and Deirdre Featherstone, Llyn Strelau's specially designed clasp system incorporates a European bayonet mechanism which permits cuff links, pendants, chains and pearls to be worn in infinite combinations for complete versatility.

**FEATHERSTONE
DIAMOND RIVIERE WITH
OPAL PENDANT**

PLATINUM & DIAMOND
RIVIERE WITH HEART-
SHAPE OPAL PUSH CLASP
AND DIAMOND, PINK
SAPPHIRE, CRYSTAL OPAL
PENDANT.

AVAILABLE AT BERGDORF
GOODMAN, PRICE UPON
REQUEST



Naomi Sarna creates carvings out of opals and keeps a collection of opalized fossil clams and bird bones she bought at the Tucson Gem show from a grizzled old prospector from Australia. Her award winning opal clam is destined to be held high in the hand of mermaid rising from the sea. Her style of carvings and gem setting is often reflective of her love of the sea, waves, patterns and flashes of coloured light. Among gem carvers, she is highly unusual in that she not only carves the opals, but also sets them in specially constructed settings with a host of tiny multi-coloured gems. In her shop in New York City, Naomi surrounds herself with large rough gems in the windows, catching the light and turning her workspace into a kaleidoscope of all the colours of opal.

