

## Nephrite

### Priceless gem of the orient

*One can put a price on gold, but jade is priceless – ancient Chinese proverb*

Jade has a long, illustrious history in China stretching back more than 5000 years. The term jade is used for two completely different minerals that share similar properties called nephrite and jadeite. For most of Chinese history, the term jade has referred to nephrite and it is only in the last 250 years or so that jadeite from Myanmar has entered the Chinese market. During that time, the traditional sources of nephrite in northwest China have been producing less and less. While there are small sources of nephrite throughout the world, British Columbia has become one of the largest sources in the last fifty years.

British Columbia nephrite had been used by First Nations people to fashion tools such as axes and knives for nearly 4000 years, but not as jewelry. Chinese laborers working for gold mines and as laborers on the Canadian transcontinental railway in the 1800s discovered nephrite boulders, and it is said that they would send pieces back home to China in the caskets of coworkers who had passed away. For the next 150 years or so jade production in British Columbia consisted mostly of amateur rock hounds looking for boulders to take home, but in the 1950s some small mining operations began to search in earnest.

Exploration involved backpacking the

**Nephrite with orange sapphire and diamonds in 18KT gold ring \$1600**

**Nephrite in textured sterling silver and 18KT yellow gold pendant \$600**

**Jadeite in yellow gold drop earrings \$900**

**Nephrite in pierced sterling and marlin-spike knotted leather pendant \$750**

mountains with a portable diamond core drill and checking jade boulders for their quality. Less than five percent of the boulders were saleable, but those were marked with tall poles. When winter arrived and the ground was frozen, heavy equipment was driven in from the nearest highway to retrieve the marked boulders. At that

time, most of the jade was exported to Taiwan and carved into trinkets. A major breakthrough in the market occurred in 1985 when China opened its ports to international trade. The growing middle class in China has a built in desire for quality nephrite because of their long association with it but jewelers needed a reliable source. At first there was significant resistance to using nephrite from Canada, but that resistance is gradually fading. Last year about 400 tons of jade were exported from British Columbia and nearly all of that went to China.

Mining in British Columbia is not easy. The season is very short, typically about three months and mountainous terrain makes access very difficult even when the weather cooperates. To add to the difficulty, most of the free standing boulders have been removed and the action has switched to hard rock mining. Seams of jade vary from one to twelve feet thick and nephrite is so tough it can be extremely difficult to extract. Dynamite is not used because of potential damage to the nephrite so the most common methods are hydraulic separation and sawing with huge diamond wire saws and circular blades. The sawblades need to be kept cool or tens of thousands of dollars' worth of diamonds can be lost in an instant! The good news is there seems to be an almost limitless supply of nephrite – it's just difficult and expensive to bring to market, and the top qualities are only a small percentage of production.

Nephrite is about 6.5 in hardness, so it can show wear over time, but it is extremely tough owing to its fibrous makeup. Any rock hound that has tried to break open a piece of jade with a hammer can attest to how tough it is. The choices are usually to give up, or inflict bodily harm on one's self! Even cutting slabs off a piece of jade with a diamond blade can try one's patience. So nephrite makes a good choice for all types of jewelry, especially where thin pieces may be desired for the design. Pricing varies depending on color, translucency and pattern.

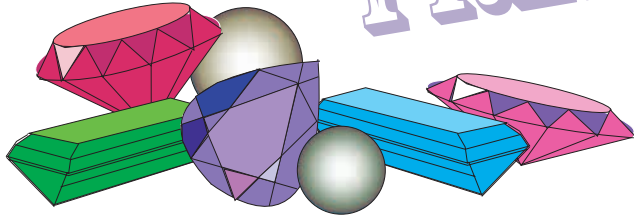


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## New Cabs!

### Red Horn Coral

Fossilized coral from Riley's Canyon, Utah. The original site is closed to collecting now and rough material is from old rock collections. Durable red coral jewelry without harvesting live coral from the ocean!

## Featured Jewelry



### Estate Diamond Ring

Old European Cut diamond,  
1.44 carat center - \$6300

### Garnet Ring

Marquise garnet in 14KT gold  
ring - \$560



### Red Horn Coral Ring

Agatized horn coral in sterling  
silver pierced ring - \$480