

Lapis Lazuli

Royal blue gem of the pharaohs

On November 8, 1922 Howard Carter made the discovery of a lifetime. Mr. Carter had been working for Lord Carnarvon for five years trying to locate the lost tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen. While most archeologists of the day agreed that there was nothing left to be found, Mr. Carter and his sponsor had devoted an enormous amount of time and energy into the search but were almost ready to admit defeat when they finally unearthed King Tut's tomb.

Almost a year and a half later they were finally ready to open the sealed coffin. Inside, over the head of the mummy was the now-famous mask of Tutankhamen. Made with 24 pounds of gold and inlaid with lapis and other gemstones, the mask became the most recognizable symbol of ancient Egypt. The most prominent use of lapis on the mask was for the oversized eyebrows.

Lapis lazuli was one of the most revered stones of the ancient world. The main source for lapis was, and still is the mountains of northeast Afghanistan in a remote area then known as Badakhshan. The extracted material was traded throughout the Mediterranean either over land or by sea. The trip to Egypt was over 2000 miles - a journey almost unimaginable at the time. In ancient Egypt, lapis lazuli was inlaid into jewelry and religious artifacts, very much like it is still used today. Of more interest, it was also ground up and used as eye shadow. It is believed that Cleopatra wore ground up malachite on her lower eyelids and lapis on her upper eyelids!

It is believed that many of the ancient stones referred to as sapphire were actually lapis lazuli! Pliny the Elder (AD 23-69) gives a description of sappir as being like the night sky, spangled with stars, and Theophrastus (372-287BC) writes about "sappir spotted with gold." It is fairly reasonable to assume the stones they were describing were lapis lazuli

even though "sappir" is normally translated as sapphire.

European painters also loved lapis lazuli for its vivid, permanent color. The pigment ultramarine is made from ground up lapis lazuli. One of the most recognizable paintings from that period is the Johannes Vermeer painting, Girl with the Pearl Earring where the vivid blue pigment is used in the head covering to outline the subject's face.

Kremer pigments describes the original technique as follows.

"The principle of the method was that the ground mineral was incorporated into a mixture of melted wax, resins and oils. The molten mass was wrapped around a cloth and kneaded under a dilute solution of lye (a solution of potassium carbonate prepared by extracting wood ashes with water). Our best quality lapis lazuli (Fra Angelico blue) is still made by this lavish procedure. Blue particles of lazurite are washed out by this process and collect by settling at the bottom of the vessel. Most of the colourless crystalline material and other impurities remain behind in the doughy mass. It is usually carried out in at least three separate extractions, offering several grades of diminishing quality."

Each kilogram of lapis yields only about 30 grams of pigment, resulting in a very high price. At the time, the finest grade of ultramarine sold for more than gold. As a result, patrons who commissioned a painting frequently would purchase the ultramarine pigment separately from the commission.

Unlike most of the gemstones we work with, lapis lazuli is a rock made up of several different minerals. The mineral providing the blue color is lazurite and the gold specks are pyrite. Other minerals frequently included are calcite, diopside and hauynite. Lazulite (with an "l" is simply another blue mineral that just happens to have a similar name to confuse us. Lapis lazuli is about 5 to 5-1/2 in hardness and is used in all types of jewelry.



Veberod Gem Gallery
13019 Ridgedale Drive
Minnetonka, MN
952-595-8338
www.vgems.net

**Lapis, malachite and
sugilite in yellow gold
pendant \$1700**

**Lapis and platinum
in 18KT gold earrings
\$1550**

**Lapis on braided
leather necklace with
silver and gold spacers \$800**

**Lapis and diamond in
yellow gold ring \$950**

Fall Bead Sale!

Come in **November 4-7**
and all strands of beads will be

50% OFF

the single strand price
regardless of quantity!

*Buy 5 strands at once, anytime before
the sale and get 40% OFF!*



Christmas Party



All day Saturday **December 19**, make custom stamped and rolling mill patterned pendants and earrings as gifts using our tools and with our help!

All ages welcome with supervision.
No experience necessary.

Live music in the afternoon!

Enjoy listening as the Travis Anderson jazz trio livens things up from 1-3 in the afternoon December 19.



Student Showcase

This year we have a showcase devoted entirely to jewelry made by our students.

You can support a local up and coming jeweler and get a great deal on designer jewelry!

All of the jewelry in the student case is made locally and priced from \$90 to \$400.

