

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines – Sun, Fun, Friends and Magnificent Minerals

Did you know that the third largest gem and mineral show is in France? It takes place in a little town in the Alsace region along the border with Germany. Every year, with its colorful houses and 5,000 inhabitants, Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines welcomes more than 1,000 dealers and 30,000 international visitors and buyers who eagerly descend on the small town looking for treasures at the four-day show.

By Marie Chabrol and Jean Claude Michelou

Established in 1962 by Francois Lehmann, this exhibition grew from a local happening to become a truly international event. Since 1966, it has welcomed increasing numbers of gem and mineral aficionados, collectors and international dealers as well as prominent lecturers and museum curators. It has been affectionately dubbed the *Tucson of Europe*. Like Tucson, the show takes place in tents on the streets, at swimming pools, and at the local theater. It has two distinct zones. The first is dedicated to rough minerals while the second is focused on the gem market and jewelry designers, with a selection of affordable, top-quality, refined and rare gemstones.

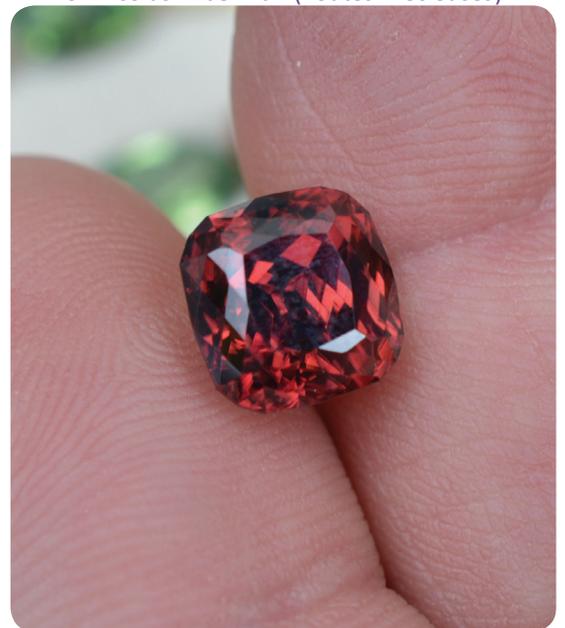
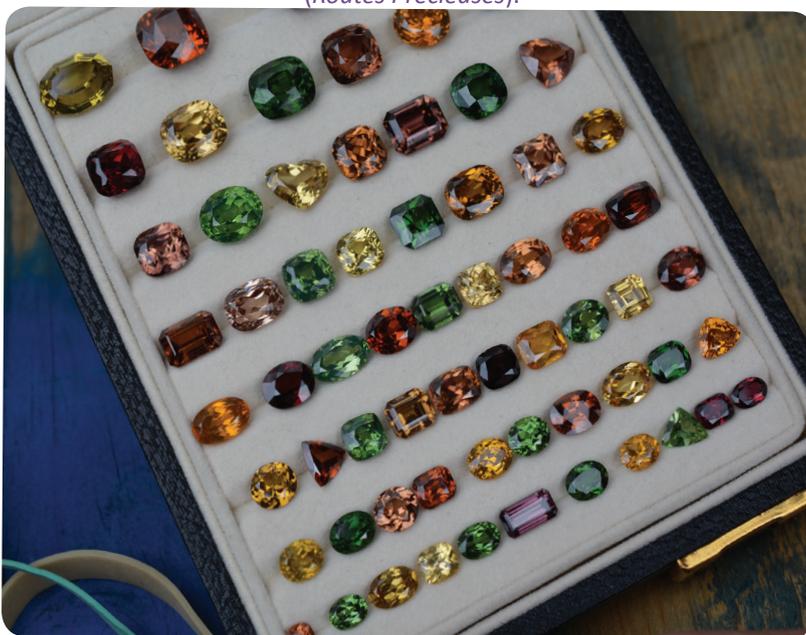
After the 2011 fair, its owner, Michel Schwab, wanted to move the event to the exhibition center in Colmar, a much larger town next to Sainte-Marie, to allow for more visitors and exhibitors to attend. But the Sainte-Marie town council opposed the project, and decided to



Jade cabochons from Italy.

The zircon collection of Nicolas Zilberman (*Routes Précieuses*).

A natural red zircon from the private collection of Nicolas Zilberman (*Routes Précieuses*).





Impressive amethyst and calcite geode from the Marco Tironi collection.



Rare rough blue-green common opal from Peru.

organize the show itself. The little Alsatian town set up a public investment corporation called *Événementiel en Val d'Argent*. Now, employing ten people, the company will prepare future fairs, starting with the 55th edition that will take place June 21 to 24, 2018.

One of the most spectacular presentations at the June 2017 fair was the prestige exhibition, *Geodes and Fumaroles: The Minerals of Volcanism*. Organized by Alain Martaud, it had such renown contributors as the Natural History Museum of Paris, the Mineralogy Museums of MinesParisTech and Strasbourg, the London Natural History Museum and Sapienza-Università di Roma.

Among the most notable specimens on display were opal knots of different colors in ignimbrite (from Mexico), red beryl from the Wah Wah Mountains (Milford, Beaver Co., Utah, USA) curated by Mines-ParisTech (Didier Nectoux and Eloise Gaillou) and a truly impressive quartz, amethyst and calcite geode from Las Delicias (Uruguay), a part of the Marco Tironi private collection, as well as some surprising grandidierite specimens (see the sidebar at the end of this article.)

While the gem zone may be smaller than the mineral zone, the selection was amazing and featured well-



Collectors, museum curators, gem dealers and gemologists attended the Mineral & Gem Show in Sainte-Marie-Aux-Mines. Left center: Jean-Claude Bouillard, Director, Museum of Mineralogy, Paris Sorbonne. Lower left: Giancarlo Parodi, mineralogist at the Natural History Museum of Paris. Right center: ICA member Edward Boehm. Lower right: ICA member Bill Larsen. (Photo: Jean Claude Michelou)



Trapiche quartz slides from Mongolia.

Rough fluorite crystals from China.



Faceted grandidierite gems from Madagascar. See sidebar, next page.



Posing for a picture at the Mineral & Gem show in Sainte-Marie-Aux-Mines (France) are, left to right, ICA members Jean Claude Michelou, Bill Larsen and Edward Boehm, and Mark Kaufman of Kaufman Enterprises. (Photo: Jean Claude Michelou)

known dealers from France and abroad. This place is a true heaven for collectors, gemology students and the curious who want to know more about gem materials. It was also a great place to meet old friends who surprised us with rarities and remarkable ensembles such as a rare colorful zircon collection assembled by Nicolas Zilberman (*Routes Précieuses*, with Sophie Charton) over the last 20 years.

Some of the other notable and amusing things that we discovered were trapiche quartz slides from Mongolia, jade from Italy and a Chinese dealer who offered perfect rough fluorite octahedrons in plastic bags for less than 10 euros. Not even the price of a bag of candy.

For anyone interested in gems and minerals, the Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines show is a must-see event. During four colorful days, the visitor will rub shoulders with many experts and other interested souls in the global gem and mineral industry.

But, aside from the gorgeous gems, the entire region is very beautiful, with its castles and canals, excellent wines and delicious food, warm inhabitants and fabulous scenery. (sainte-marie-mineral.com) *Photos courtesy of Marie Chabrol, unless otherwise specified.*

The Belle of the Ball – Sainte-Marie’s Secret Attraction

One of the most remarkable attractions at the 2017 edition of the Mineral & Gem Show, held this past June, in Sainte-Marie-Aux-Mines, France, was a collection of faceted, rough and mineral specimens of grandidierite as never seen before. World-class museum curators, gem dealers, collectors and other aficionados showed a great deal of interest in the few rare pieces that were offered even before the show had started. These particular grandidierites had never before been exhibited or shown to the trade or the public. It was a real treat for everyone to see them.

Grandidierite is considered to be one of the rarest gemstones in the world. It was first described by Alfred Lacroix in 1902 who found it on the southern coast of Madagascar. He named the gem **Grandidierite** in honor of Alfred Grandidier, a French naturalist and explorer, who studied the natural history and geography of Madagascar.

Although the early crystals were not of facetable grade material, collectors prized these rare minerals. After a century of limited production, however, a new deposit was found outside the town of Tranomaro near the original discovery locality of Andrahomana. Soon, high quality crystal samples began showing up in the gem markets of Bangkok. It came to the notice of even more dealers after the GIA issued certificates describing the crystals as grandidierite. A number of companies and dealers, including GIA, rushed to the mines in Madagascar to obtain as much facet-grade material as possible from the new deposit. It soon became clear that the gem was rare, especially in the higher qualities. Today, prices for fine-cut gems range from US\$8,000 to US\$100,000 per carat, depending in the size, color and clarity.

The mineral has a hardness of 7.5 on the Mohs scale and is an orthorhombic Mg-Fe aluminous borosilicate. The chemical formula of $(\text{MgFe}^{2+})\text{Al}_3(\text{BO}_3)(\text{SiO}_4)\text{O}_2$ is close to that of kornepupine. Its color can range from dark green, blue-green to colorless.

Here are a few samples of the remarkable grandidierites seen at the show.



Grandidierite crystals from the Amboasary district, Anosy region, Madagascar. Left crystal measures 1.8 x 0.7 x 0.3 cm. Right crystal measures 2.1 x 1.4 x 1.4 cm. (Photo: Louis-Dominique Bayle, *Le règne Minéral*; specimens from Pierre Yves Chatagnier.)



Grandidierite crystals from the Amboasary district, Anosy region, Madagascar. Left crystal measures 2.1 x 1.4 x 1.4 cm. Right crystal measures 1.0 x 1.6 x 0.9 cm. (Photo: Louis-Dominique Bayle, *Le règne Minéral*; specimens from Pierre Yves Chatagnier.)



Stunning rough crystal and faceted grandidierite. (Photo: Jeff Scovill; specimens from Brice Gobin)



Faceted grandidierites from Brice Gobin, top left to right: 4.96 cts, 2.86 cts, 3.14 cts; bottom left to right: 9.32 cts, 2.53 cts.