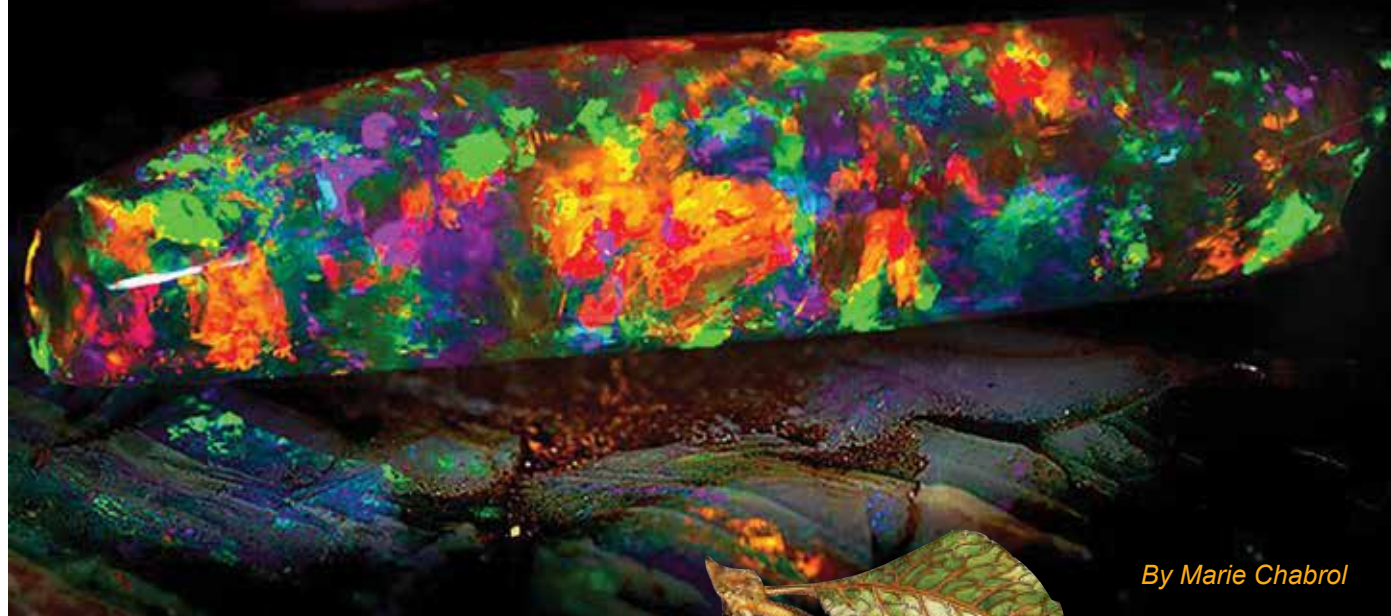


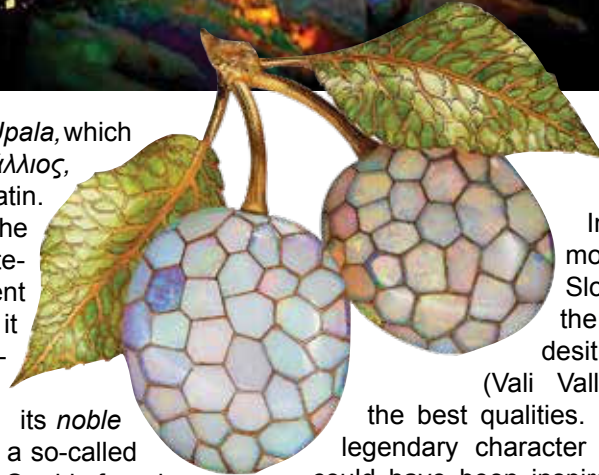
Opal – A Colorful Love Affair



By Marie Chabrol

The name *opal* comes from the Sanskrit *Upala*, which means *gemstone*. It will become *ὀπάλλιος*, *opállios* in Greek then *opalus* in Latin. Although opal has been well known since the 19th century, it has an older story that is mysterious and even devilish, going back to ancient times. The Greeks and Romans attributed it with magical and powerful virtues. Its colorful changes and reflections raised a questions and even fears. This silicate known in its *noble* variety (with colorful effects) exists also in a so-called *common* version (without colorful effects). Opal is found in many regions of the world, in different shades and effects. This is certainly wherein its magic lies!

Among the ancients who talked about opal is Pliny the Elder (23-79 BC) in his famous *Natural History*, translated by Litré in 1877. He described this stone presenting *the subtle fire of the carbuncle, the purplish brilliancy of the amethyst, the sea-green of the emerald; and all these colors shine there, wonderfully melted*. He also related an anecdote about Roman Emperor Antoine, who banished Senator Nonius when he refused to give him his opal ring, valued at 2 millions sesterces. Pliny added that opal in general is like *a color drawing on that of the flower called heliotrope (...), a rugged surface, details that stop the eye*.



He noted that the Indians used colored glass that imitated opal.

In antiquity, opals came mostly from present-day Slovakia. Until the end of the 17th century, the andesitic lavas of Cervenitsa (Vali Valley, Slovakia) provided the best qualities. In the Middle Ages, the legendary character of Robert the Devil (it could have been inspired by the father of William the Conqueror) described this stone as *diabolical*. In 1075, the bishop of Rennes calls it the *stone of thieves*. But a legend dating back to the Black Death epidemic is primarily responsible for its bad reputation.

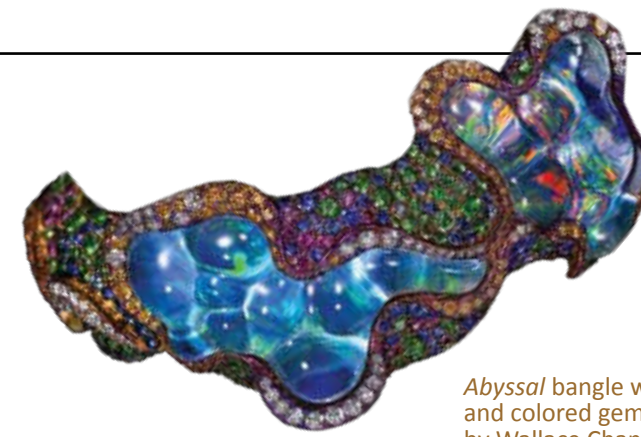
Isidore Kozminski wrote in his 1922 book, *The Magic and Science of Jewels and Stones*, that opal was the favorite gemstone of Italian jewelers, who used it often. Others insisted that opals worn by those stricken became suddenly glowing, and that the gem's luster entirely disappeared with the death of the wearer. Opal then became associated with the death of the victim and an object of dread.

Photos

Top: *The Virgin Rainbow Opal*, found in 2003 in Coober Pedy, is thought to be the most expensive opal in the world (est. US\$1 million). It is displayed in the Adelaide South Australian Museum. (Photo: Adelaide South Australian Museum)

Center: Enamelled gold brooch with opal marquetry. Signed Rene Lalique, circa 1900. Sold at Christie's for CHF212,000. (Photo: Christie's)

Left: Yellow gold *Sabrina* bracelet set with tsavorite garnets, blue zircons and opals by Paula Crevoshay.



Abyssal bangle with opal and colored gemstones by Wallace Chan



Fascinante opal ring, in pink gold, diamonds and opal by Victoire de Castellane, Dior Joaillerie



A 108-ct Mexican fire opal is accented by diamonds, sapphires and amethysts in white gold by Naomi Sarna.

The discovery of opal in Australian mines gave opal back its letters of nobility. In 1849, German geologist Johannes Menge found the first opals. But the discovery of similar stones in Queensland (1869) allowed the advent of an industry that we know today. When these stones arrived on the market, they quickly provoked commercial jealousies. Hungarians declared them to be fake because they presented extremely intense colored fire. And, the opals of Slovakia, more milky, tend to fade very quickly.

Yet, Australia saw a rapid increase in opal discoveries: Quilpie (1871), White Cliffs (1890), Opalton (1896) and Coober Pedy (1915). At the same time, descriptions of opals came from around the world: the Gold Opal from Hungary (brownish-greenish to yellow) by Ernst F. Glocker in 1847; the Quincite (pink common opal) by Pierre Berthier; the Forcherite (yellow orangy, from Austria) by M. Aichhorn in 1860, etc.

In Europe, opals were appreciated at the end of the 19th century, especially in London where they provided joy to Queen Victoria. By wearing them regularly, she promoted these stones throughout the Commonwealth and to her international counterparts. In France, the actress Sarah Bernard believed the gems had magical virtues.



The 16.65-ct black opal *Maelstrom* ring with sapphires, tsavorites and diamonds in 18K gold by David Morris.



Sapphire and 22.08 Mexican fire opal blackened gold cuff by Lydia Courteille.

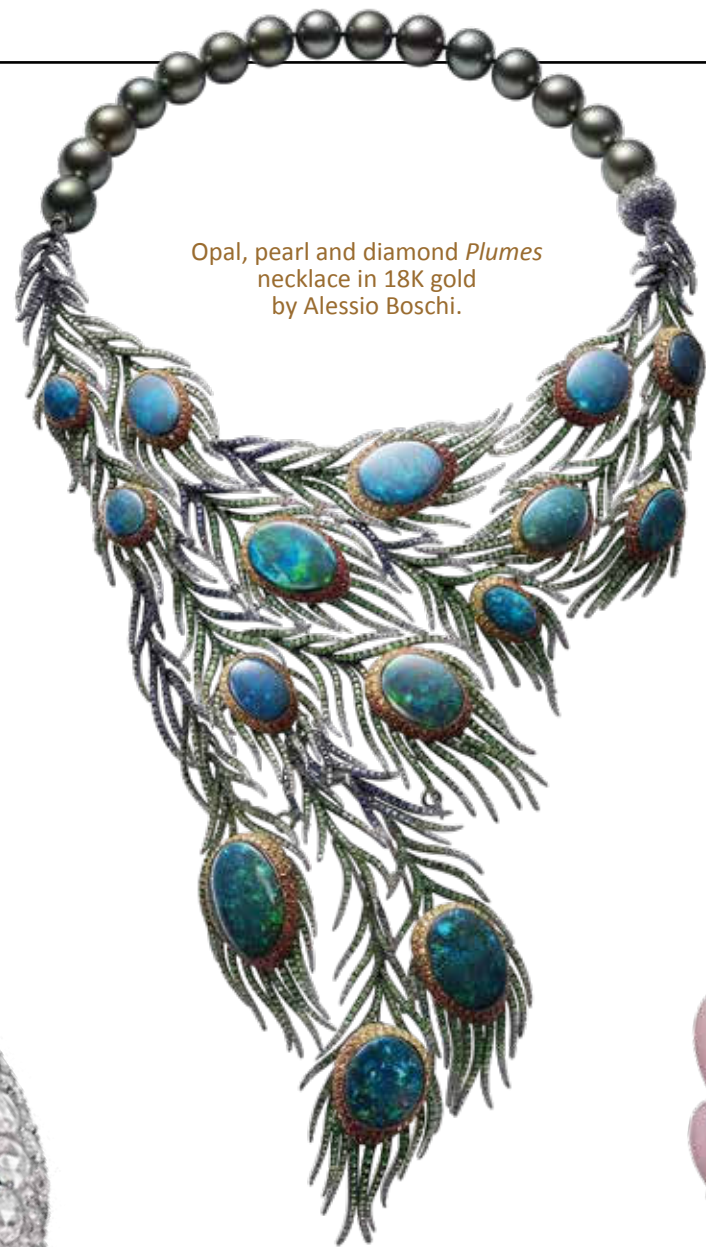
Yellow gold brooch with blue zircons, rhodochrosite, opals, turquoise, malachite and onyx by Paula Crevoshay.



Austrian brooch from the 1940s in platinum, opals, diamonds, rock crystal, enamel, aquamarine and pearls. (Photo: Sotheby's)



Brooch in pink opal in white gold, with two round sapphires, pear-shaped tanzanites, and round mint tourmalines by Chaumet.



Opal, pearl and diamond *Plumes* necklace in 18K gold by Alessio Boschi.



Silver and gold ring with a Peruvian blue opal and diamond by Tai Vautier Jewelry.



Enameled gold necklace with opal and pearl signed Georges Fouquet, circa 1900. Sold by Christie's for more than CHF300,000. (Photo: Christie's)



Aurores Boréales gold modular ring that can transform into two jewels, with Australian opal, Ethiopian opal, sapphire, Paraiba tourmaline, tsavorite garnet and aquamarine by Pamela Hasty/Morphée Joaillerie. (Photo: Marie Chabrol)



Colorful Symphony gold watch with an Australian opal dial with diamond, emerald (2.8 ctw) and Ceylon sapphire (5.56 ctw) accents by Piaget.



Titanium ring set with diamonds and opal by Arunashi.



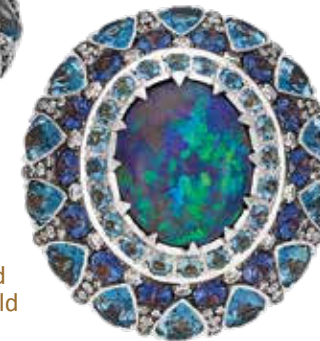
Gold ring with an 11.77-ct black opal by David Morris.



India Collection gold ring with pink opals and white diamonds by de Grisogono.



Opal, sapphire and diamond *Sea Anemone* rings in 18K gold by Alessio Boschi.



Gold bracelet with Australian opal, haüynes, andradite, hessonite garnets, yellow sapphires by Lydia Courteille.



Petit Panache ring, in black opal, gold and diamonds by Victoire de Castellane, Dior Joaillerie.



Set in a 19th-century brooch is a 48.80-ct black opal offered in 2017 at a Bonhams auction (unsold, estimated at US\$200-300,000). (Photo: Bonhams)

At the same time, the advent of fantasy literature and the birth of the Art & Crafts and Art Nouveau movements highlighted these gemstones in jewelry. Opal enjoyed immense success with creators such as Lalique, Fouquet, Sybil Dunlop and Dorie Nossiter.

But then, the birth of the Art Deco movement significantly reduced its appeal. It was not until new deposits were discovered that opal regained its luster. In the 1970s came opals from Peru, also called *opals of the Andes*. These gems are blue, green, yellow, pink, translucent or opaque and without iridescence. The opals from Ethiopia in the mid-1990s (the first stones were in 1994 from the Menz Gische District) also revived interest for this material.

In high jewelry, Dior's Victoire de Castellane first used opal, for which she has a real passion. Almost all the collections she has signed for the house since 1999 include them. Australian or Ethiopian, the stones chosen by the gemstone department all have incredible colors and almost supernatural fires. The major international high-end jewelry brands as well as smaller designers incorporate opal in their lines. In 2010, the 26th edition of the Biennale des Antiquaires officially signed the big return of this gem. Boucheron, Cartier, Bulgari, Chaumet, Harry Winston, Anna Hu, Wallace Chan, Van Cleef & Arpels, David Morris and Feng J. regularly place opal in creations, each one more spectacular than the previous. And, one of the most beautiful watch dials ever produced was opal, signed Yves Piaget in an unforgettable wristwatch in the 1970s.

There are no two identical noble opals. And designers understand and appreciate this mystery. Even though opal is a fragile gem and requires special attention in the manufacturing stages, its colorful love affair with admirers around the world continues. *Photos are courtesy of the designers mentioned unless otherwise specified.* ■