



DTPSA Emerald Seminar:

Shire Knocks Certs For Colored Stones

By Geoffrey Coffey

At a recent Diamond Trade and Precious Stones Association (DTPSA) seminar billed as "All About Emeralds, the Aristocrats of Colored Stones," principal speaker Maurice Shire (longtime emerald dealer and past president of the AGTA) did not touch upon current trends but, rather, gave his views on country-of-origin colored stone grading certificates and ethics in the colored stone industry.

Shire told the tale of a man who attempted to sell him a cloudy, nearly-black sapphire which, according to Mr. Shire's estimate, was worth no more than \$1,500. The seller, however, was demanding \$10,000. When he saw the look of disgust that Shire registered upon hearing the price, the seller was quick to add, "No, no, you don't understand. This sapphire has a certificate — it is a Kashmir sapphire." The certificate, the man insisted, justified the price.

Shire made it clear to his audience that he disagrees. He said he bases the worth of a stone upon its appearance, its cut, its size, its color, its glow, its passion, its life. Each stone, he asserted, has certain characteristics which can neither be quantified on a piece of paper (if good) nor explained away by a country-of-origin certificate (if bad). He pointed out that an emerald or other colored stone, being a beautiful piece of nature, must be priced according only to its beauty. "What difference does it make if a stone comes from Burma, Ceylon, or Times Square?" asked Mr. Shire.

"Unethical Outsiders"

Between fifteen and twenty years ago, he reminded the audience, the colored stone industry suffered greatly at the hands of "unethical outsiders." These people, Shire asserted, caused huge artificial inflation during the 1970's by hawking cheap diamonds and colored stones to unknowing customers at outrageous prices, citing

the "investment purposes" of the gems. Since a certificate adds immensely to a gem's image of glory and great worth, Shire noted, this trend of charlatanism spawned a great desire for certification, which resulted in "labs popping up worldwide like mushrooms." The wave of chicanery was ended, he added, when the diamond crash of '81 pulled the bottom out of the market and eliminated the opportunity for these people to sell their "investment" stones.

Objective Color Standards Anybody?

One aspect of color grading that was not discussed at the DTPSA meeting was the notion of non-subjective grades, whereby colored stones would be put, not on a "perfection scale," but merely on a relative color scale, thus coming in somewhere between white and black. A November 11 article in the New York Times (called "Making One Blue Look Like Another") addresses the issue of color classification with relation to television screens; the system — which classifies individual colors as points in space, with the X-, Y-, and Z-axes representing hue, saturation, and brightness — might be well-suited to the representation of gemstone color without imposing judgments or standards upon individual stones.

- G. Coffey

"Investment," said Mr. Shire, "is defined as: 'putting money into a venture which brings dividend, profit, or interest.' We [dealers] have a market to sell gems, and so we can buy gems as 'investments.' Little old ladies do not have such a market. They do not invest in jewelry." He said that jewelry — bought, generally, for

pleasure — should be thought of as a "security" rather than an "investment." In cases of emergency, it can be sold for its liquid value, but otherwise should be kept as adornment and nothing more.

Join the AGTA

His vehemence against the "unethical outsiders" was unflagging. He urged the entire assembled audience to join the AGTA, and commented that "only through the support of the trade organizations could the ethical standards necessary to preserve the industry be maintained."

Citing the 2000-year-old history of gemstone treatment (tracing it back to the Greek tradition of heating gemstones and passing pearls through the digestive tracts of live chickens to enhance luster), Shire insisted that treatment itself was not necessarily unethical, but that in failure to disclose the treatment lay the breach. He mentioned that the GIA certification criteria—which treat both clear and colored oiling of stones with equal gravity—should be changed, so that certificates would ignore clear oiling (since, according to Mr. Shire, 99% of all emeralds are immediately oiled) but would report the presence of colored oil in gigantic red letters of warning. This, he said, would improve the value of colored stone certificates.

Opposed to Colored Grading System

However, Shire was adamantly opposed to a colored stone grading system. He pointed out the essential difference between grading diamonds and grading colored stones: the criterion for a perfect diamond is a complete lack of color. When grading any diamond, a gemologist assigns it a letter which corresponds to its lack of color, and hence its perfection. This is not possible with colored stones, since they define themselves by their variety of colors.

Shire compared the grading of colored stones to the appreciation of women: what is attractive to one man is repulsive to the next. Who, asked Mr. Shire, will draw the line which says "This is the perfect green"? Who will arbitrarily assign the color which is to be emulated by

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all emeralds? He suggested that emeralds are beautiful simply by nature of their great variety of color, and that a "gadget" or "standard" by which to judge emeralds "would degrade the gem itself," and would "rob dealers and experts of their professionalism." If gemstones could be graded and judged by machine, said Mr. Shire, "we would soon be buying our emeralds from grocery clerks."

The question of certificates was hotly debated during the question-and-answer

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period. Some felt that colored stone certificates will "open up" the market, since

they will make customers more comfortable and will provide more information to everyone involved in each transaction. Others—Shire included—maintained that colored stone certificates are merely boons to charlatans, who can use them to deceive and cheat unsuspecting buyers by overcharging for certain certified characteristics (most notably country-of-origin). One participant's statement that "certificates will kill the colored stone market" was countered by DTPSA chairman for special events Martin Harmon, who said that he could not sell anything without a certificate. ♦