



FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS

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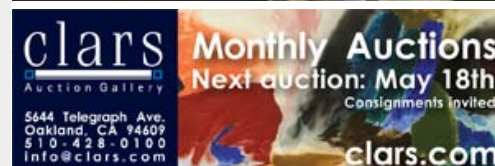


Wrested from the depths of the earth but possessing a beauty that seems almost unearthly, fine mineral specimens are now being collected as natural works of art.

On June 2, 2013, a large chunk of rose quartz, most likely discovered in a mine in Brazil in the 1950s, sold at Dallas-based Heritage Auctions for \$662,500, the world record for any mineral at auction. The 15-by-8-inch specimen, called "La Madonna Rosa" in Portuguese because of its striking resemblance to a typical Renaissance depiction of a Madonna, underscored two key points about today's market for minerals. First, as Heritage expert James Walker put it after the sale, "This auction is proof that, as a collectible, fine and rare minerals have value and credibility, and that




Fluorite, 19 cm, Denton Mine, Illinois.



concept has now been proven in a public and transparent fashion.” But even more significant is that fact that collector interest in minerals is now more than ever being driven by aesthetics, with samples being positioned by dealers and auctioneers as bona fide works of art rather than as scientific specimens. Indeed, their often astonishing shapes, coupled with brilliant and unusual colors, can make minerals seem more like natural art than natural history, like sculptures created by non-human hands.

The visual impact of minerals is immediate and powerful, and while those who are unfamiliar with them may be surprised to hear that they cross the same auction blocks as artworks and fine jewelry, to see is to believe. The spiky green rods of a tourmaline sample rising at angles from the matrix; the intense orange-within-purple-within-royal blue of a fluorite sample; the cherry-pink of rhodochrosite nesting on the glinting dark brown of tetrahedrite; these are just some of the endlessly varied visual and tactile marvels of minerals. La Madona Rosa is not typical; most of the coveted mineral samples evoke abstract sculpture or contemporary art glass rather than figurative art.

Collectible minerals come to light essentially by accident, explains Walker: “The vast percentage are probably byproducts of mining operations. Miners will encounter them in the course of their daily work and put them in a lunchbox, supplementing their income by selling them to dealers who come through from time to time and buy what the locals collect, especially in poorer countries.” Sometimes, says Walker, remarkable samples will be discovered on or near the surface of the earth by people with no mining or geology background. He cites the case of a valuable aquamarine deposit in Pakistan that was found by herdsmen while extricating one of their goats from a hole.

 The avocation of mineral collecting traditionally went hand in hand with an interest in science. Stuart Wilensky, a dealer in Middletown, N.Y., with 30 years’ experience in the business, recalls, “When I began there was usually a science-based interest. Many collectors had been geologists, chemistry professionals, or in other related geo-sciences. Now I see far more collectors who do not have any background in science and collect minerals primarily based on aesthetics. This is not to say

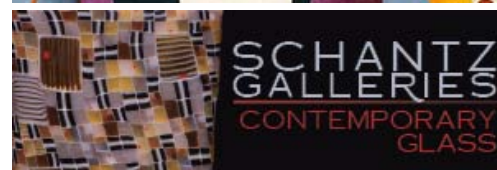
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that they don't appreciate the natural science aspect, but it is not the primary focus." Claudia Florian, the fine minerals expert at Bonhams, says, "Collectors of minerals used to be a slower-growing, more finite, more elite group. It was a primarily intellectual interest, and people wanted certain minerals because they represented certain areas. But in the last 10 or 15 years, what we're seeing the collecting of specimens for their aesthetic qualities." Daniel Trinchillo, owner of Fine Minerals International in Edison, N.J., says, "Minerals used to be looked at from aesthetic point of view, but even more from a scientific point of view. I have a lot of strong clients out of Dallas and Houston who are in the petroleum industry. What I've seen in last decade is people coming over from the arts." He notes that of those, about half eventually acquire a scientific interest as well, while the other half stay strictly on the aesthetic side of things.

Sometimes the dividing line between gems and precious metals on the one hand and minerals on the other can be a bit porous. Walker says, "The mineral hobby is allied to the gem trade, which crosses over to some degree. I have an emerald that by all rights should have been cut, but it will be sold as natural specimen, still embedded in the rock, as a matrix specimen. That gives you an idea of what kind of environment the emerald was formed within." Uncut sapphires, rubies, and amethysts are also highly collectible as minerals rather than jewels. Silver and gold are in the minerals market, as well. "The value of gold is around \$1,300," says Walker, "but there are single specimens that have sold for over \$1 million and didn't have more than 10 or 15 ounces of gold in them. Gold occasionally forms extremely sharp and brilliantly lustrous crystals, and that excites collectors no end, causing the prices to go way out of then realm of spot-gold prices. Many years ago I sold a single-ounce specimen from Russia that brought \$9,000 when gold was trading at \$35 an ounce." Silver can occur in curved crystalline structures known as "wire silver," which can sell for up to a quarter of a million dollars.

On the other hand, some of the most beautiful and valuable fine minerals come from materials that have none of the romance of gold, silver, emeralds, or the like. Sulphur in its crystalline form has a brilliant yellow color that makes it highly attractive to mineral collectors, and samples, which usually come from Italy, can command five- or six-figure prices. Many beautiful and important minerals, however, can be had for much less. "Mineral collecting has many tiers," explains Wilensky. "A beginner price level could be as low as \$50, going up into the low thousands. Mid-tier collecting would be from about \$5,000 to around \$25,000. From \$25,000 up is where serious collecting begins, and today it is not at all unusual to see specimens regularly selling for \$100,000 or more." According to Trinchillo, the top price ever paid for a mineral was \$5 million, for a rhodochrosite specimen from the Sweet Home mine in Colorado that is believed to be the best example of the mineral ever seen.

In the sales she organizes for Bonhams, Florian has pioneered a sub-category that she calls the "100-carat club." These are gemstones that have been faceted but at three or four inches across are too large to ever be worn as jewelry. They appeal to collectors—most of whom are men—as cabinet-display pieces similar to mineral samples. Florian finds it

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helpful in general to consider minerals in the context of gems, and vice versa. "It's very useful to have the two categories juxtaposed," she says. "When I'm trying to sell a gemstone, I'll walk a the customer over to the mineral cabinet, and show them how it has inclusions and so forth. When you see the clean gemstone, you have something to compare it with."

Like the collecting field itself, the displaying of minerals has come a long way recently. Whereas yesterday's collectors were content to simply arrange their minerals on shelves in glass-fronted cases lit by ordinary room lighting, now they are having special bases built for their minerals out of Lucite or colorless acrylic and housing them in fully transparent cases with purpose-built LED or fiber-optic lighting that reveals the full color potential of a sample. Such systems can even be adjusted to illuminate specific faces of crystals. "It's probably as good a display technology as the world has for any kind of collectible," says Walker.

At the end of the day, the point of all this is to let the mineral show itself, for something long hidden in the bowels of the earth to be revealed and bring about feelings of wonder. Wilensky has written on the subject as follows: "Minerals are the purest form of art. Minerals have no agenda, no culture, no religion, no political beliefs—they are what you see. All human-created art has a bias.... Minerals are unadulterated. They are pure beauty."

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