

In Praise of Semi-Precious – by Alistir Tait

In the world where gemmology is a science and mineralogists and academics attempt to create a correct and unambiguous nomenclature for the jewellery trade the term semi-precious has become something of a dirty word. Traditionally diamond, ruby, sapphire and emerald were 'precious' and almost everything else 'semi-precious'. So opal and aquamarine were semi-precious yet in many cases could be of greater value than the average diamond or sapphire. It is a useless and ambiguous term with no clearly definable meaning, and so a covert slap on the wrist for all of us who apply the term semi-precious within our discipline.

I would take some exception to this and argue that it is an acceptable and much loved term that will not go away and has a long established place in the jewellery consciousness.

It's not that I'm a jewellery luddite. I don't hark back to those halcyon days of imperial measures when jewellery was priced in guineas, and a diamond was of 'the first water' and not some incomprehensible letter of the alphabet. Today, selling a row of pearls may bring the trading standards officer to your door demanding to know why it was 20 inches long and not 50cm. I know which terminology my clients prefer and understand.

Nomenclature is a minefield. As a retail jeweller and gemmologist, applying the correct CIBJO description may help pave the way towards a world harmonisation of terms and there are times when referring to the Blue Book is appropriate. It brings clarity and confidence to the buying public, however, I'm never going to stop them loving their mystic topaz, faux pearls or French jet.

The term semi-precious has been around for a considerable time because it fulfils a function and conveys a meaning. The general public understand the term 'precious', as in a 'precious stone', to be making a judgement of worth and value. It is itself vague and woolly for we cannot define which gemstone is of adequate value to be described as precious and which is not. It is really the term precious stone that is at fault, for not only is it ambiguous, it begets non-precious and semi-precious as valid terms also.

The CIBJO Blue Book (Coloured Stone Division 2010/11) defines a precious stone as any 'natural gemstone of inorganic origin.....used in jewellery'. Value here is not a qualification and therefore all gemstones (as defined by CIBJO) are precious stones. A 'D' colour diamond or a humble agate or jasper are equally 'precious'. I'm afraid this only muddies the waters of commonly used nomenclature further.

As Edwin Streeter simply described semi-precious materials - 'those (gemstones) of less commercial value'. It might be impossible to define a line that divides what we describe as precious from the semi-precious (or non-precious) but without it there is no other word we can use to describe this category, and that is why it endures.

Semi-precious is like an elderly and rather embarrassing uncle. Never politically correct and often a bit vague and ambiguous, possibly living in the past and always speaking out inappropriately. However, irrespective of what anyone says, he is going to be about for some considerable time to come. Semi-precious is rather like him.