

Homework Assignment 2

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Jade

“Better to be shattered jade than unbroken pottery”.

Chinese proverb

“Thank God they’re only after the gold and silver-they didn’t know about jade”.¹

Aztec Emperor Moctezuma, after encountering Cortes.

For the Mesoamerican Indians of Mexico, Central, and South America, jade was a symbol of water and the sprouting of plant life. Known as “chalchihuitl”, it was more precious than gold. Jade was used in the most precious objects: masks, depictions of the gods, and ritual items. It was cast into sacred wells as an offering to the gods. It was sometimes inlaid in the heart in sacred sculptures. A piece of jadeite placed in the mouth of a deceased nobleman was believed to serve as his or her heart in the afterlife. When powdered and mixed with herbs, jadeite was used to treat fractured skulls and fevers, and to resurrect the dying. Mesoamerican jadeite principally came from sources in Guatemala and Costa Rica.¹

Evidently, the Spanish did find out about how the Aztecs valued jade because the term “jade” was derived from the Spanish term “piedra de tjada” (“loin stone”).³ The reference to “loin stone” is from the Mesoamerican belief (which the Spanish also adopted as a remedy), that it was a remedy for kidney ailments.

The jade from South America was believed to be the same as the Old World jade until 1863, when a Chinese carving was analyzed and discovered to be a different stone. Thus, the term “jade”, prized throughout history for its beauty and toughness, is applied actually to two different metamorphic rocks similar in appearance and characteristics:

Nephrite is a calcium, magnesium, and iron rich amphibole (in the tremolite series) made up of fibrous crystals. It measures between 5.5 and 6.0 on the Mohs hardness scale. Nephrite is found in a creamy white form as well as in a variety of green colors. The iron content determines the intensity of the green in the stone. Until the 16th Century, almost all jade in Europe was nephrite. Major deposits of nephrite are found in places such as Australia, Brazil, China, Canada, and Alaska.²

Jadeite, is a sodium- and aluminum-rich pyroxene made up of interlocking, blocky, granular crystals. Jadeite appears in various colors including blue, lavender-mauve, pink, and emerald-green. It measures between 6.5 and 7.0 on the Mohs hardness scale. Jadeite can be mined in fewer than 12 places worldwide and is rarer than nephrite. The most desired jadeite variety is a jadeite from Myanmar, known as “imperial jade”, colored emerald-green and translucent to almost transparent. Other deposits can be found in places including, in part: China, Japan, Guatemala, and California.²

In ancient China, jade was called “yu”, and was believed to embody yang, or cosmic energy. It was mined, as far back as 8000 years ago, and was used for utilitarian (weapons, tools) and ceremonial purposes. Jade was considered the “imperial gem” and more valuable than gold or silver. Yearly tribute payments consisting of the most precious white jade were made to the Chinese Imperial court which was transformed into various carvings by skilled artisans. The Chinese also took jade internally in the belief that it regenerated the body. Jade was also believed to preserve a deceased body from decay which led to the creation of jade burial suits.

In ancient Egypt, jade was admired as the stone of love, inner peace, harmony and balance.

Jade plays an important part of the Maori (native people of New Zealand) culture. It is considered a treasure and its exploitation is closely protected under the Treaty of Waitangi (1840). Jade is made into tools, weapons, and ornaments which are believed to have their own “mana”: “spiritual power held by individuals derived from a supernatural power”.⁴

In general, the value of jade is determined according to its color and the intensity of that color, the vivacity and texture, and its clarity and transparency.² Preference for particular colors vary considerably from region to region and culture to culture.

A buyer of jade should be aware that many minerals are sold as jade including, in part, serpentine, carnelian, aventurine quartz, and glass. Buyers of jade should also be aware that it can be “enhanced”, or according to one’s perspective: “stabilized”). Examples of enhancement can include exposing a promising but stained piece of jadeite to chemical bleaches and/or acids and impregnating it with a clear polymer resin. This can result in an improvement in transparency and color of the stone. “Enhancement” can also include artificially staining or dyeing the stone.² A buyer of jade should therefore exercise caution in making their purchases.

References:

- 1 “Smithsonian Rock and Gem: The definitive guide to rocks, minerals, gems, and fossils” Ronald Louis Bonewitz, 2005, Pg. 274-275, 280-281
- 2 “Gemstones of the World”, 4th Edition Walter Schumann, 2009, Pg. 170-172
- 3 Jade Wikipedia
- 4 www.hawaii.edu

Quiz on attached page:

Quiz:

Which one of the following is obviously not known as jade?

1.



2.



3.



4.



Answer:

serpentine #4