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Color-Change
DIASPORE



COLOR-CHANGE DIASPORE: Turkish Delight

BY DAVID FEDERMAN,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Before it was Zultanite, before master lapidaries like Steven Avery cut it, and before no more than a few stray souls saw any reason for excitement about it, Turkish diaspore caught jewelry artisan Diana Stern's roving eye at the Tucson gem show and she paid \$200 per carat for a 3 carat stone. "It was one of the few good stones they had," she recalls of the purchase more than a decade ago, "and I knew it was preposterously overpriced. But you know the old story about finding something new that no one else has and wanting to be the first person to own one."

When Stern first saw the stone, she was impressed by what she describes as its "dusty pink champagne color studded with flecks of scintillation." Not yet realizing it was a color-change stone, she insists she would have bought it even if it only exhibited one color state. "Remember, this was before we had stones around like sphene that display all those big flashes of color," Stern says. "I took to the gem's fireworks."

Nevertheless, once she saw the gem's light cypress-green in sunlight, she began to think of it as "Turkish alexandrite," which is what she likened it to when she sold it mounted in a ring at a crafts fair. "I hated to part with that stone, but I reassured myself I would be able to find another as good."

A dozen or so years later, at the 2006 Tucson show, she finally did. "I thought I had caught the first wave of supply," she says with a laugh. "Little did I know I wouldn't see the second wave for at least a decade."

Stern was the only person I ever met for whom Turkish diaspore kept the lavish promises made for it when first introduced into America in the mid-1990s. Hailed as a major new phenomenon gem, this magazine devoted a "Gem Profile" to the material, but the article was based on hype and hope. Somehow I was talked into believing this gem would earn the praise its first promoters heaped on it.

Apparently, Stern and myself weren't the only ones who bought into diaspore's bright future. Murat Akgun sank much more than \$100,000 of his own money into the venture—and had no other way to recoup his investment than by turning his faith in the gem into fact. To do so meant finding new partners and throwing even more money into his dream. Now that dream is beginning to pay off.

ROUGHING IT

Diaspore is a relatively new gem, first faceted in the 1970s—and then mainly as a curiosity. The highest grade deposit known is found 4,000 feet up in the mountainous remotes of Anatolia, Turkey, miles

away from the nearest village. When Akgun first became involved with diaspore, he believed his partners owned the mine. They didn't. And it has taken him years to obtain a lease of his own.

In the meantime, locals were poaching material and selling it in poorly-cut form that did nothing to improve its reputation or prospects. Akgun admits there is still a backlog of these inferior goods on the market and that it makes his job all the harder.

But starting in 2005, he began to sell superbly crafted diaspore under the new brand name of Zultanite, which is a vaguely Turkish-sounding reference to the sultans who founded the Ottoman Empire. Akgun formed a company Zultanite Gems LLC, based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and entrusted the cutting of his best stones to top-notch lapidaries who were not intimidated by its perfect cleavage and able to orient stones to maximize color change and sparkle. Of course, this meant huge sacrifices of rough, but the final beauty more than made up for loss of bulk.

With a hardness of 6-1/2 to 7, diaspore doesn't present any more problems for wearers than, say, tanzanite—another gem known for shifts of color in different lights. Although Akgun characterizes diaspore's color change as going from kiwi-green in sunlight to rhodolite pink under incandescent light, this writer has seen lots of intermediate shades that range from what might be called dusty avocado and sage-green to light pinkish terra cotta and soft flax-brown. Both green/olive and pink/brown color states fit right in with popular earth-tone color schemes.

Having attracted justified publicity for Zultanite, Akgun is focused on making a market for his brand. Akgun sees the stone as a designer gem—perfectly suited for one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry. But at this year's Tucson show, the most interest was paid by buyers from shop-at-home TV networks on the constant prowl for new products. Some even took large samples of goods back to headquarters for evaluation.

If Zultanite becomes home-shopping air ware, will that be good for its image as a designer gem? And even if Akgun can develop dual mass and collectors markets for diaspore, can what is still a small, primitive pick-and-shovel mining operation back in Turkey support two tiers?

A year ago, when Akgun had a more modest inventory, the answer would have been no. But now that mining is getting organized, he believes he can satisfy such demand. Let's hope so now that the trade press is paying generous attention to Zultanite. For sure, the company's booth was a must-see attraction at this year's Tucson show. Says Stern, who keeps a scrapbook of the friendly write-ups the gem is getting: "I want to say, 'See, didn't I tell you so?'" ♦

THIS DIASPORE IS NAMED "SULTAN'S CUSHION" AND WEIGHS 41.12 CARATS. IT WAS PROVIDED COURTESY OF ZULTANITE GEMS, FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA.