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Gemstone Treatments - Friend or Foe?

Treatments, in whatever form, remain the most contentious subject in the gemstone industry today. The discussion of the issue at GIA's International Gemological Symposium in August 2006 stimulated an interesting exchange from various viewpoints among the panellists, who, following the debate, agreed that a wider section of the gemstone industry should know more about the issue of treatments and enhancements. Thus, in this series, Jewellery News Asia publishes the views of each of the symposium panellists, starting with respected gemmologist, author and lecturer Antoinette Matlins. Ms Matlins believes that "where treated gemstones are concerned, too many jewellers are still failing to communicate accurately-or at all-with consumers."

Viewpoint by Antoinette Matlins

I can still remember when the term "natural" meant that a gemstone was formed by nature rather than in a laboratory. We knew about treatments, and that some dated back to pre-Roman times, but apart from the cutting and polishing, most coloured gemstones in the market were assumed, correctly, to be as nature made them. The word "treated" wasn't part of our jargon. I doubt anyone ever envisioned that the market would change so dramatically over the past 50 years that jewellers worldwide would be selling predominantly "treated, natural" gemstones, and that most jewellers would be buying and selling *on the assumption that everything is treated unless otherwise stated!*

This is where we are today, and there is no turning back the clock. Treatments are here to stay, and new treatments continue to surface, in an ever-increasing number of gemstones. There are many who think this is a good thing, that treatments simply make gems more readily available, at more affordable prices, so that they can be enjoyed by an ever-increasing number of people. There is some merit to this position, and when consumers are dealing with well-educated jewellers, who understand and communicate clearly and accurately about what they are selling, then consumers can make whatever choice best meets their

needs, emotionally and financially. But this is rarely the case.

Unfortunately, where treated gemstones are concerned, too many jewellers are still failing to communicate accurately – or at all – with consumers. All too many are over-generalising when it comes to the entire area of "treatments," lumping all gems together into one of two categories: "treated" or "untreated." They are therefore failing to make important distinctions that affect not only the price of what they are buying and selling, but also the care requirements and future customer satisfaction and confidence.

Equally disturbing is that many jewellery salespeople are telling customers that *all* coloured gemstones are treated. This is not true and, in my opinion, is as misleading and deceptive as not telling them about treatments at all! Beautiful, fine-quality, "natural, natural" gemstones (that is, gemstones that have not been artificially enhanced in any way) are still available, including natural rubies, sapphires and emeralds. Today they are among the rarest and most precious of all gems, and while prices were held artificially low during the decades when no one was disclosing treatment information, the past decade has seen the prices of fine-quality "natural" rubies, sapphires and emeralds increase dramatically... and there is no end in sight.

Other natural gemstones, often very affordable, are also available. For



Antoinette Matlins. PG

example, gems in the garnet "family" (such as "mandarin" and "tsavorite") and a rainbow of gems in the spinel family are *not* routinely treated to enhance colour. Neither is chrome tourmaline, or iolite (see my book *Colored Gemstones: The Antoinette Matlins Buying Guide* for a complete list). Yet there are very few jewellers offering these gems and explaining to customers that they belong to a special category of "natural" gemstones. For me, one of the most unfortunate results of the increasing use and acceptance of treatments is that many "natural" gemstones are being diminished-"sacrificed" might be a more appropriate term-when

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jewellers and salespeople insist that *all* coloured gemstones are “treated.” Neither the jeweller nor the consumer is being well served when many wonderful, truly natural stones are not properly presented and elevated to the status they deserve.

Where treated gemstones are concerned, understanding the treatments has become increasingly complex as the treatment field itself has become more complex. Lack of knowledge among salespeople – those to whom consumers turn for information – is universal, despite the efforts made by various organisations. This is one of our most serious problems. For a variety of reasons, too few jewellers are providing sufficient training to their salespeople about treatments. Thus, in addition to failing to elevate wonderful “natural” gemstone families to that special category, they often fail to discuss treatments explicitly at all. Information is frequently provided

somewhere on the sales receipt, or in brochures given to consumers following a purchase. This is not a healthy situation for our industry; it is not a candid, honest, straightforward way to conduct business.

Treatments are used today on coloured gemstones, diamonds and pearls. The effects of some treatments are permanent, while those of others are not. Some treatments do not affect durability or wearability, but others do. Some gems are improved in a minor way, while others are very heavily treated. Yet for many jewellers and consumers, the appearance of treated gemstones-no matter what the treatment, the extent of the treatment or the effect on durability and longevity-is the same. They don't *see* differences, so they are unaware that there are any. Herein lies the major problem: without fully understanding what type of treatment has been used, the degree of treatment, its effect on wearability and, most importantly, how the particular type-and degree-

of treatment affects pricing, no one can make a sound, *informed* buying decision.

Finally, perhaps the biggest problem is that many of the treaters themselves fail to disclose information about treatments they are using, and the gemstone dealers rarely take the time or incur the expense to submit samples to gem-testing laboratories to ensure that they themselves know what they are buying and selling.

The bottom line is that “full disclosure” regarding treatments is not being practised at each point of the distribution chain, detection requires gemmological skill that many gemstone dealers lack, dependency on laboratories is increasing and education “at the counter” is severely lacking. This is not good for the consumer; and, as we have learned over the years, what is good for the consumer is good for the industry, and what is bad for the consumer is bad for the industry. We have a time bomb in our midst, and it is ticking. JMA