Amber

Contributed by Administrator
Tuesday, 13 November 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 13 November 2007

Amber
Amber is not a gem stone but an organic substance of vegetable origin. It consists of the fossilized resin of coniferous trees long since extinct. It is found in a range of shades from clear yellow to a very deep yellow. Each one of the shades can be modified by the inclusion of many fine air bubbles, which give the amber a cloudy appearance. "Amber" which is very bright red, greenish, or completely black, is fossilized tree gum of lesser age.

One of its most fascinating aspects is its extreme age, the true ambers having originated in the Oligocene period some forty to fifty million years ago. In these prehistoric times, large quantities of sticky resins oozed from the timbers of coniferous trees, trapping in the process many kinds of insects, beetles, butterflies, and even small lizards. Today, these animals can still be seen encased in chunks of amber almost as if all this had hap¬pened yesterday instead of millions of years ago. Many of these varied animal and plant inclusions are, of course, immensely valuable to scientific research, for they give a very clear picture of certain aspects of life in those early times. A fine collection of animal and plant inclusions was formerly housed in the amber museum at Konigsberg, East Prussia (now Kalinin¬grad in Russia). During the siege of 1944, the collection was destroyed by fire.

As a gem, amber's attraction lies chiefly in its coloring. Its hardness is only 2½, and it is usually turned into rounded beads for necklaces or brooches where the risk of undue wear is minimized. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, all amber was recovered on the Baltic seashore where it was gathered in when the tide was low. Later, large underground deposits of it were discovered near the same shore, and today most of the amber is obtained by open-cast mining 40 miles west of Kaliningrad. Less important sources are Rumania, where small deposits of an inferior quality are found, and Burma, where ambers of a large variety of shades ranging from honey yellow to deep red are located.

Amberlike material is also washed up on the shores of Sicily. This Sicilian "amber" is highly thought of because of its rich, dark color, which sometimes exhibits a blue-green fluorescence. Amber is fairly easy to imitate by means of various forms of plastic materials. If tested with a knife, however, true amber is found to chip, while the plastic imitations peel. Glass beads of the correct color have been used as imitations, but glass is considerably more dense than amber, and the weight difference immediately becomes apparent. Glass is colder to the touch, too, and its different luster is easily recognized.