

Jewellery History Today



Issue 48 · Autumn 2023
ISSN 2042-8529



The magazine of The Society of Jewellery Historians

The Slovak Opal – an Historical Gem Forging a New Path

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In this article I will expand upon the history of Slovak opals, as promised in my earlier contribution on the subject in JHT 45. Traditionally, gem dealers have split opals into two categories: ‘Oriental opal’ (a generic term for opals of any origin, for which they could charge more) and ‘Hungarian opal’ (in use since the early 17th century). The latter can be clearly linked to precious opals from the Červenica-Dubník locality in present-day Slovakia (fig. 1). Consequently, a new trade name for this gem appeared – ‘Slovak opal’. The term ‘Slovak opal’ has technically been in existence since 1918, when the Kingdom of Hungary was dissolved and successor states emerged, but it was not commonly used until 2016. This article investigates developments in Slovak opal exploration during this period.

After World War I, opal mining at Červenica-Dubník did not immediately cease, providing an opportunity to reintroduce the gem to the market under its new designation. However, the newly established Czechoslovakia had many pressing post-war issues, subsequently the mining enterprise for opals was neglected. The options were either to lease it to a private entity or let mining cease altogether. Eventually, a French consortium based in Lorient (Brittany) expressed interest and signed a contract with the state in 1922. Unfortunately, a few months later, the consortium unexpectedly terminated the contract. Seeing the opal mines as a financial burden, state officials closed them. After that, the gem only sporadically garnered attention, such as when a Slovak opal was featured in the Czechoslovakian Pavilion together with a Czech garnet at the Chicago World Fair in 1933-34. I also uncovered a brief announcement in *Volksdeutsche Zeitung* in July 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, stating that the (First) Slovak Republic planned to revive opal exploitation with the help of German capital. However, this initiative never materialized.

The first attempt to resume opal

mining at Červenica-Dubník after the Second World War occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, state geologists conducted surveys of the cinnabar deposit adjacent to the largest historical opal deposit in the Libanka Hill. When they determined that the mercury content was insufficient, they considered redirecting their geological survey towards opal mineralization. This development generated the most significant prospect for the future of Slovak opal mining since 1922. However, the democratization processes in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s and early 1990s halted these efforts. The transition to a market economy ended state interest in reviving opal mining but created opportunities for private entities instead. Consequently, the opal region quickly attracted new prospectors. From 1991 to 2001, companies such as Jozef Jančok – SAVARNA and later Slovenský opál Ltd surveyed known opal exploitation sites and explored adjacent areas in hopes of finding new opal-bearing structures. These activities led to the establishment of the Červenica I protected deposit area (approximately 11 sq. km) and the Červenica mining claim (approximately 1 sq. km) for gem extraction in the region.



Fig. 1. Raw Slovak Opal, 16.3 x 13.3 x 8.6 mm, 7.66 ct. © Great Rent JSC / YOPHINE.

From 2001 to 2021, the holder of the Červenica mining claim changed hands several times, causing delays in the resumption of opal extraction. As a result, the first opal mining of the 21st century in this historical locality did not occur until 2012, and only continued intermittently afterwards. In the same decade, the geographical designation ‘Slovak Opal’ was officially registered at the Industrial Property Office of the Slovak Republic (October 11, 2016) and with the International System of Appellations of



Fig. 2. Raw Slovak Ice Opal, 14 x 12 x 7 mm, 3.3 ct. © Great Rent JSC / YOPHINE.

Origin and Geographical Indications under the World Intellectual Property Organization (November 10, 2016). According to these registrations, the term 'Slovak Opal' exclusively applies to precious opals originating from the Červenica I protected deposit area and the Červenica mining claim. The latter is currently leased by Slovenské opálové bane (ie. mines) Ltd from the state, which gathers opals from secondary sources such as excavated opal-bearing rock on the surface and from backfilling in stopes (when piles of excavated rock, considered unpromising, are piled up in disused underground chambers). Consequently, the raw opals are collected manually, sometimes using only hand tools. Interestingly, the Červenica mining claim largely overlaps with the Dubnícke bane protected site, and some disused mine works have been colonised by various species of bat. This presents another reason for collecting the raw opals manually, so as not to disturb the hibernating bats.

Opal prospectors gather the stones in two ways. Some pieces are found by chance, when securing mines that are no longer worked for guided tours. Others discover them through targeted exploration. The Slovenské opálové bane Ltd sells the entire production of gem-quality opals to the Great Rent Joint Stock Company (JSC). The term 'gem-quality opal' refers to compact pieces of opal with play-of-colour (also referred to as precious opals), and to compact pieces of common transparent opal with a mellow bluish body tone, which are colloquially known as 'glassy opal' (fig. 2). The former can have either an opaque-translucent white body ('Slovak Light Opal') or a colourless and transparent body ('Slovak Crystal Opal') although the Great Rent JSC recently introduced a new trade name for 'glassy opal': 'Slovak Ice Opal'. Slovak Opals are typically mounted in a bezel setting (fig. 3), while Slovak Ice Opals benefit particularly from a claw setting (fig. 4), which allows light to pass through the transparent opal body, creating in combination with the facets, a beautiful optical spectacle for the observer.

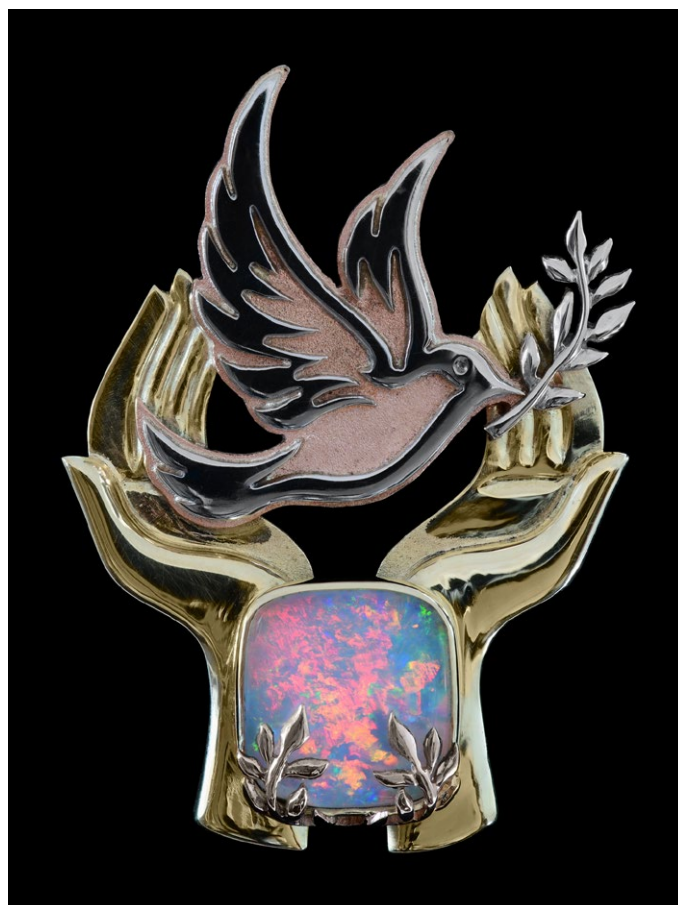


Fig. 3. Brooch made of 14 ct yellow, white and pink gold with a Slovak Opal, 10.15 x 9.6 x 3.05 mm, 2.21 ct. © Great Rent JSC / YOPHINE.



Fig. 4. Woman's ring made of 14 ct white gold with 14 diamonds and the Slovak Ice Opal, 7.85 x 6.25 x 5.50 mm, 1.17 ct. © Great Rent JSC / YOPHINE.

Due to intensive exploitation of these deposits in the past, the number of recently and legally produced Slovak Opal gems in circulation is very limited, especially for large stones. Direct and internet sales of opals purporting to be from Červenica-Dubník are something of a grey area, as the provenance of the stone's origin or the date of its extraction can be hard to verify. Customers should expect to pay a considerable amount for a genuine Slovak Opal on the understanding that they are purchasing a beautiful gem that comes with a fascinating historical story.

Peter is an independent researcher, author, and lecturer on precious opal from the world-famous mines in Červenica-Dubník. His latest book, Zrkadlo minulosti/Mirror of the Past was published in 2022.