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RARE OPALIZED FOSSIL SEES NEW LIFE IN EXTRAORDINARY SCULPTURE

For Los Angeles-based gemstone dealer Anup Jogani, hunting down antique gems and jewels of exceptional provenance, history and character is a way of life. From the prized rubies of Burma and the rare, velvety blue sapphires of Kashmir, to the vivid green emeralds of the Mughal Empire and the crystal-clear diamonds of India's legendary Golconda Mine, Jogani has amassed quite a collection, well-admired for the quality and "personality" of its pieces.

One particular gemstone in his collection, however, had really caught his eye. It wasn't that it was the only colored stone to ever truly captivate him, nor was it perhaps the most valuable he could acquire, but it was very special, a rare union of Mother Nature's handiwork: a black opal formed within petrified wood.

Jogani discovered the unusual piece sitting on a table at a trade show in Miami, while visiting a dealer of very fine opals.

"Is that for sale?" Jogani asked. "No," said the opal dealer, "I haven't the heart to cut [the opal] out of the petrified wood."

Upon closer examination, Jogani realized what was there to behold: "It was opalization and petrification coming together in one momentous geological soup!" he says, resulting in "an incredibly fine opal and a sublimely formed piece of rock."



Gem dealer Anup Jogani holds a rare piece of black opal formed in petrified wood. The extraordinary specimen inspired him to have a sculpture created that expands the piece on a much larger scale, with the hope that it would both educate and inspire.

The rarity of these two natural processes working in unison to produce such an extraordinary object ultimately attracted Jogani into making it his own. To grasp the piece's value to a gem collector or connoisseur—as well as its considerable scientific worth—one has to understand how the earth worked its magic on this superb specimen.

In simple terms, when an organism such as a tree dies, usually microorganisms such as bacteria or fungi set in to break down its organic matter. Once in a while, though, a newly deceased tree gets rapidly buried by mud, silt or volcanic ash. This blanketing material then shields the dead tree from oxygen. Because oxygen is the main impetus behind the decaying process, the smothered tree will begin to decompose far more slowly than it normally would.

Meanwhile, mineral-laden water or mud seeps into the dead tree's pores and other openings. Over a period of hundreds of thousands of years as the tree's internal structure gradually breaks down, its organic material is replaced by the crystallizing minerals. In this case, converting into hydrated silica or opal (opalization). The end result is a rock that takes the shape and structure of the original tree (petrification). It's no wonder then that opal was once thought to have the power to preserve life!

The formation of this piece so fascinated Jogani, that he was moved to share the story with a greater audience. Since extracting opal from petrified wood destroys the petrified wood in the process, most people never get to see the gem in such a way. So he decided to have a sculpture created that would expand the original piece on a much larger scale, with the hope that this work of art would both educate and inspire.



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"The story captured me," Jogani says. "It was during the [COVID-19] pandemic, and I was thinking of ways to incorporate the history of gems with the mythology of nature. Art plus nature equals a story."

Jogani then enlisted the help of three artisans to realize his vision, each an expert in his or her respective field.

Chris Towle, a sculptor whose acclaimed skills have been sought after for films such as *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park* and *Avatar*, among many others, was tasked with creating the petrified wood sculpture and seams of faux opal and blending them with Jogani's original piece. In the concept phase of development, he gave a lot of thought to the scale of the sculpture and how the faux opal seams would complement the original specimen. Then, using what he calls a "secret formula" process attained from decades of experience in his craft, Towle formed the main body of the piece using clay and silicone molds. His biggest challenge, however, was replicating the color, luminosity and iridescence of the opal.

"The faux seams of opal that I've embedded in the sculpture are [created from] an elaborate, time-consuming, multilayered system done by hand to achieve the luminous depth-of-color and iridescent qualities of reflected light," Towle says. "I spent a lot of time fine-tuning the brilliance, color-depth and intensity. It was a long, protracted labor of love. The result is worth it."

Nathalie Tierce, meanwhile, Towle's wife, an accomplished artist on projects as diverse as productions for Andrew Lloyd Webber, period dramas for the BBC, mural paintings for Disney and feature films such as Tim Burton's *Alice*, was given "the honor and slightly daunting last phase" of painting the sculpture, which "she enjoyed immensely."

"The challenge of accurately mimicking the detail [of the original piece] was exciting," says Tierce, whose lifelong inspirations as an artist, designer and color consultant have been the colors and forms of nature. "To achieve the subtle variation of color, I used countless glazes of color, alternating between light and dark. I applied light washes with a fine, small brush. There were long waiting times between layers while the paint seeped into the sculpture's surface, creating a natural, organic quality."



Renowned Hollywood artists, sculptor Chris Towle and painter Nathalie Tierce, created the black opal in petrified wood sculpture, deftly facing the challenges of accurately mimicking the detail of the original piece and replicating the color, luminosity and iridescence of the opal.

Additional touches were put in the very capable hands of Cassandra Nicholson, a Graduate Gemologist, goldsmith and fine jewelry designer, who perfected her craft as a bench jeweler for Fred Leighton in New York City, known for the exquisite vintage jewels it lends celebrities for red-carpet events, plus a signature collection.

Her contribution was to sculpt a gold accent for the original specimen to highlight its place in the sculpture, as well as a gold post for the sculpture to rest upon. She carved several options for the pieces in wax, and then with the team decided which would best complement the grain of the petrified wood.

The final pieces were created using a technique called the lost wax process, where Nicholson sculpted a block of hard jeweler's wax into the desired shapes using carving tools and small files. The shapes were then cast into metal, cleaned and polished.

"The project was different from my usual work of crafting jewelry," Nicholson says. "It required shaping the wax to the irregular texture of the wood."



A gold accent to highlight the original specimen's place in the sculpture, as well as a gold post for the sculpture to rest upon, were crafted by Graduate Gemologist, goldsmith and jewelry designer Cassandra Nicholson.

Nicholson, who grew up in Alberta, Canada, spending time as a child on fossil hunts in the badlands of Drumheller and visiting museums of paleontology, says she was thrilled to be working with such a rare fossilized specimen containing opal, one of her favorite gems. To see the finished piece—which took eight months from concept phase to integrating the faux opal seams and the original specimen to painting—"makes her mind wander."

"I imagine the journey a precious opal might go through, from rough to finished jewel," Nicholson says. "I love how the contrasting elements come together. I've never seen anything like it."

For Towle and Tierce—who were so struck by the beauty of the original piece that they were compelled to find the best way to honor and celebrate it—the final sculpture has surpassed their expectations, even giving Towle a hunger to explore other work like this and push it in new directions.

"I love how the marriage between a geological phenomenon and a sculpture has elevated them in a poetic union," Tierce says.

For Jogani, the sculpture is "magnificent," and like all of those involved in its making, he hopes it's appreciated for its beauty and design. Just as importantly, Jogani hopes the sculpture sparks a curiosity in viewers about one of the extraordinary ways opals come into existence, leaves them in awe of what Mother Nature is capable of producing and nourishes their souls the way it has each of its creators.

WRITTEN BY JERILYNN KRAUS

