

InColor

SUMMER 2015
ISSUE 29

All About **Colored Gemstones**

GREENLAND RUBIES The Final Straight

The Aurora Diamond Collection

Three-Phase Emeralds From Musakashi

Erica Courtney - Coloring The Stars



ELKE BERR

For the Love of Gems

By Cynthia Unninayar



18K gold ring with a 10.24-ct Paraiba tourmaline and diamonds.



With a passion for rare beauty and the remarkable talent to find it, Elke Berr is not only recognized the world over for her ability to find extraordinary stones, but also for her original yet timeless jewelry incorporating these amazing gems. To learn more about this globetrotting gemologist and jeweler, we caught up with her recently in Sri Lanka.

Q: What made you decide to go into the gem business?

Elke Berr: My fascination for gems started in Sri Lanka when I went there at the age of 17 to buy my very first stones, with pocket money, to illustrate my thesis for the German Maturity diploma, entitled "The journey of gems: From the mine to the hand of a beautiful woman." The only person I could sell my stones to was my grandmother, so I decided to learn more about them and how to mount them in jewelry. Some years later, with studies and practical experience in hand, I opened my own company, Berr & Partners SA, with my husband, Thomas, in Geneva, Switzerland.

Q: And now you are again in Sri Lanka. Do you also travel to other exotic locations to find unusual stones?

Elke Berr: Yes, traveling is a large part of our business since we source directly from the mines in very remote corners of the planet, as well as trading with dealers around the world, who have become friends over the years. We look for one-of-a-kind gems, such as unheated sapphires, rubies and spinels from Sri Lanka and Burma, tourmalines from Brazil, emeralds from Colombia, and unusual agate opals and Paraiba tourmalines from Africa. I also enjoy hunting for gems with private individuals as well as opportunities at auctions and shows.

Q: What is your favorite gemstone?

Elke Berr: Even as a small child, I collected minerals and shells on the beach. They each have their own beauty and characteristics. I do, however, have a special fondness for blue colors, such as the dazzling neon-blue Paraiba and the cornflower blue Kashmir sapphire. Sometimes I love a stone so much that I hide it.

Q: What brings you to Sri Lanka this time?

Elke Berr: As an ICA member, I came to attend the conference and the mine tour. The ICA events afford the opportunity to meet new members as well as

Elke talks with miners at a sapphire mine in Ratnapura, Sri Lanka.



local gem dealers. I also came to find large and rare blue sapphires for my clients. Sri Lanka is not only a good source of these beautiful gems, but it is also an amazing country with kind and warm-hearted people.

Q: Please tell us a little about your experience at the ICA?

Elke Berr: I have been a member of ICA since 1989 and I served as ambassador to Switzerland for a number of years. I feel it is important to have a voice in the industry, and to promote the use and awareness of gemstones in the jewelry market. Being in the ICA offers the opportunity to meet and interact with people involved in our sector from mine to retail around the world. Because we make friends with other actors in the supply chain, whom we trust, we turn to them first when buying and selling. I love the seminars and the sources of information provided by the ICA that I can share later in my training sessions. After all these years, it is very emotional to return to Sri Lanka and see Ratnapura again, where my passion for colored gems started.

Q: What is your view regarding the global gem trade and the need for transparency and ethical standards?

Elke Berr: In order to have consumer trust, industry players must be transparent and deal ethically, not only with their customers downstream, but also with their suppliers upstream. These best practices are a part of our daily business transactions. Aside from business, we also try to make a difference in the lives of those in need. And, I feel it is important to share our knowledge of gems and the industry with other people.

Q: Could you be more specific about making a difference?

Elke Berr: One of Burma's [Myanmar] most famous mining areas is Mogok, not widely open to visitors. We were among the few to be granted access to this mythical mining region many years ago. As a result, we have come to know many of the miners and their families. We decided to provide support for a multi-religious and multi-ethnic orphanage that allows children to be raised by volunteer "mothers," who receive funds to take care of them. This allows the children to get an education through high school. I invite anyone who goes to Mogok to visit the Grace Haven orphanage and see the wonderful work they do. We also support Voix Libre, a Swiss organization working to prevent children from working in the mines in Bolivia.

Q: Are you also involved in commercial partnerships?

Elke Berr: Because of our knowledge of antique jewelry and high-value gemstones, we work with banks, investors and insurance companies that rely on our expertise in "art banking." We have also partnered with Dukascopy Bank, a Swiss forex bank, where we promoted gems in mini-seminars on their TV channel, in addition to sponsoring the Miss Dukascopy contest. We also provide seminars and training for watch and jewelry



Elke Berr examines sapphires offered by gemstone dealers in Beruwala, Sri Lanka.



Elke Berr looks at gem material from a mine in Mogok, Myanmar.



From trading in precious stones, Elke expanded her passion for gems to include jewelry design. Here is a sketch for a pair of earrings.



Elke Berr specializes in rare and one-of-a-kind gems, which she sources from around the world.

brands on gemstones because I believe that education is an innate part of our business.

Q: After developing your deep knowledge of gemstones, you branched out into jewelry design. How did that happen?

Elke Berr: Yes. I expanded into jewelry in 2006, with the launch of Elke Berr Creations Genève. I wanted to capture the beauty and mystery of rare gems in exquisite jewelry. And, I also create modern, more affordable lines with unusual cuts. Among the affordable lines, in addition to feminine jewelry, is a men's collection of cufflinks, using carved rock crystal and diamonds. I also create different lines to be sold in retail stores in different markets.

Q: Given the exceptional gemstones used, who are the buyers of these jewelry items?

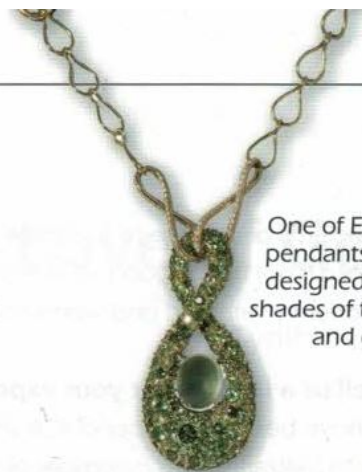
Elke Berr: Our limited-series collections, incorporating rare and often one-of-a-kind gems, are sold through the world's most prestigious retailers and to collectors who purchase them for both their design qualities and as investments. It is amazing to think that these wonderful jewels will be passed down for generations. High quality gems are becoming scarce and, as a result, prices are rising along with demand.

Q: Can you tell us something about your custom-made pieces?

Elke Berr: Custom is a large part of our work. Many clients request a specific gem and then ask me to design a unique piece of jewelry around it. Among the many bespoke pieces is a spectacular ring made with a 33.9-carat unheated Burmese star ruby set in 18K black gold with black and white diamonds. A French television channel made a documentary about it entitled *Dream Stones*, which has already been distributed to 15 countries.

Q: Can you give us a sneak preview of your next collection?

Elke Berr: After the successes of my previous collections, *Icy*, *African Flame*, and *Mogok*, I am now launching my newest, called *Might & Magic: Immersion in a Precious and Enchanted World*. With it, I create real alchemy between exceptional Burmese rubies, sapphires and spinels set in gold with diamond accents. This collection unites gemology and design and comprises four lines: *Life's Elixir*, *Jouvence's Fountain*, *Love's Potion* and *Purple's Charm*. Along with a certificate from a recognized laboratory, each piece is an ode to life and love for the discerning woman, the woman who has a love for gems.



One of Elke Berr's pendants that she designed in green shades of tourmaline and gold.



"Love's Potion" ring made with a 9.01-ct natural Burmese ruby, diamonds and 18K gold.



Ring with a 33.9-ct unheated Burmese star ruby and black and white diamonds set in 18K gold.



"Life's Elixir" ring with an 11.81-ct natural Burmese Royal Blue sapphire, diamonds and 18K gold.



"Purple's Charm" ring with an 11.62-ct natural Burmese purple spinel, amethysts, pink sapphires, diamonds and 18K black gold.



Elke also designs men's jewelry as seen in these "Acqua Bubble" cufflinks made of rock crystal, diamonds, and 18K gold.