

Mexican Opal in Matrix

Picture stones that have it all - pattern, color and **FIRE!**

According to legend, opals have a long history in Mexico. The Aztecs used a stone called “vitzitziptepal,” or “hummingbird stone” for ceremonies and rituals. The stone is described as a glittering gem that resembles the feathers of the hummingbird. After the Spanish conquest, many of the localities of the “hummingbird stone” were lost until 1840 when don José María Siurab discovered opal deposits in Esmeralda, Querétaro. The region reached its peak in the year 1969 when it is said opals were sold by the sackful to visitors. Today Mexican opals come primarily from the three states of Querétaro, Nayarit and Jalisco.

Like their better-known Australian cousins, Mexican opals are 5-1/2 to 6-1/2 in hardness, and usually have the rainbow play-of-color people associate with opal.



Mexican fire opal, 18KT yellow gold, silver cuttlefish casting \$500

While this play-of-color phenomenon is referred to as “fire” by most people, gemologists use the term “fire opal” for any opal with an orange to red base color, whether or not it has the rainbow flashes. The term “play-of-color” is used by gemologists to describe the rainbow flashes. Mexican opal frequently occurs in orange to red colors, with and without play-of-color.

The red-orange colors that were transparent enough to facet became very popular in the 1990s when they were promoted by mass merchandisers. Unfortunately, all opal contains some water and is subject to cracking when it dries out. Usually this isn't a big problem for consumers, because the opal has sat around long enough before and after cutting that the water level has stabilized. During the heyday of mass production, stones were being pushed through the

system too fast, and the result was an unusually large number of opals that cracked after purchase.

Since Mexican opal occurs in a reasonably hard matrix rock called rhyolite, it is frequently cut with some of the rhyolite still surrounding and backing the opal nodule. This is similar to the “boulder opals” from Australia and creates more of a textured look in the finished cabachon. It also provides a dark background for the opal, helping to show it at its best.

Mexican opals tend to be more translucent and jelly-like compared to Australian opals. The best Mexican material is so transparent it appears almost liquid, like ice that is thawing, and has rainbow colors that flow from deep within the stone and roll across the surface.

We were lucky enough to be offered an old collection containing roughly seven kilos of Mexican opal rough mined over forty years ago! We have started cutting it and have several new gems to offer at very reasonable prices.



Mexican fire opal, 14KT yellow gold, padparadsha sapphire, diamond \$1200

Assortment of Mexican opal cabochons cut with the rhyolite matrix as part of the design



Mexican matrix opal, 14KT yellow gold, tsavorite garnet \$900