The Most Valuable Amber

by Sean McLaughlin (Proprietor of Baltic Imports, Minneapolis, Minnesota)
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Ed: We offer this article not as a commercial endorsement, but merely as the insight of an Amber Master speaking of amber. We could not leave out all the references to his store without missing a great part of the information about amber.

While working in our stores, we have been asked many questions about amber. Since our formation in the late 80's, we have constantly taught about the nature of amber, its history, and its mythology, for we love the heritage and continuity that amber possesses.

That is why amber has become a large part of our stores' identity. That identity, in turn, has offered us a certain amount of fame as our care, concern and knowledge has become celebrated in the amber world.

Even as knowledgeable as we are, there are so many different aspects to amber that we are often overwhelmed by where to start when we are asked to discuss it. It is the oldest traded gem in existence, followed closely by the pearl. I have been told that the oldest cuneiform tablets in the British Museum are buy an inventory of an ancient amber trading voyage. Even the great crown of King Tut is said to center its precious gems around a piece of unworked Baltic amber.

The Baltic amber world possesses a thousand stories. It is an unending tale of lovers, of tears wept by gods, of compassion, of greed, of purity, and of healing. Legend often repeats itself changing characters, changing places, and changing times.

The buyers who enter our stores are a part of that amber world. By buying a legendary piece from a great master they have personally entered into amber's story. Almost always, their purchases are founded on beauty. But in many ways, their purchases are also founded on trust.

It is our obligation to maintain that trust. Being traditionalists, we have always pledged that we will only represent museum-quality Baltic amber. By that we mean an amber that has been: 1) deposited south and eastward from the Baltic area in Northern Europe, 2) which possesses 3 to 7% succinite acid, and 3) which is cross linked molecularly, and stabilized enough to hold a fine polish.

But within that specific family of old resins, the question most often asked is: which of these true ambers possesses the most value? It is a sincerely difficult question to answer for, like are, there are many conventions but no absolute rules. Yet there is a logic that offers a structure that may aid the individual.

All amber that is not joined together or fused is more valuable than amber which is.

Much amber is now the product of joining small or poorer pieces together into a block or in a mold. Join lines, where individual pieces meet by being vacuum-formed together, are readily apparent with a loop. But please be careful: to the uninitiated, these lines might be confused with the actual flow lines of true shelly amber. A better indicator is the use of the loop to look for non-ripped sun spangles, those round, discoidal

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fissures prevalent in natural amber pieces, which are easily torn by the pressure needed to fuse amber together. Even better is the indication of a rind, that rough discolored, outside surface of amber, that must be ground off if amber is to be joined.

Color can create value, but the color must be natural.

Rare, natural, deep red amber, which is still called Romanite, true greens, water clear amber called gelsim, and bone-white amber called King's Amber, have all been esteemed since ancient times. Their function in mythology is slightly different than the gold and clear-brown amber so often called the sun stone. But that is precisely why the factories fake such colors. Dyed reds, known as cherry amber, as well as modern dyed greens and blues, are as prevalent in our time, and sold with such poor communication, that the average buyer is often shocked to find out that they have no gem value. In fact, modern greens, blues, and teal ambers are called triplets in the amber trade. The term is derogatory and means that these ambers have been manipulated three times.

What is not commonly known is the value of color that is created by true plant pollens. Brown, grey, yellow and white pollens can softly color a transparent piece and elevate it both in beauty and in value. Latvia's greatest amber master, Gerogs Romulis, prizes pollen above all other inclusions, for in natural amber, it is often the pollen that shifts the amber into the extraordinary.

Even pyrites are preserved in amber so that is is possible to have natural sun spangles that are dusted with fool's gold and to find insects wrapped in what appears to be golden foil.

Many amber masters remember that the Polish peasant, at one time, was said to have had 400 names for amber. We, as masters, often reflect on the names we have lost, using only 40.

Natural pieces worked on a wheel by a certified master are more valuable than computer-cut pieces of the same size and color.

Today, the majority of amber is vacuum-formed block amber cut on a computer. Vacuum-formed block amber does not have a rind so there is no need of a master to skillfully unfold it. In addition, by heating and fusing it into jeweler's blocks, the amber has become harder so that it will more easily withstand the blades of the cutter. The amber has risen on the hardness scale. Yet the individuality of the amber piece, its air, its flows, and the coloration of its rind and pollen is lessened, if not lost.

The traditions of healing become non-existent when an amber loses its identity. As for value, any move away from the natural reduces the gem value of amber.

Yet not all computer-cut jewelry is made from block amber. To ascertain the value of a piece, look for diversity in color and inclusion, and study the individual pieces through a loop, again looking at the sun spangles and for traces of the rind. The rind will often look like tiny brown to brownish-red cracks on the surface of amber.

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LIFE and ADVENTURES of REMUS - continued

By Aleksander Majkowski
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Chapter VII
In which the Ghost in the *Pustkowie* Is Let Out and Remus Takes on Goliath and Is Triumphant

Absalom did not want to show me how to make a slingshot. Jeremiah said angrily, "All you will accomplish is to poke somebody's eye out."

Once, beyond the forest, on the way to Jerusalem, I saw a boy shooting stones from some kind of divided stick. I gave him two buttons from my capote and a small piece of rope. In turn, he showed me his weapon and taught me how to use it. When I returned home, I made myself a slingshot like David had, using my own imagination. Then I figured out how to aim it.

First my stones went somewhere far, but who could tell where the 'somewhere' was? Then I chose Nebuchadnezzar's oven for a target and next the spruce trees by Joseph's Well. When I finally improved my aim so I could hit my hat which I had put on a stick, I felt confident and knew I would be able to strike any target, and I knew I would win. I waited for my Goliath.

But before I encountered him, something very odd happened in the *pustkowie*. It involved the ghost with green eyes who lived in the corner of the attic room.

One day, before the harvest, Jeremiah was behind the barn pounding the blade of a scythe flat to get it ready for the honing stone. The noise echoed everywhere. I was in the house putting bread into my bag, preparing to take Marta to school. Bright sunshine fell on the face of the clock as it swallowed the hours. It was laughing and saying to me, "Go, it is time...! Go, it is time...!"

"I am going! I am going!" I answered

Suddenly the room darkened. Marcyjanna screamed and crossed herself, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!" I did not see anything, so I could not understand the reason for her fear. Soon, however, I would find out.

The door opened and something big as a boulder strode in. It did not cross itself with holy water, nor did it greet God, even though it looked like a human being. Everything on it was shiny--the tall boots, the buttons on its cloak, the hat on its head. When I looked at it more closely, I noticed that it had a head like a bucket and a huge sword hung from the belt around its belly. Now I understood. I said to my soul, "This is Goliath. That is how he is portrayed in the Holy Scriptures. The Lord God has sent him to you for a fight."

While I was organizing my thoughts regarding what to do about him, the master and mistress came in. The mistress held a handkerchief to her eyes and was weeping quietly. Marcyjanna broke into violent sobs. Marta also came in, but she only screamed and ran away.

As soon as she left, another stranger appeared. He was young and was laughing as if nothing were amiss. His wide grin showed off his gleaming white teeth, and his flashing eyes were black as tar. He said, "Hey, servant of the king, go knock on the door of the ghost's room. See if he is there." Then he left and went outside.

The master took that scoundrel Goliath and together they slowly started to climb the stairway. Next I heard their footsteps moving towards the room where the ghost lived. I thought, "I do not suppose that unfriendly boor came here just to give the ghost its freedom."

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