

CONSUMER INSIGHTS

Blue velvet

Consumer study on tanzanite reveals need for greater exposure

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LONDON—Tanzanite may have been discovered four decades ago, but not all American consumers know the exotic East African gemstone when they see it, a soon-to-be-released consumer survey finds.

Commissioned by the Tanzanite Foundation and conducted by the Jewelry Consumer Opinion Council (JCOC), the survey found that 56.1 percent of consumers knew tanzanite comes only from Tanzania, the African nation that is its namesake, and that it is extremely rare.

Nearly 50 percent of respondents said they believe that it is “important” and 31.9 percent said it is “somewhat important” that tanzanite mines, jewelry manufacturers and related organizations support causes and projects in the communities where they mine.

Based on the study’s findings, the Tanzanite Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes tanzanite and mining community causes, is seeking greater visibility for the gemstone in 2009, says Anna Haber, operations director of the Tanzanite Foundation. The foundation’s plans include meetings with retailers nationwide, from luxury merchants to mass-market retailers, and hosting its first-ever tanzanite jewelry suite for stars and their stylists before the Feb. 22 Academy Awards, aiming to gain all-important red carpet exposure.

COLOR, COLOR, COLOR

Among the designers and retailers who spoke to NATIONAL JEWELER about tanzanite sales, one verdict emerged: Color is tanzanite’s top asset. And, as it happens, 2009 is the perfect year to promote a blue gemstone to consumers, say two of the nation’s leading color forecasters.

“Palace Blue,” considered to be in the navy family, is the number-one color for spring,” says Leatrice Eiseman, executive

director of the Pantone Color Institute. “You’ll be seeing a lot of it in both sportswear and dressier clothing.”

Also talking up the blues is Pat Tunsy, internationally recognized color and trend forecaster, and creative director of the New York City-based Doneger Group.

“Navy is important,” Tunsy says. “For late October, there’s a palette we call ‘Byzantium,’ with deep, dark, rich colors, for example, midnight navy.”

The economic downturn and the high cost of precious metals have made color especially important, says Sandi Rousso of David’s Ltd., a high-end jeweler in Charlotte, N.C.

“I can get a big look by putting big colored gems in a setting,” says Rousso, who started using tanzanite, a favorite of hers, when it first became available.

“First, blue is the most popular consumer color, no matter what gem it is,” she says. “And second, tanzanite gets people talking. They love how it looks in different lighting.”

The trichroic stone exhibits various colors when viewed from different directions because the different axes of the gem crystal handle light differently.

“But I think the Tanzanite Foundation should think less like a gemologist and, instead, talk about how beautiful the stone is,” Rousso says.

A key finding in the consumer study was that those who recognize and desire tanzanite considered it the fourth most valuable colored gemstone, after emerald, ruby and sapphire.

Among tanzanite aficionados, few share the passion of Los Angeles-based designer and jeweler to the stars Erica Courtney, who says tanzanite gets people talking—“especially if it’s the gorgeous color with red flecks in it.”

Courtney is also passionate about tanzanite’s virtues as a collectible gem, pointing to geologists’ estimates that the world’s only tanzanite source will likely be depleted within the next 20 years. She



Francis Mertens titanium, tanzanite and diamond cuffs; suggested retail price available upon request. (646) 704-4447 or FrancisMertens.com



Paula Crevosshay earrings in 18-karat yellow gold accented with diamonds from the “True Blue Collection” featuring a 16.27-carat trillion-cut tanzanite and an 18.18-carat tanzanite oval drop; suggested retail price is \$76,500. (505) 898-2888 or Crevosshay.com



Erica Courtney 18-karat gold “Aurora” necklace featuring 32.07 carats of tanzanite, 4.68 carats of diamonds and 0.47 carats of pink sapphires; suggested retail price is \$159,320. (323) 938-2373 or EricaCourtney.com

recently stepped out of her glitz-and-glamour element to travel to Tanzania and see firsthand the Tanzanite Foundation’s efforts in local education and sustainable development initiatives.

“The day we went into the mine was the first time in six weeks the miners actually found any tanzanite,” Courtney recalls. “That’s when I realized just how rare it is.”

The designer’s 2009 “Tanzanite Collection” typically retails between \$16,000 and \$200,000, with stones mainly from 4- to 30-something carats. The stones Courtney uses would whet the appetite of retailer Bill Sites, a self-confessed “colored stone junkie.”

BEAUTY OVER BIRTHSTONE?

Sites Jewelers in Charlottesville, Tenn., carries only a limited supply of tanzanite jewelry, but Sites says his customers always remark on the stone’s color, regardless of its price point, leading him to believe that the market extends from mass retail to luxury. Haber agrees.

“QVC had some record sales lately for tanzanite jewelry, selling almost \$3 million worth in 24 hours,” she says. Still, the Tanzanite Foundation study finds that retail jewelry stores were the top source of consumer information among consumers who know tanzanite, with

television shopping channels number two.

Sites, who thought most people knew of tanzanite from home shopping channels, was surprised at that particular finding. But he isn’t surprised that 54.8 percent of respondents don’t know which gemstone is December’s birthstone, even though tanzanite has shared that honor with blue topaz since 2002.

“Birthstones aren’t as important as they used to be,” Sites says. “If I were the Tanzanite Foundation, I’d put more effort into the angles of tanzanite’s rarity and beauty.”

Albuquerque, N.M.-based jewelry designer Paula Crevosshay is so enamored of that violet blue color and “velvet-like texture and full saturation,” as she describes it, that she calls her tanzanite collection “True Blue.”

“Tanzanites are so much more cost-effective than very large blue sapphires, so they’re a great substitute,” Crevosshay says. “So customers just need to see them and know about them and then they will want them.”



Lorraine DePasque is a freelance writer who specializes in fine jewelry and gems.

The Jewelry Consumer Opinion Council, a consumer research division of Paso Robles, Calif.-based MVI Marketing, conducted the online tanzanite study between June 20 and July 10, 2008. It included 3,024 U.S. consumers of both genders and of all ages and income levels.

Find the full consumer survey on tanzanite on our Web site, NationalJeweler.com

14

COLOR GUARD: GEMSTONES
GET FLAMBOYANT

16

STAR SIGHTINGS: ANGELINA JOLIE IS
PRETTY IN PEARLS