

The World of Minerals

Tiffany Blue—Uncovered

By Vivien Gornitz

The best gifts come in small packages, and the finest often come packed inside a robin's-egg blue box wrapped in a satin white ribbon. This iconic aqua blue packaging is the signature of Tiffany & Co.--a world-famous jewelry store founded in New York City in 1837 by Charles Lewis Tiffany and John B. Young. The color first became associated with Tiffany, when in 1845 the fledgling company published its first annual Blue Book Collection, which highlights its most spectacular jewelry and gems of the year. In 1886, when Tiffany & Co. presented its classic diamond engagement ring packed in a little blue box, the association of the color with the company strengthened even further. In fact, Tiffany & Co. trademarked the color in 1998. Furthermore, Tiffany Blue—1837 Blue, named after the company's founding date--is now a standardized color on the Pantone Matching System Chart (Fig. 1).

How did this particular color become so closely associated with Tiffany & Co. and its instantly-recognizable packaging? Some suggest that the choice of robin's-egg blue or forget-me-not-blue reflected the popularity of turquoise jewelry in Victorian times. Bridesmaids often received a turquoise dove brooch as a thank-you gift. But the connection between Tiffany & Co. and turquoise may run even deeper than just a 19th-century fashion fad.

The turquoise connection

The Cerrillos District, around 20 miles southwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the site of one of the oldest mines in North America, with a history going back over 1000 years. The Anasazi Indians were mining turquoise by at least 900 AD. After the Spanish arrived in the late 1500s, some sporadic mining for silver and lead took place. The years 1879-1884 witnessed a short-lived mining boom for silver and gold, triggered by highly exaggerated and erroneous reports of the precious metal content of the ore. Prior to the 1890s, only Native Americans valued turquoise for use in jewelry and ceremonies. Yet within a few years, annual U.S. turquoise production soared throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. What triggered this sudden interest in turquoise? What, if any, was the connection between the famous Tiffany Mine, which yielded some of the finest quality Cerrillos turquoise, and the New York jewelry company of that name? Until recently, the facts were clouded by conflicting and often inaccurate stories from period newspaper clippings and magazine articles. But an insider account clarifies many of these once murky associations.

"Tiffany Blue" by Patricia McCraw (2006) presents an insider's view of the late 19th century turquoise craze. Ms. McCraw is the great-granddaughter of James Patrick McNulty, who was superintendent of the American Turquoise Company mines, including the Tiffany Mine, between 1892 and 1913. She pieced together her account from personal correspondence, meticulously-kept mine records, and contemporary newspaper articles.

The American Turquoise Company (ATC) was initially financed by the Pinkertons (the detective agency), the New York City Bank, and Charles Lewis Tiffany of Tiffany and Co. Charles Rutt Andrews, the first president of the ATC, was a former jewelry manufacturer at Tiffany & Co. and also a major stockholder of ATC. Joseph G. Doty, who supervised the cutting, polishing, and sales of turquoise for ATC, also had prior ties to Tiffany and Co. However, turquoise would have remained a low-value stone had it not been for George F. Kunz,

gemologist, who worked for Tiffany at that time, and who realized the gem potential of Cerrillos turquoise.

In his book “Gems and Precious Stones of North America” (1892, 1968), Kunz promoted North American gemstones. Curiously, in Chapter III, he mentions only “desultory” mining at Cerrillos by Indians or local lapidaries (p. 54-56). The lowly stones, in his opinion, were only fit for cabinet specimens or ornamental inlay. Only flawless (i.e., no matrix) deep sky-blue or robin’s-egg blue stones from Persia were acceptable for jewelry. In the Appendix, however, he describes turquoise of superior color from the Castilian Mine that had been opened in 1890, and subsequently acquired by the ATC in 1892. This new material must have vastly surpassed any turquoise previously mined in the area. Kunz maintained that the stones “although not equal to the finest Persian, were yet fine enough in quality to make them worth more than one hundred thousand dollars” (p. 342-343). A local newspaper article in 1892 stated “Mr. George Kunz, the noted expert of Tiffany, New York, and the highest American authority on gems, says: ‘...Is not that an exquisite blue? It is the blue of a sky upon a perfect June day. That is a turquoise, far and away the finest in America, and it came from these new mines in New Mexico. It is worth \$4,000....it is probable that gems to the value of \$200,000 a year may be obtained from this mine’ ” (McCraw, 2006, p.6). Such a positive endorsement by an eminent gemologist sufficed to stimulate a turquoise boom in the district that soon wiped out the memory of failed attempts at finding precious metals.

Tiffany and Co. was one of the main purchasers of the mines’ output and demanded the “perfect blue”. The Tiffany Mine (also known as the Muñiz claim) was one of the most productive in the Cerrillos district. But as with many mines, its heyday was short-lived. The death of Charles Lewis Tiffany in 1902 struck a major blow. His son Louis Comfort Tiffany showed little interest in the blue stone and concentrated instead on art glass. Mining claim disputes, declining production of high-grade ore, growing competition from other turquoise mines, and changes in fashion all contributed to the decline and ultimate demise of the ATC.

Favorable assessments by George Kunz, helped launch the late 19th century turquoise boom. Kunz was also an ATC shareholder. Yet Tiffany & Co. never actually owned the Tiffany Mine in New Mexico, nor did it have controlling interest in the American Turquoise Company, which did own and operate this mine. However, it was among the mining company’s main financial backers, especially in the initial stages, and almost certainly was a major purchaser of the turquoise rough. The first president of the ATC had one worked at Tiffany’s. Considering these close links between the Tiffany Mine in New Mexico and the New York luxury jewelry company of the same name, the choice of “Tiffany Blue” for the company’s packaging to this day was no mere coincidence.

Further reading

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Figure 1. Robin's egg blue, a shade of pale cyan, very close in hue to the trademarked color Tiffany Blue.

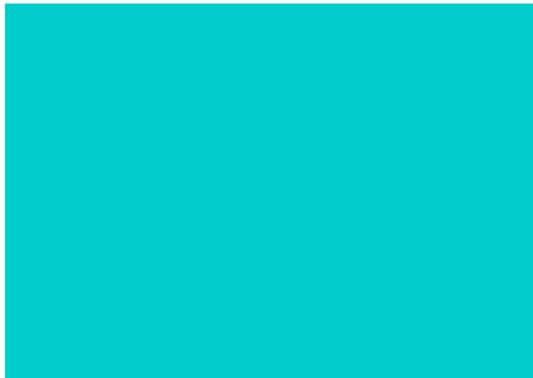


Figure 2. Turquoise wash at Mount Chalchihuitl, near the Tiffany Mine, Cerrillos Hills, New Mexico (Photo credit: Larry Valtelhas).

