

THE IMPACT OF CUT ON COLORED GEMSTONES

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Gems are broadly classified into three categories of cutting styles from traditional, fantasy, and precision. There are often debates as to how these cuts impact value and certainly, beauty. Better cuts will impact beauty and beauty will impact value. Cutters often have a story, and that story may include responsible sourcing, the cut, and the cutter and marketing these leads to better profit.

The past ten years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of precision cutters working in North America. Cutting houses in Sri Lanka, China, and Thailand are also doing meet point faceting and producing precision cut gems. Meet point faceting uses diagrams based on the refractive index of the gem, and the facets 'meet' each other to give crisp lines. This not only creates a nicer pattern when looking at the facet junctions, but it ensures that the light refracts and reflects correctly. There is much debate among US precision cutters about the value that cutting adds to a gem over traditional cutting.

I've been cutting gems professionally since 2007, and when I started out, I was told to multiply the price of the rough by some amount, calculate my time, add some extra for the non-cutting time I spend and overhead on my workshop, and come up with a price. That made no sense at all to me. My background before moving into gems was large scale business consulting for high tech so I knew how businesses priced goods, and gems, however lovely, are commodities.

CLASSIFYING GEM CUTS

There are more opinions on this than there are gem cutters, but I classify cutting for this article into traditional, fantasy, and precision.

Traditional

When we refer to traditional cutting, the term "native cut" is often used, but it is problematic. It's used as a pejorative often, but if you're looking at an emerald cut in Colombia, or a dark C-axis tourmaline cut in Brazil, or a sapphire or ruby cut in Thailand, those 'native' cutters did a beautiful job. They know how to get the very best out of those gems. Some of the finest sapphires I've seen have been cut on simple equipment in Sri Lanka and Thailand.



FIGURE 1. Smoky quartz cut in Madagascar. See the large windowed area.



FIGURE 2. Tanzanite cut in Arusha, Tanzania. The color is nice but it's extinct in the center.



FIGURE 3. Smoky quartz cut in Madagascar. This gem is not precision cut but still performs well.

But ‘traditionally’ there are a lot of gems cut that are windowed, or have extinction, or are basically just not well cut at all. They are cut primarily for weight retention. Sometimes they are cut for color, but in general they are underperforming. The quartz in Figure 1 was cut in Madagascar on a jam peg machine. The tanzanite in Figure 2 was cut in Arusha, Tanzania. Both have huge windows and poorly placed facets.

The quartz in Figure 3 was cut in the same Madagascar workshop, on the same equipment. The tanzanite in Figure 4 was also cut in Arusha. They are all traditionally cut gems and I cannot argue that the cutters who produced the last two gems didn’t do a great job. They are not meet point faceting and the polish is a bit streaky, but I was happy to buy both of those gems and happy to sell them with just a slight repolish.

There’s nothing wrong with well-cut gems cut in traditional cutting centers like Sri Lanka or Thailand, and there is something very right about supporting cutters in the country of origin where the gem was mined.

Fantasy

Fantasy cutting used to be reserved for a few carvers, both in Germany and in North America with gem artists like Canadian, Sherris Cottier Shank or American, Dalan Hargrave. Figures 5 and 6. Now, with the advent of precision concave and fantasy machines, concave cutting is more common, and fantasy cuts that have elements of carving are no longer rare. As the equipment gets better and easier to use, sadly I am seeing more and more cutters try to fit as many fantasy elements as possible onto a gem.

I am not including concave cuts with fantasy if they fall into normal shapes. A round brilliant concave is just a spiffier round brilliant. This one with the scalloped girdle (Figure 7) is an example of a concave that’s more a fantasy cut.

Some people love fantasy cuts. Some people hate them. Some goldsmiths do not want to work with them because they are often harder to set, certainly different. Fantasy cutting does make people think differently about gems though. It moves from a colored object to a piece of art. I have not found that there’s a higher price point for fantasy cutting though, although that may change as they become more mainstream.



FIGURE 4. *Tanzanite cut in Arusha, Tanzania. The round is traditional cutting but performs well.*



FIGURE 5. *Spessartine garnet carved by Sherris Cottier Shank (photo by SCS).*



FIGURE 6. *Tanzanite carved by Sherris Cottier Shank (photo by SCS).*

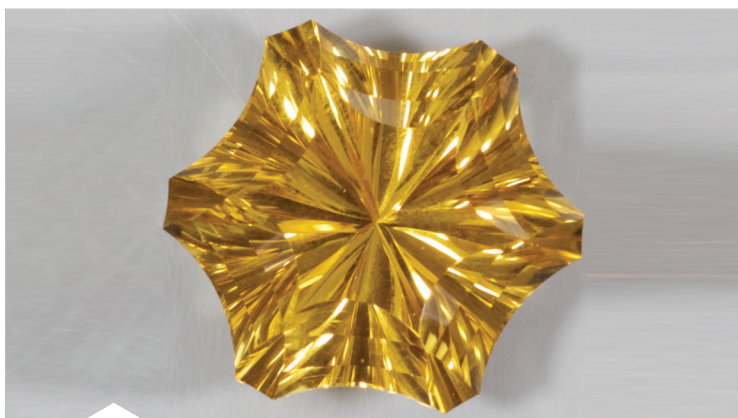


FIGURE 7. *Citrine concave cut by Lisa Elser.*



FIGURE 8. Traditionally cut tanzanite before recutting.



FIGURE 9. Tanzanite in Figure 8 after recutting.



FIGURE 10. Aquamarine, precision cut, but with a large window.

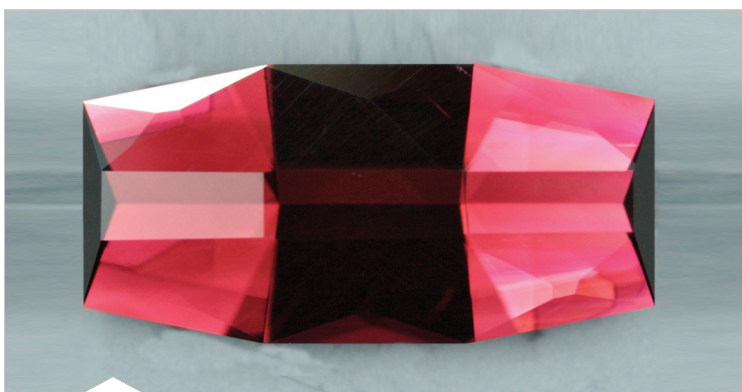


FIGURE 11. Rubellite tourmaline, precision cut, but with extinction.

Precision

Precision Cutting as I define it here is: Designed to move light and enhance color; generally uses meet point designs; has excellent polish and finish.

Precision cut gems will generally weigh less than traditionally cut gems with the same face-up dimensions. Figures 8 and 9. Precision cutting is also not magic. Figures 10 and 11 are some of my early career failures. Both are precision cut and both have serious issues. The aquamarine is terribly windowed, and the tourmaline goes extinct in the middle. Despite being cut by a Canadian gem cutter in Canada using meet point designs, these are far less attractive than a well-done traditional cut.

Precision cutting also, but not always, has unique designs. My husband Tom and I work to create flat faceting designs that have exceptional optics without washing out the color. Figures 12-14.

VALUING PRECISION GEMS

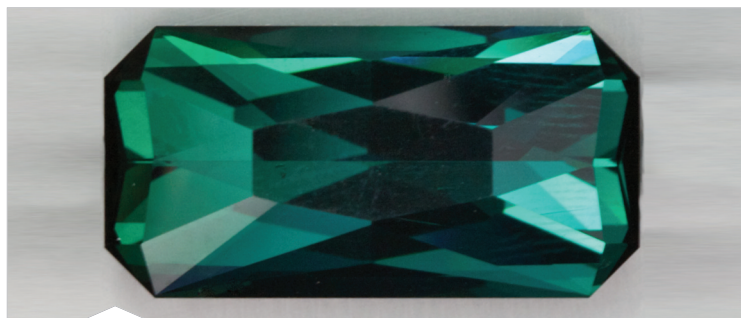
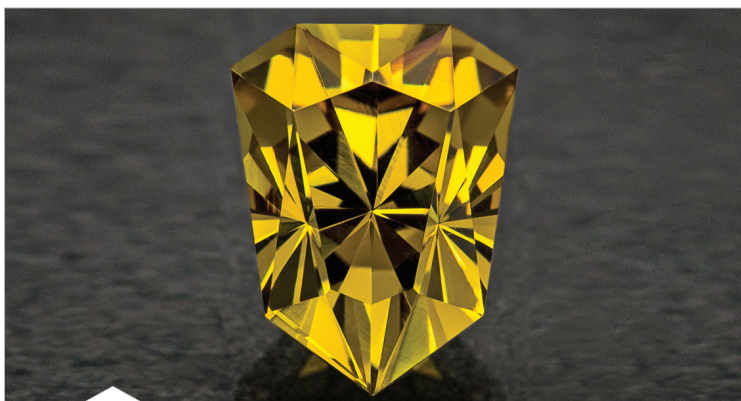
So, if the gem is precision cut, is it inherently more valuable? So far only one major lab certificate that I am aware of has been issued naming the cutter. It was a 51.743 ct rare tourmaline cut by Victor Tuzlov who is one of the top gem cutters in the world. Bellerophon Gemlab, Bangkok, Thailand, issued that report in 2019.

With the exception of certain collectible gems and award winners, I disagree with the arguments that gems should be priced higher based on the name of the cutter, or if they are cut in the US or Canada, or other factors. If I am selling to a collector who wants my work specifically, the gem is worth what it is worth. If my cutting or another artist's cutting results in a more attractive gem, then it will be rated higher and attain a higher price because it is more beautiful, more brilliant, than a traditional cut gem.

Where then is the added value in precision cutting? It is in marketing. While I do not believe that my name—or any cutter's name—should carry an automatic uplift in price, I do know that it makes it easier to sell the gems.

Many years ago, I learned that most people want to buy an oval from an artist. They are not quite ready for the 'art piece,' but they like knowing that the person who cut their beautiful oval also cuts more elaborate work. They want the story of the gem and the cutter.

That story includes the history of the gem. When the cutter can point to the provenance of the

FIGURE 12. *Tourmaline cut by Lisa Elser in a custom oval.*FIGURE 13. *Tourmaline cut by Lisa Elser in a custom rectangle.*FIGURE 14. *Garnet cut by Lisa Elser in a custom shield (photo by Karlyn Bennett).*FIGURE 15. *Buying at the site highlights my story as a gem cutter.*

rough, that is a selling point. Sometimes more important pieces will have “certificates” of rough origin along with the cut and design.

The story also is my story. People like knowing about the person who cut their gems. That is not possible if the gem came from a cutting house in Sri Lanka. The gem may be precision cut, but five or six different people may have worked on it and you will likely not know their stories. Figure 15.

Increasingly, consumers want to know that their purchase is ethical. That includes how they treat their workers but also how they source their materials and what they give back to the countries that produce their gems.

PROFITING FROM COLOR

There is margin in color! Selling color means investing in your knowledge. Clients want to be guided and they rely on their jewelers to guide them. Unlike diamonds, where people walk in often knowing exactly what they want down to the last “C,” each colored gem is unique. Being able to show the beauty of the precision cut, and being able to share the story of the gem dramatically increases the likelihood of making the sale.

At the end of the day, precision cutting is becoming more common. It will never surpass traditional cutting but it’s no longer rare. It offers high quality and unique designs.

There is, or there should be, no big uplift in price. If it is a prettier gem, it is a more expensive gem. Some cutters do have brand recognition and charge more for the brand but that’s not the norm. When valuing, research the brand to see if any premium has been added.

Goldsmiths and jewelers can and should market the story of the gems. The push for ethical and transparent sourcing can make precision gems an easier sale. ♦

About the Author

Lisa Elser is a gem cutter in British Columbia, Canada. She has 19 years of experience as a cutter. Lisa donates 20% of her gross profit back to the gem producing countries and makes the information available to her clients so they can share with their clients.

All photos by C. Tom Schlegel except where noted.

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