

SPECIAL REPORT



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CIBJO Coloured Stone Commission

Understanding disclosure terminology is key to protecting consumer confidence in gemstones

By Nilam Alawdeen, President, CIBJO Coloured Stone Commission

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the nomenclature of gemstones in the trade, and in particular the terms that should be used to clearly communicate the identity of stones that are sourced in nature, as compared to synthetic stones or those that have been artificially altered to improve their appearance.

It is especially fundamental to determine if a natural

gemstone, such as a diamond or sapphire, needs to be qualified with the adjective "natural," to signify that it is a natural stone. In the diamond world, it has clearly been established by both the trade and gemmological laboratories that the unqualified term "diamond" alone is sufficient to establish that fact, and that treated and artificial products, including synthetics, require a modifier to clearly disclose the information to consumers: e.g. treated sapphire, synthetic diamond, etc.

Both the trade and gemmological laboratories agree



MIXED MESSAGES IN TRADE AND MARKET

that the unqualified word “diamond” indicates that it is a natural product. However, in the coloured gemstone world, although the trade has traditionally followed the same approach, the nomenclature is handled somewhat differently by gemmological laboratories.

For example, the Laboratory Manual Harmonization Committee (LMHC), which represents seven important international gemmological laboratories, indicates on its “Information Sheet #7” (http://lmhc-gemology.org/pdfs/IS7_20111214.pdf) the following for a natural non-treated sapphire:

Species – Natural Corundum
Variety – Natural Sapphire
Treatment – No indication of heating

A heated sapphire is described as:

Species – Natural Corundum
Variety – Sapphire
Treatment – Indication of heating (to modify the colour or transparency of the stone)

In other words, from the seven laboratories’ point of view, an unmodified rough or cut “sapphire” refers to a stone that may no longer be completely “natural,” but rather one whose colour and or clarity has been changed through artificial heating. On a laboratory report, if the modifier “natural” does not precede the word “sapphire,” one may assume that the stone has been subjected to heating and is no longer in its original, natural state.

Mixed messages in the trade and market

Although the above definitions comply with the proper technical and/or scientific descriptions used



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in a laboratory, they clearly contrast with the trade’s understanding that, when using the term “sapphire” without a modifier, one suggests that it is natural and untreated.

From the trade’s perspective, the responsibility for disclosure is on those selling the treated variety, about what process, besides cutting and polishing, the stone has been subjected to.

So the trade would prefer a laboratory to describe a



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Information Sheet #7

Standardised Gemmological Report Wording

No indications of heating

Any corundum that shows no indications of having undergone heat treatment shall be described as,

Identification	
• Species:	(Natural) ¹ corundum
• Variety:	(Natural) ¹ ruby / (Natural) ¹ sapphire ² / (Natural) ¹ padparadscha (sapphire) ¹
Further information	No indications of heating (NTE)

This clause may include the presence of an insignificant amount of coloured material within a fissure, but not any amount of iron oxide and/or an orange dye in a 'padparadscha (sapphire)'.

Indications of heating

Any corundum that shows indications of having undergone heat treatment shall be described as,

Identification	
• Species:	(Natural) ¹ corundum
• Variety:	Ruby / Sapphire ² / Padparadscha (sapphire) ¹
Further information	Indications of heating (to modify the colour or transparency of the stone) (TE)

The guidelines of the the Laboratory Manual Harmonization Committee (LMHC) for describing on laboratory reports heated and non-heated sapphires, as stated in the LMHC's Information Sheet #7.

natural, untreated sapphire as:

Species – Natural Corundum

Variety – Sapphire

Treatment - None

And to leave the wording as it is presently used on reports to describe a heated sapphire.

We are of the opinion that, when nomenclature follows different sets of rules in the coloured gemstone and diamond sectors, the goals of harmonisation are undermined, even if they are technically understood by the trade. What suffers as the result of different approaches being taken by different sectors is the protection of consumer confidence in our industry.

With treated and synthetic diamonds being more readily available and also advertised today, it can be assumed that consumers' attitudes about coloured gemstones, be they natural, treated or artificial, are being influenced.

More than ever before it is our obligation to be as clear as possible when communicating with the public, about the nomenclature we use, and what it signifies. It is absolutely imperative that we do not provide a mixed message.

Should all treatments be disclosed with equal veracity?

A growing segment of the trade is now of the opinion that all treatments should be disclosed equally. Put simply, there is the feeling that the current system of dividing treatments into those that are "traditional," requiring only general disclosure, and newer treatments that require specific disclosure, does not properly serve the interests of the consumer. All treatments should be described with equal veracity, they say, and must be disclosed in the same way, without prejudice.

On the other hand, there remains a significant segment of the trade that strongly believes that not all treatments are equal. There are differences in their intensities, and some treatments include the introduction of artificial elements into the gemstone during the treatment process.

The trade understands well that the success of certain treatments limits the use of materials to those elements that are naturally part of the gemstone, thereby restricting the range of possible outcomes. Other treatments include the addition of foreign elements, enabling a significantly wider range of outcomes, but usually producing materials that can only obtain lower prices.

The market price of a gemstone, therefore, does to a degree depend on the type of treatment applied. Part of the trade feels strongly that such factors, which differ in terms of their economic impact from treatment to treatment, should both be disclosed and explained to the consumer. Consumer confidence, they say, is enhanced by the customer understanding what various elements are factored in by the industry, when pricing a product.

The industry has the responsibility and obligation to provide its customers with the necessary knowledge, through some form of guidance in disclosure, which the present system of general versus specific disclosure does.

CIBJO's foremost duty is to defend consumer confidence

Discussions within the industry are ongoing, and the subject includes how disclosure is being dealt with when it comes to promotional and advertising materials.

It is a topic that the CIBJO Coloured Stone Commission

is investigating, and I believe that we will arrive at the best solution, after taking advice from all segments of the trade, with the foremost objective of meeting the interests of the consumer in mind.

The Coloured Stone Commission will continue to work on proper the nomenclature of the terms widely

used in the industry, to better reflect contemporary understanding of gemstone materials.

Updates to our Blue Book will be proposed, keeping in mind that the foremost objective of CIBJO is to protect consumer confidence in our industry, using clear, concise and understandable nomenclature.

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