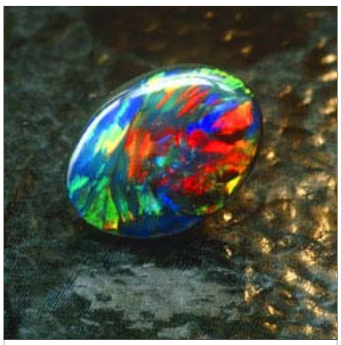

An 'exceptional gem opal'

Image Gallery **(3 Images)**

OPAL GRADING SYSTEM AIMS TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE

Posted June 14, 2011 | By Sonia Nair

Brisbane-based gem company Opal Horizon has launched a comprehensive quantifiable opal grading system as the first step in a global marketing effort to restore confidence in the gemstone.

Opal Horizon managing director David Horton said his company enlisted the expertise of international opal authorities to formulate the grading system in the hope that it would make opal gradings and valuations more transparent and therefore help increase worldwide acceptance of opals in the jewellery industry.

“After interviewing the CEOs of around 20 of the top jewellery companies in the world, we found that every single person was saying the same thing. There was no transparency in how opals were classified, graded and valued,” Horton said.

Opal Horizon unveiled its opal grading system at the Gemological Institute of America’s (GIA) Symposium on May 30 and Horton said it received “excellent” feedback from key industry players.

With Opal Horizon’s grading system, jewellers and consumers can evaluate opal by quantifiable grading parameters based on the opal’s category, colour and cut. ‘Category’ stands for the presence and degree of host rock in the opal, ‘colour’ assigns points to the opal according to its face, body tone, play of colour, brightness, pattern, directionality and special attributes while ‘cut’ looks at the opal’s finish and polish, ease of setting, symmetry or balance and exclusion of defects.

Assessment of these three quality features will categorise an opal into five quality grades ranging from ‘exceptional gem opal’ to ‘fine gem opal’, ‘gem opal’, ‘commericial opal’ and ‘promotional opal’. The grading system also allows for certification of quality.

Opal Horizon has also developed an international marketing strategy to reintroduce and promote opals to retailers and consumers. As part of the strategy, it intends to implement a retail education programme on opals.

Horton believes local retailers will reap the benefits of this grading system.

“There are a lot of myths and uncertainty about opal and while some retailers will admit that they prefer it that way because they can sell at the price they want, they admit it has damaged the industry and this is now the best way forward,” he said.

While he concedes that the Opal Horizon-formulated grading system is not the first of its kind, he feels it is evolutionary and gemmologist Helen Levonis who gave a presentation at the GIA symposium about the grading system agreed with Horton.

A 'fine gem opal'

“While there are other grading, appraisal and evaluation programmes for natural precious opal, none have caught on as an industry standard because they are either too consuming, too complex or too simplified,” Levonis said.

Several gemmologists from Opal Horizon will be attending the National Opal Symposium in Lightning Ridge in late July to talk about the new grading system and the company is also looking to get the grading system promoted in GIA publications.

“GIA does set global standards and by getting it accepted by GIA, which we appear to have done, we expect this will be the first step towards global acceptance,” Horton said.

Horton hopes global acceptance will increase opal’s standing in Australia, where more than 95 per cent of gem-quality opal is produced. “The Australian opal industry wants to grow but it doesn’t want to change. You can’t do one without the other.”

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