All About Coloured Diamonds

Deep inside the darkest caverns of the Natural History Museum in London, England, there's a curious little box. Not too big, not too flashy, in typical restrained British fashion, and in this box is a small pedestal called the "Aurora Pyramid of Hope". It is the world's most complete and stunning display of natural, untreated, multi-coloured diamonds.

Multi-coloured what now?

Many people don't realize that in addition to the icy, crystalline, colourless diamonds that have adorned the hands and throats of royalty for centuries, diamonds can come in a vast array of colours.

The coloured diamond display in London's natural history museum shows the entire range of possible colour variations, from pale yellow to burnt marigold, glacier blue through to diamonds the colour of the night sky, all the different verdant shades of green and even some of the world's very, very few specimens of rarest red diamonds.

These diamonds get their unique colours from trace impurities and are some of the most consistently reliable investment pieces of the fine jewellery world; historically, the most expensive items sold at auctions over the last century have been coloured diamonds.

Are They *Real* Diamonds, Though?

Yes! Coloured diamonds are real diamonds with almost exactly the same geological properties and mineral makeup, only they have slight chemical impurities or structural distortions that affect the way we perceive the light that passes through them.

The vast majority of diamonds on the market will have traces of these impurities or distortions of formation — this is how we get our D-Z colour grading scale when evaluating standard diamonds. Fancy coloured diamonds will just have them in greater intensity, allowing us to perceive deeper and richer colours. Sometimes larger rough diamond stones will have both coloured areas and colourless areas, which are cut into separate finished gems.

How Are Colored Diamonds Formed?

Coloured diamonds are born deep within the earth in the same way as standard colourless or near-colourless diamonds: intense heat and pressure over a very long time that causes the crystallization of atoms of pure carbon.

Colour can be created in diamonds in one of two ways: the first is with the inclusion of trace elements that change the body colour of the diamond, usually nitrogen (which causes yellowish tints), or boron (which causes blueish tints).

The second is by inconsistencies in the way the diamond forms in the earth. As you may know, light is actually made up of a whole range of rainbow colours usually imperceptible to the human eye. Certain distortions of a diamond's crystal lattice, or the way the atoms fit together, can cause the light entering the stone to break up and reflect back at us differently. Thus, we perceive certain colours more strongly than others. This is called *selective absorption.*

A talented and experienced stonecutter can make the most of this by cutting a deeper pavilion (the lower pointed part of the diamond) or by adjusting the way the girdle is cut and polished (the "belt" that runs around the center in between the upper and lower halves) to manipulate the way light travels through the stone.

How Are Colored Diamonds Graded?

Grading standard colourless diamonds and fancy coloured diamonds have some similarities and some differences. The most important quality considerations are:

Carat Weight

Just like with standard colourless diamonds, the size and weight of the diamond plays an enormous role in its value. All of the record-breaking, headline-making, major player sales of coloured diamonds over the years have been in substantial sizes over five carats. Rarity is a consideration when looking at size; coloured diamonds are already so uncommon, and to find them in sizes over a half carat is almost unheard of.

Cut

Both standard colourless diamonds and coloured diamonds are given a cut grade based on how well proportioned the facets are and how effectively the cut interacts with the light. In colourless diamond grading, the cut is possibly the number one most important factor in a diamond's beauty.

However, cut grading tends to be a little bit more complicated when evaluating coloured diamonds, because so much of the cutting and polishing process prioritizes getting the best body colour and may be approached a bit differently. Only the very best in the industry are able to evaluate their rough diamond and find the best way to show its natural colour to its absolute best potential, while still guarding against loss of carat weight and breakage.

Clarity

Clarity is an important consideration for both standard colourless diamonds and coloured ones. High quality diamonds of any colour should be clear, uniform, and free of visible impurities. The exceptions to this rule are black and white coloured diamonds — the unique properties of both come from their pattern of clarity characteristics.

However, remember that an intensely-coloured diamond with an undesirable clarity grade will nearly always be worth more than an internally flawless diamond with a weak, washed out colour.

Hue

Here's where our diamond grading criteria starts to deviate. While the value of colourless diamonds increases as the amount of trace coloured tones decreases — with completely colour-free diamonds ("D" grade) being the most desireable — coloured diamonds are valued based on the opposite.

Hue is what we tend to think of as the "colour", for instance blue, pink or yellow. Red, green, and blue in particular are always highly desired.

Sometimes diamonds will be given a base color and a “secondary” one to describe the hue in more detail — for example, “purplish red”, “greyish blue”, “greenish yellow”. This helps gemologists cover the entire spectrum of rainbow colors.

Tone

This refers to the relative light and darkness of the colour, for instance light blue or deep blue. Generally mid-range tones towards slightly darker are most popular, but as long as the colour is bright and intense the tone is largely a matter of personal preference. Note, however, that black and white diamonds do not receive a “tone” grade as they represent and encompass only one polarity of darkness and light.

Saturation

Probably the most important grading characteristic for coloured diamonds, saturation refers to the intensity of the colour. Bright, vivid, eye-catching colour will always be more valuable than dim, watery colours, no matter where the stone lands in the other grading considerations.

In a coloured diamond grading report, these three colour characteristics — hue, tone, and saturation — come together into an overall colour grade. While there can be some overlap, most coloured diamonds will fall under the terms Fancy, Fancy Light, Fancy Intense, Fancy Vivid, Fancy Deep, and Fancy Dark, with Vivid and Deep being the most valuable. This will then be followed by the hue to reach the final colour grade, for instance Fancy Deep Blue.

Beautiful, Valuable, and Always in Style

As you can see, the “fancy” coloured diamond industry is a booming collector’s club, full of one-of-a-kind wonders, red carpets, family curses, and high-profile auctions. Coloured diamonds are some of the most reliable investments you can make, as their value consistently increases with every passing year. Their incredible rarity, as well as their appeal to a new generation that values individuality, innovation, and self-expression, ensures that coloured diamonds continually sell for millions of dollars per carat at auctions that gain worldwide exposure.

Now, with diamond mines reaching the end of their production potential and struggling to continue supplying the market, these unique coloured beauties will be in even more demand. Next time you want to invest in a forever piece, consider choosing a coloured diamond ring that will compound its value exponentially and display your unique personality to the world.