Lively stories, new information, scientific methods, and vivid photography combine to capture the romance and passion of one of the world’s rarest and most colorful gemstones.
Turquoise has been mined on six continents and traded throughout the world’s history, including among the European, Middle East, Chinese, Mayan, Aztec, Inca, and Southwest Native American cultures. It has been set in silver and gold jewelry, cut and shaped into fetish animals, and even formed to represent gods in many religions. It is displayed in museums around the world, representing prehistoric, historic, and modern society’s arts and histories.

Turquoise’s history and folklore is laced with mystery and colorful legends about its alluring mystical qualities. Turquoise: The World Story of a Fascinating Gemstone represents the arts and traditions of prehistoric, historic, and modern societies, and includes examples from the greatest collections in the world. Included are artifacts representing cultures, museums, and individual artists from Egypt, Persia, China, Tibet, Russia, Germany, Italy, Mayan, Aztec, Inca, Southwest Native America, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

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**Initial Use and Trade**

In Mesoamerica, the hunter-gatherers continued until about 1800 BCE. In Oaxaca and Veracruz, the early farming and settlement began at Santa Marta and Tehuacan. By 1200 BCE, the early Olmec civilization began at San Lorenzo and, through their influence to other surrounding areas, trade began. By 400 BCE, the Olmec had constructed many dwelling areas, including Monte Alban, which was begun by the Olmecs and later became one of the main cities of Zapotec, a culture that lasted from 500 BCE to AD 1000. The ancient city of Teotihuacan inhabitants were active traders during the first millennium with trade routes extending to other parts of Mexico as well as the Gulf Coast. Their main city reached its zenith by AD 600 and was abandoned by AD 700. It is through these past cultures’ use of turquoise ornamentation in art, gold, silver, and copper that most Mesoamerican turquoise history is commonly written about. Jade, plumage and turquoises, and a variety of shells were all used to decorate many items. The Mayan culture lasted for about three thousand years and was divided into three historical periods: Preclassic (2000 BCE–AD 250), Classic (AD 250–900), and Postclassic (AD 900–1300). There is evidence to support that the Maya and other peoples were miners of jade and jadeite, and it should be assumed that if there was turquoise nearby, they had the advancement in tools and developed reasons to go to the hills and mine it for ceremonial and ornamental uses as they did jade and other minerals. Turquoise in the Mesoamerican cultures had great symbolism and religious significance relating to rain, drought, political power, and even the concept of time. The Aztec culture came to what is now the Mexican Basin and gained control about AD 1427, reaching its zenith by 1521. There was great trade and interaction among all of the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica, including the Aztecs. They continually learned from the previous and surrounding cultures, and improved on what they learned from these cultures as they conquered each one, adding these smaller cultures to their empire. "Annually the tribes under the dominion of Montezuma were required to pay tribute, including jewelry and ornaments of great value. As recorded in the ‘Book of Tribute’ and translated by Penafiel, these consisted of ‘a gold circle, gold diadem, gold necklace, pearls of chalchihuitl, masks of turquoise stone, turquoise stone not cut, stones of rock crystal with shades of blue and with gold mounting, pendants of beryl enameled in blue and with gold mounting, and plates mounted with turquoise stones.’ Included also therein, according to Clavigero, were ‘ten small measures of fine turquoises and one cargo of ordinary turquoises.’ It is known from the Chronicle of Tezozomoc that in the fifteenth century, the Mexicans imported shields and ear plugs bedecked with turquoise mosaics from the people of the Zapotecan tribes and accepted these objects as tribute."
Squash blossoms set with a variety of turquoise. Photo by Davonna Lowry; courtesy of Turquoise Museum.

Above right: The world’s modern trade routes for turquoise fascinate every collector of turquoise, jewelry and art. This sterling silver necklace was made by Navajo artist Allison Lee and his two sons Trent and Kyle. The necklace is set with gem grade Egyptian turquoise. Photo by Davonna Lowry; courtesy of Turquoise Museum.

Above left: Navajo artist Allison Lee silversmithing at his workshop in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Allison has taught his art to his three sons as well as jewelry design and silver and goldsmithing skills to several artists. Photo by Davonna Lowry; courtesy of Turquoise Museum.

Left: Navajo artist Wes Willie has become a world-renowned artist since starting his craft in 1995. It was then that he came to the Turquoise Museum in search of high-quality turquoise to set in his artwork. He chose two high-grade Lone Mountain stones that were given to him on consignment. Since that time, his artwork has been purchased by collectors around the world. Photo by Joe Dan Lowry; courtesy of Turquoise Museum.

Center right: Turquoise is a gem that has been used as ornamentation in many cultural eras of art through the centuries. It has been used in those cultures’ iconic influences and art, including the smoking era in the United States. Photo by Davonna Lowry; courtesy of Turquoise Museum.
Buffington, and Lawrence Springer. In 1930, Ted Johnson bought out Buffington and since then, several owners (including Lee Hand, Doc Wilson, Myron Clark, the Edgar family, and Dowel Ward) have worked these deposits. Around 1959, the ten claims were sold to a large metal mining outfit by the Edgar brothers, who did not know that gold deposits were located below the well-known turquoise and copper outcroppings. Other names that these claims were known as were Royal Blue, Royal Blue No. 1, and Blue Star. The last production of turquoise from this area was by Dowel Ward in 1976. It is said that the name “Number Eight” originated because the best turquoise was found on the eighth claim.

Cerrillos
This name refers to the most-mentioned historic turquoise mining area in the American Southwest and is located between Santa Fe and Albuquerque in Santa Fe County, New Mexico. Multiple minerals have been found throughout several miles of hillsides where turquoise and gravel deposits are common and gold less common. Many turquoise aficionados collect from this area for a connection to the famous and oftentimes exaggerated tales that have been written about this area in articles and books. This area’s most well-known deposits have been marketed as Turquoise Hill, Castillian, and Mount Chalchihuitl, as well as by a few other names. The Turquoise Hill property is one of the most preserved and interesting turquoise mining sites in the world, with its prehistoric dig site above and its numerous extended tunnels below.

Godber-Burnham
Bob Burton and Joe Potts discovered these deposits in Nevada at an elevation of 6,900 feet in 1932. They originally named the claim Last Chance and later filed two more claims called Homestite and Blue Stone. Located east of Austin about thirty miles, these claims later became known as Dry Creek. Bob and Joe sold their claims to Frank Burnham in 1934, and then Frank sold the claims to Walter Godber. Bruce and Jeri Woods became the owners of these claims in 1999.

American Phenomenon
The greatest influence in turquoise over the last hundred years has been the impact of the American turquoise market. The American market has brought a new twist to naming and marketing turquoise. The phenomenon of the Classic American Turquoise Mines is directly related to the American’s individual right to freedom and land ownership. When a turquoise claim (generally twenty acres or 1,500 by 600 feet) is filed at the state BLM and the county courthouse where the mine is located, the turquoise produced at a specific claim is then marketed by its given name around the world. This name can become a pedigree for the turquoise it produces. It can define the source of an individual turquoise stone and thereby be tied to that mine’s provenance, rarity, and value. Every turquoise mine has an opportunity to become a Classic, depending on the quantity and quality of turquoise it produces and how well it is marketed to the suppliers and demands of the turquoise industry. Almost every time a new mine with an unusual color, matrix, or story is introduced into the market, it has the chance to become the next Classic mine. Sometimes through the years, a turquoise claim may change owners, and the new mine owner might rename the claim. Jim Godber renamed his newly purchased claim (Godber Mine) after buying it from the Burnham family (Burnham Mine). Naming and renaming turquoise mines has created some long genealogies for certain turquoise mines. If the mine name is already famous, many new mine owners stay with the famous name.
LONE MOUNTAIN

The Moser brothers from Germany were said to be the first miners in this area. It was in 1920 that Lee Hand claimed the deposits under the name of the Blue Jay Mining Lode. He was told about them and led directly to them by a man who owed him money, and the location of the deposits was this man’s hope that his debt would be forgiven. And it was Lee Hand eventually sold out to Doc Wilson. This area has produced turquoise for generations, with the largest production during the 1970s when Menless Windfeld owned the mine. For decades these deposits were exposed and mined as miners dug unorganized and treacherous tunnels to chase the deposits through the hillside. Eventually these tunnels dangerously weakened the integrity of the mountain, thus endangering the miner’s safety. Menless leased the claims a couple of times, including several miners who, it is said, ruined the site with unsafe tunneling and mining practices. Menless reacquired the claims and eventually started using heavy equipment to collapse existing tunnels and to slowly build a small open-pit mining operation that continued to produce turquoise until Menless decided it also was too dangerous and expensive to keep mining. The current owners of this mine are Gerard (Nick) Smith and Tristine Smith under the business name Lone Mountain Mining, LLC. They continue to actively mine turquoise and develop this mining area.4

BONANZA

Each discovery of a turquoise deposit has the chance of becoming the next big turquoise producer that will make the miner rich. It is interesting that several deposits have been marketed using the name Bonanza, yet none of these discoveries have become famous or made the miner rich.6

HILLSIDE

Since most turquoise deposits form on a hillside, several of these discoveries in the southwestern United States have been marketed using the name Hillside. These samples are from a deposit that was near Battle Mountain, Nevada. Many claim jumpers have also used the name Hillside or other generic names to sell turquoise that they illegally mined from someone else’s claims. One claim jumper said, “Yeah, I found this small deposit along a hillside and this is all there was.”4

WHY

The marketing and tradition affixed to the name of a mine and the turquoise that it produces has created a romance factor that a turn has created a demand for turquoise stones from a variety of famous turquoise mines. Each turquoise mine that has become a Classic has a little something different that distinguishes it from other turquoise mines around the world. Even though the Native Americans mined and used turquoise from many sources around the Southwest, the most prolific writings in history continually speak about the Cerrillos mining area. Therefore, this location of mines has become synonymous with the history and tourism of the southwestern United States. The reasons why certain American turquoise mines have become famous include their history, unique grade of color, matrix, rarity, production, and marketing. Many American mines produce high-grade colors of blue and green turquoise, such as the Tyrone Mine in southern New Mexico or the Manassa Mine in southern Colorado. Others, such as the Blue Gem and Royston mines in Nevada, became famous for their turquoise’s mixture of blue and green colors. Although many turquoise mines produce nice grades and quantities of turquoise, not all turquoise mines have become famous. It should also be stated that just because a mine is famous does not mean that all of the turquoise it produces is considered quality or even unique in its color and matrix.

TYRONE

These prehistoric workings were rediscovered in the late 1800s. “Turquoise John” was said to be on a hunting trip when he discovered the deposits. In 1893, the most famous and best turquoise from this area was discovered in what was called the Elizabeth Pocket. Tyrone has produced the best turquoise in New Mexico. This area’s deposits stretch for several miles of hillsides in the Burro Mountains and has been marketed using names such as the Azure, Parker, Porterfield, Burro Chief, and Montezuma. The largest-producing area was the Azure. This area is now most famous for its copper production. It is important to note that most of the high-grade blue New Mexican turquoise that was sold during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centu-
JOE DAN LOWRY
is world-renowned for his knowledge about turquoise and is sought after for appraisals, interviews, and lectures. His research has led him to work with many experts in the fields of geology, mineralogy, and archeology, and he has seen some of the most spectacular turquoise specimens and artifacts on display in the world’s museums as well as private collections. He owns one turquoise mine, has worked at many mines around the world, is a skilled lapidary, and is co-author of the book Turquoise Unearthed. He developed and is curator of the Turquoise Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he lives.

JOE P. LOWRY
has been the president of Zoch Low since 1973 and is the founder and president of the Turquoise Museum since 1993. He has been involved in bringing education to the turquoise and Indian jewelry industry at museums and national parks around the country and has worked with the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in Washington, D.C. He co-authored Turquoise Unearthed with his son, Joe Dan Lowry.