



This year, the town of Sainte-Marie-Aux-Mines turned into a giant gem/mineral show with booths in every conceivable location, showcasing the wares of more than 1,000 exhibitors. (Photo: Marion Keller)
Inset: Poster for the 58th edition of the SMAM. (Photo: Mineral & Gem, Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines)

SAINTE-MARIE-AUX-MINES

A Must-See Show

HOW DID A SMALL TOWN IN THE ALSACE REGION OF FRANCE BECOME THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT GLOBAL EVENT FOR GEMSTONES AND MINERALS—ONLY AFTER TUCSON? NOW IN ITS 58TH YEAR, THE 2023 EDITION OF THE SAINTE-MARIE-AUX-MINES MINERAL & GEM SHOW WELCOMED SOME 40,000 VISITORS WHO CAME TO SEE THE PRODUCTS OF MORE THAN 1,000 EXHIBITORS. THIS RECORD-BREAKING ATTENDANCE AUGURS WELL FOR THE LASTING ENTHUSIASM GENERATED BY THIS LEGENDARY EUROPEAN SHOW.

By Marie Chabrol

During a very short but jam-packed five days (June 21-25), gem dealers from all over the world showcased their products in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, a small and picturesque town nestled in the Vosges Mountains.

The town itself turned into a giant gem/mineral showcase. Booths were set up in the local school, the streets, the theater and even the swimming pool area. On display was a wide choice of minerals, gemstones, jewelry, fossils and more. Two zones welcomed visitors: the *Gem* and the *Mineral* zone, although there was some mixing in the two areas.

A Bit of History

So, why did this small town of some 6000 inhabitants become a mineral and gemstone destination in Europe? Likely, it's due to its mining heritage. Archaeologists have suggested that mining began there in the Iron Age, although it is more likely that the exploitation of mineral wealth came later. Records of taxes on silver mining date to the end of the 10th century, and the geology of the region supports other metals such as zinc, cobalt, copper, arsenic and even antimony. The mining technique at the time was that of *pingen* or vertical wells that were frequently flooded, followed by open pits.

The golden age of Sainte-Marie's mines started in the 16th century with the arrival of German miners and the gradual creation of mining corporations. Period documents mention up to 500 active mines. A detail of a 17th-century painting in the town's Sainte-Madeleine church bears witness to the area's mining activities.



Detail of a 17th-century painting in the Church of the Madeleine in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, depicting the Virgin offering the scapular to Saint Simon Stok. The lower part of the painting shows miners and a view of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, divided between Catholics and Protestants. (Photo: José Antenat)



The theater was one of the venues that welcomed thousands of visitors to the SMAM show. (Photo: Marion Keller)

But the proliferation of conflicts and epidemics in the 17th century decimated the region, with a resulting decline in activity. The last arsenic mine closed in 1904.

Yet, the culture around the town's mining history endures. The 1960s saw the rediscovery of the galleries by speleology enthusiasts and, in 1962, *La Journée des Mines* organized by François Lehman saw the creation of what would become the second most important worldwide exhibition dedicated to minerals and gems. Despite the ups and downs in the mid-2000s, the show has continually taken place. Managed for many years by a private company, it was taken over by the Town Hall in 2011, with the mission of perpetuating this beautiful event.

The 2023 Show

It must be recognized that the 2023 edition was not one of any great discoveries. What makes SMAM so special, though, are not only the magnificent specimens for sale, but the overall ambiance and camaraderie of meeting fellow dealers, gemologists, and aficionados. And while the Theater and the Swimming Pool are mandatory destinations for mineral lovers, for those visiting the *Gem* area, it is strongly recommended to come with comfortable sneakers, backpack, hat, a large water bottle and, of course, a loupe.

It didn't take long to notice that the prices have overall greatly increased. Good deals were no longer the norm as was the case in previous years. Spinel, zircon, beryl, tourmaline and beautiful corundum were in high demand, as indicated by their rising prices. The same was true for the beautiful ornamental materials whose cost per kilo easily reached several hundred dollars.

"Sainte-Marie is eagerly awaited by all," commented Emmanuel Thoreux, a gem cutter and dealer whose company White River Gems specializes in material from North America. "We find our friends and our customers there. I would not miss this great gem event for anything in the world."

Among the many wonders at his booth were agatized dinosaur bones from the Morrison formation that extends along the states of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Utah, as well as Spiny Oyster from the Gulf of Mexico, obsidian from Oregon, and agates with marcasite from California. Also quite memorable was an impressive and rare 0.63-kg turquoise nugget, probably from Tibet.

Center: An impressive 630-gram turquoise nugget and a 37.87-ct cabochon, cut from this material, origin probably Tibet, from Emmanuel Thoreux.

Right: Emmanuel Thoreux shows off some of his beautiful gemstones.

(Both photos: Emmanuel Thoreux)



Above: Future gem aficionados admire some of the many mineral and gem specimens. (Photo: José Antenat)



One of the main attractions of the show was this T-rex that was featured outside the Osmont Pavillon, from Eleonore Clement. Of course, I had to say Hi to it! (Photo: Marion Keller)

In the school's gymnasium, also called the "Prestige Room," one of the booths we visited was that of Mauricio Bello Cortes and his wife Frédérique, whose company Bello Gems specializes in stones from Latin America. "The Bello Gems company is the result of meeting Mauricio," explains Frédérique, who grew up in southern France and went to university in England. "After finishing my master's degree, I wanted to swap the London fog for the Mexican sun and, while working in an art gallery in Oaxaca in 2002, I met Mauricio. A jeweler who handcrafts all his pieces, he travels throughout South America to buy precious stones for his customers."

She joined him on his trips and became fascinated by the world of gemstones. The couple then created their company and began exhibiting their finds. Among their stones featured at SMAM were blue opal from Peru (Nazca region) and sapphires from Colombia, which are of magmatic origin. Some were two-tone while others

Rough Peruvian opal from Bello Gems. (Photo: Bello Gems)



Beautiful tourmaline from Afghanistan at the booth of Mineraux Alain Martaud. (Photo: Marion Keller)



Frédérique & Mauricio Bello Cortes of Bello Gems, which specializes in gems from South America. (Photo: Bello Gems)

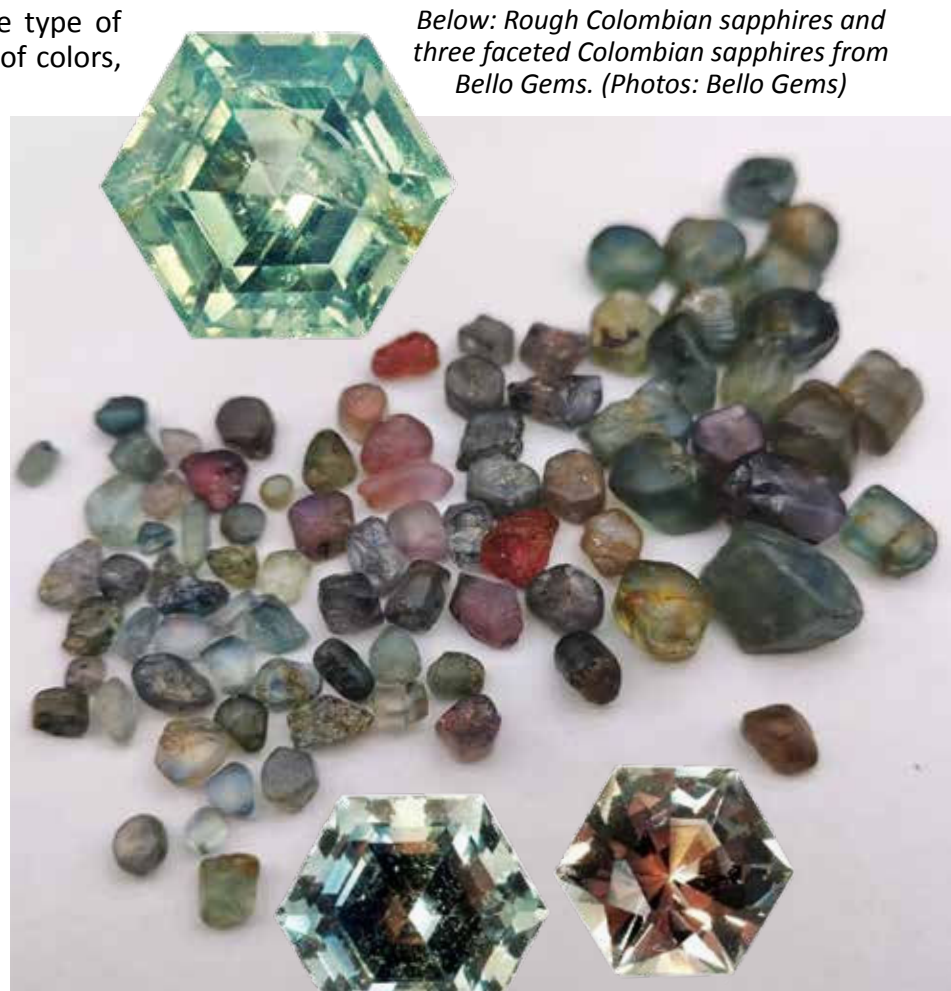


Selection of vivid blue Peruvian opals from Bello Gems. (Photo: Bello Gems)

exhibited color change depending on the type of light. The sapphires are found in a range of colors, from classic blue through pink, green, yellow, purple, gray, and even colorless.

“The Colombian production remains artisanal and mining is alluvial because the primary deposit hasn’t yet been found,” continues Frédérique, adding that the main mining area is in the Valle del Cauca near Mercaderes. The company they work with buys what the subsistence miners manage to collect when they are not working in the fields since agriculture is their main activity.

“The material is often very included and fractured, but when clean, it offers a sheen close to that of spinel, and more vivid than usual sapphires.” describes Frédérique enthusiastically, adding “The characteristic inclusions of Colombian sapphires are polysynthetic twins and areas of color following the hexagonal growth, zircon crystals, sometimes pseudo-triangular red rutile crystals and boehmite needles.”



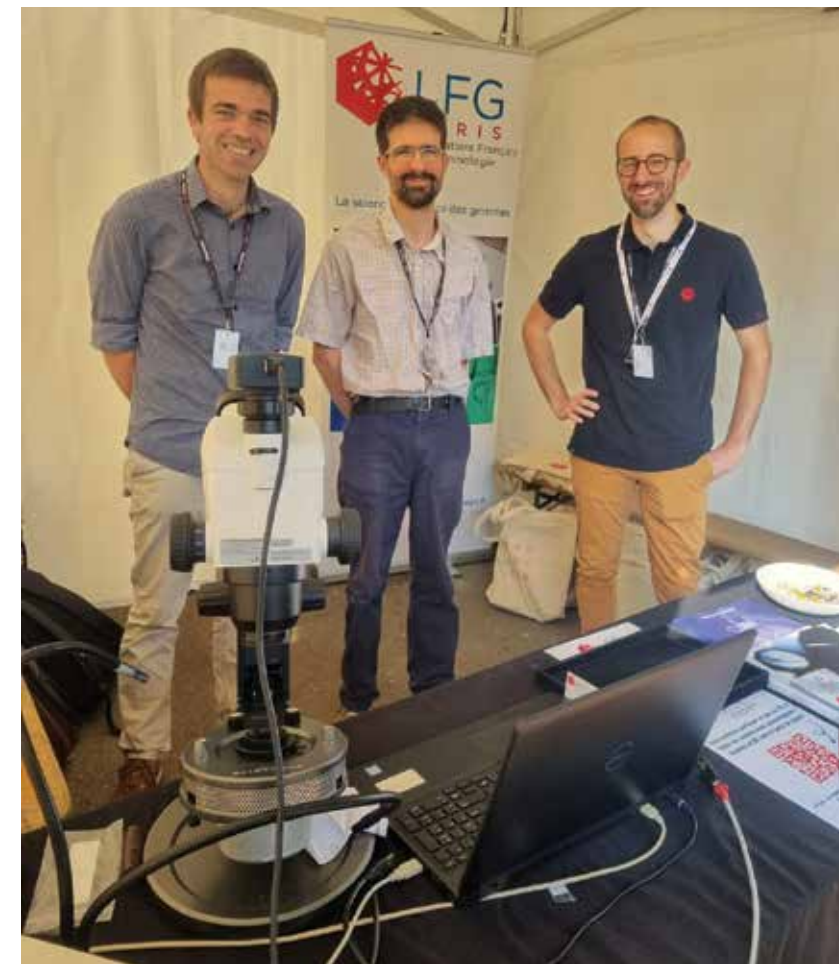
Below: Rough Colombian sapphires and three faceted Colombian sapphires from Bello Gems. (Photos: Bello Gems)



One of the many fluorite crystals on display at the SMAM (Photo: Marion Keller)

We also noted some treated materials in the exhibition, most of which were disclosed by the dealers. But, when in doubt, we would not hesitate to contact the Laboratoire Français de Gemmologie (LFG), formed in 1929, that offered to analyze stones at the show.

Located at the center of the *Gem* zone, the LFG team comprised its Director, Aurélien Delaunay, along with Ugo Hennebois and Quentin Dartois. During the event, they examined quite a lot of samples. It was the perfect way to dispel any worries and get first-hand information on the materials acquired.



The team of the Laboratoire Français de Gemmologie, with their equipment. The LFG was at the SMAM show to help and inform buyers about potential purchases. Left to right: Quentin Dartois, Ugo Hennebois and Director Aurelien Delaunay. (Photo: LFG)



A carved blue topaz with diamonds inside! (Photo: Marie Chabrol)



Crocodiles and eggs, cut in Mexican calcite by Stephane Renard. (Photo: Marie Chabrol)

Among a few of the more interesting, if not rather improbable, items at the show, were irradiated blue topazes, sliced in two, hollowed out, and then glued together with small “sun” bezels inside set with diamonds! Yes, you read it correctly, diamonds!

Other quite amazing creations were by Stéphane Renard, a gem cutter who makes *crocodile* sweets in calcite (Haribo® eaters will recognize themselves!) and *eggs* as equally delicious dishes. Bon Appetit!

The show would not be complete without its excellent and varied selection of speakers, conferences and other activities, as well as talented jewelry designers.

It would take weeks to visit each stand, each dedicated space, and then greet everyone. The four days I spent there passed way too quickly. What comes to mind, however, besides the sore feet, is that I must not miss next year’s show at Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines that will take place June 26 – 30, 2024. See you there! ■