

GEORGIOUS



A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
SAPPHIRES

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In a
Word
or Two

So great is the affinity between Sri Lanka and its sapphires that the nation might legitimately put in for a name change to be better called Sri Sapphire.

Thanks to the extreme old age of its rocks (90% are between 500 to 2.5 million years old), Sri Lanka's gems are so numerous as to often just wash out onto flood plains, and into rivers and streams.

Indeed, the mining of alluvial deposits by simple water-winnowing river mining was for long the classic technique used to find gemstones, separating them out from the river sand and clay by simple sluicing in wicker baskets.

Tunnel mining represents a more scalable technique. Typically, pits of 5 to 500 feet in depth are dug, with tunnels excavated horizontally from them.

The clay, sand and gravel is then sluiced with water in conical baskets to separate out the heavier stones that then settle at the basket base.

At a much more industrial level, backhoe earthmover machines, ablaze in their environmentally challenging acid yellow or orange livery, are used to excavate the top soil.

Twenty five percent of the country's total land area is potentially gem-bearing, but the greatest concentration of mining is around the town of Ratnapura which accounts for 65% of mined gems, the balance mostly coming from Elahera, a district in the North Central Province.

The country's gem mining recorded history reaches back to at least the 2nd century BCE, with the mention of a gem mine in The Mahavamsa. However, if biblical rumours of King Solomon's wooing of the Queen of Sheba with gifts of priceless Sri Lankan gems, are to be believed, the country's gem mines can be back dated at least another 700 years.

Today, the country's gem industry is high regulated, and its exports are one of the country's main foreign revenue earners, with sales escalating from around \$40 million in 1980 to over \$473 million in 2022. This places it in 4th position, below that of Garments (\$4.7 billion); Coffee, Tea & Spices (\$1.6 billion); and Rubber (\$1.06 billion).

This phenomenal acceleration dates in part to two bouts of government intervention: the establishment of the State Gem Corporation in 1971 and the 1993 Gem and Jewellery Authority Act.

By these moves, the government centralised and professionalised the issuing of gem-mining licenses and the leasing government land for mining. They extended control over sales and exporting and made it mandatory that gems discovered within mines could be sold arbitrarily; but must instead be presented at public auctions, with the government receiving a share of sales amounting to 2.5%.

The industry's value chain is a long one. Gem miners sell their stones to dealers, who sell the rough stones to cutter-polishers. Historically, these have usually been Ceylon Moors descendants of Arabians traders.

The glittering stones are then sold to wholesalers and onto retailers, where the greatest profits are to be made. The Sri Lankan Export Development Board claims that right across this chain some 650,000 people are employed – through the figure is difficult to verify.

Sri Lankan Sapphires are usually blue but also come in a variety of other colours that depend on the chemical composition of the stone: variants of red, purple; pink, gold sapphires, and lavender.

The country also excels at producing Hot Pink Sapphires, a yellow sapphire that is apparently a good deterrent against witchcraft, orange, and white ones.

Its green sapphires are its most distinctive, exhibiting a colour that is not found among the sapphires mined in other gem-producing countries. And it is also famous for a variant known as a padparadscha sapphire – from Padmaraga -a pink-orange stone.

The gem accounts for 85% of the precious stones mined in Sri Lanka – but the colour variant that gets the most acclaim is – of course - the Ceylon Blue Sapphire, the blue of cornflowers, clear skies, and inestimable, sophisticated material contentment.

Selling for \$5,000 - 8,000 per carat, they are as much statements of investment as they are items of adornment: "A kiss on the hand may feel very, very good," noted Anita Loos, "but a diamond and sapphire bracelet lasts forever".

Sri Lanka's sapphires are found in alluvial deposits across the country, the very best from Elahera and the Thammannawa, Kataragama area.

Since Ptolemy noted their glittering existence, the country's sapphires have been much favoured for crowns, thrones, diadems, as well as jewellery for First Nights and cocktail parties. They have won their place in global hearts since the very earliest times due to their exceptional clarity and transparency.

For any wearer interested in absolute quality, they are the go-to source for best-bling; and, not coincidentally, have given museums and auction houses 18 jewels of such arresting quality as to gain themselves names and identities in the own right.

THE APHRODITE SAPPHIRE



Modestly sized and sitting safe in a gallery of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum is one of the earliest and most beautiful Roman jewels – a sapphire, almost certainly from Sri Lanka.

Carved at some point in the first century it depicts Aphrodite feeding an eagle.

THE BISMARCK SAPPHIRE



The ultimate honeymoon gift, the Bismark Sapphire was discovered in Sri Lanka in 1920, though rumours within the South Asian gem trade claim that it was merely sold here - but that it originated in Burma.

Whatever the truth of its provenance, it was spotted by Harrison Willaims, an American carpet sweeper - cum-millionaire for his third wife, the remarkable Countess Mona von Bismarck, named by Chanel in 1930 as "The Best Dressed Woman in the World;" set to music by Cole Porter in "Ridin' High" in 1936; and painted by Salvador Dalí in 1943.

Given Harrison Williams' fortune (now valued at over 11 billion dollars) the 98.6 carat honeymoon present was but a bauble. The countess was to outlive Willaims and at some point between her fourth (Count Albrecht von Bismarck-Schonhausen) and fifth husband (Count Umberto de Martini) donated the jewel to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. Today it sits there for all to see (but never again wear), the sapphire mounted in a pendant necklace of diamonds and smaller sapphires.

THE BLUE BELLE OF ASIA



Rarely has a modest paddy field ever yielded so rich a crop as the Blue Belle of Asia, one of eighteen celebrated Sri Lankan sapphires so rare and beautiful as to have gained both a name, a legend and of course and an impressive provenance. The gem was pulled from marshy rice fields near Rathnapura in 1926; and sooner after was bought by O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co, a jeweller based in Colombo.

Macan Markar, established in 1860, was one of the country's preeminent jewellers, whose customers reached deep into the British royal family. It was polished and processed to reveal a 392.52-carat stone and set, suspended on a brilliant cut diamond tassel pendant and white gold necklace, its deep blue prism perfected framed.

Advertising his gem for its 'highly prized peacock blue colour and excellent clarity,' O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co sold it to Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors Limited in 1937. Quite why the motor magnate really wanted it is a mystery. He claimed he wished to present it to The Queen Consort, Elizabeth, on her coronation in 1937, but it was instead to vanish for 35 years – begging the question: Did it ever reach the Queen; or did she resell it in secret? Its next public airing was in the 1970s when it was examined by the Swiss-based gem dealer, Theodore Horovitz. In 2014 it reappeared at an auction and was bought for \$17.29 million by a Saudi collector.

THE BLUE GIANT OF THE ORIENT

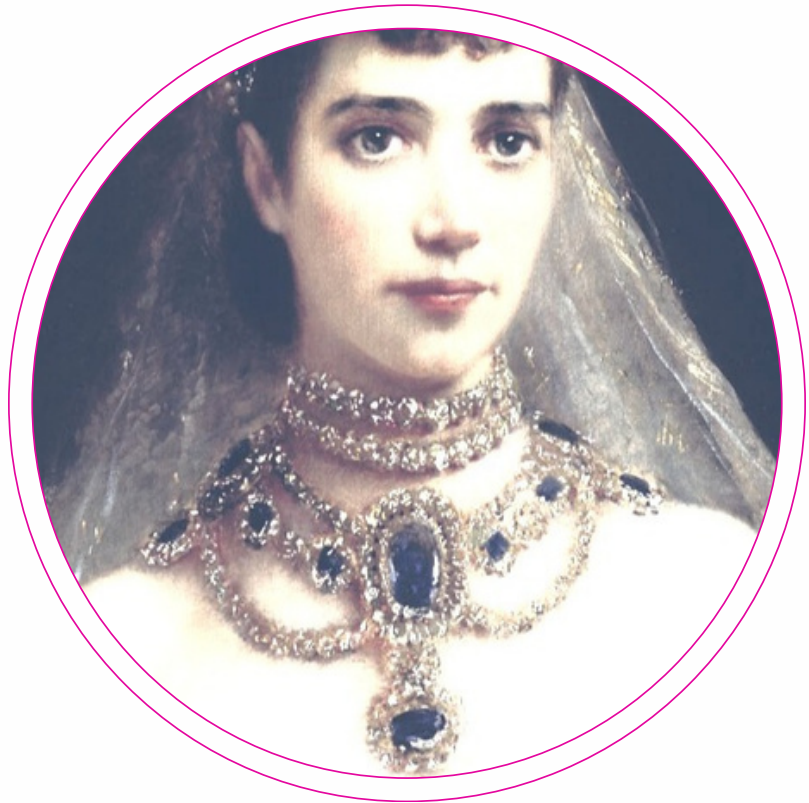


One of eighteen celebrated Sri Lankan sapphires, the Blue Giant Of The Orient is as rare as it is beautiful.

Weighing in at 466 carats, the Blue Giant of the Orient is one of the world's largest sapphires - though it was rumoured to be over 600 carats when it was first discovered in 1907, pulled from the waters of the Kalu Ganga, a river that winds across the foothills of Adam's Peak.

It was bought and processed by O. L. M. Macan Markar & Co, a jeweller based in Colombo, who oversaw the cutting and polishing. Macan Markar, established in 1860, was one of the country's preeminent jewellers, whose customers reached deep into the British royal family. The cutting of the gem properly revealed the stone's massive facets which yielded to the maximin possible light saturation to render the stone an impressive corn flower blue. Its life thereafter became a mystery. Valued at \$7,000 in 1907, it was sold to an anonymous American buyer. For nearly 100 years it vanished from the public eye - to reappear unexpectedly in May 2004 at the Christie's Magnificent Jewels action catalogue in Geneva. Remarkedly, it failed to sell in the auction but was later sold privately for \$1 million - again to a most anonymous collector; and has once again disappeared from the public eye.

THE EMPRESS MARIA'S SAPPHIRE



The ninth largest blue sapphire in the world, the 260.37 carat Empress Maria Sapphire was purchased as a holiday keepsake by her husband, Tsar Alexander II in the London Great Exhibition of 1862. Just the year before the Tsar had won acclaim for his emancipation of Russian serfs – a liberal legacy that nevertheless did nothing to forestall his assassination twenty years later by People's Will, an anarchist organization.

At the time of receiving her gift, the Tsarina had been married for 23 years, but it was only in 1860 on the death of her formidable mother in law that she came into her own, and took a more decisive role in the Russian court. The Tsarina was no wallflower. Behind the scenes, she encouraged her husband to liberate the serfs, further democratic initiatives and promote capitalism. The sapphire was made into an oval brooch adorned with a further 56 carats of diamonds and for eighteen years was worn with stylish delight. On the Tsarina's death in 1880 it was donated to the State Diamond Fund, still in existence today by way of the Borovitsky Gate in the Kremlin where it sits, almost lost amidst such an orgy of other rare gems, insignia, and crown jewels as to dim the dawn itself.

THE HEART OF THE OCEAN

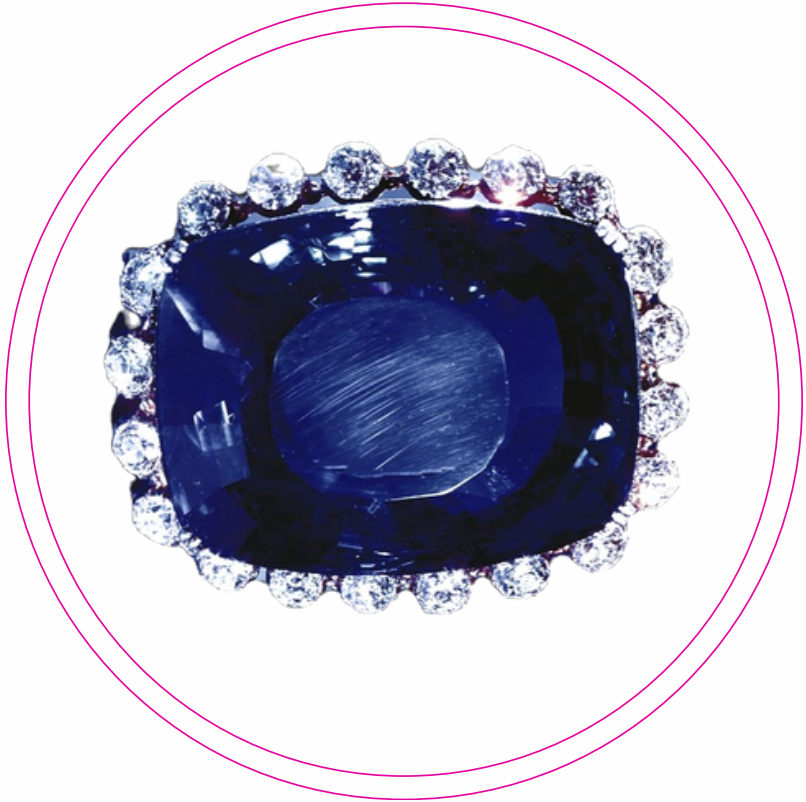


In a perfect example of nature obediently following Hollywood, the so-called Heart of the Ocean jewel in the film "Titanic," was posthumously created following the film's success as a 170 carat Ceylon blue sapphire, set with 65 diamonds. The sapphire replaced the inexpensive blue quartz flung by Kate Winslet into the icy ocean.

It was worn with much acclaim in 1998 by Celine Dion when she sang "My Heart Will Go On" at the Oscars. And, as is often the way with over mighty jewellery, it vanished some years later when it was auctioned for over \$2 million at a charity ball to a buyer who remains anonymous to this day.

More affordable copies of the necklace can be bought on eBay.

THE LOGAN SAPPHIRE



One of eighteen celebrated Sri Lankan sapphires, the Logan Blue Sapphire is - at 423 carats - one of the largest sapphires in the world. Its discovery is famously opaque. It is thought to have been mined in the early 19th century, cut, and polished and sent to Paris for sale.

After various owners, it eventually passed into the hands of Robert Guggenheim, the American diplomat and benefactor behind the Hall of Gems and Minerals at the Smithsonian Museum. Guggenheim gifted the jewel to his new wife, Rebecca, sometime around 1938.

On his death she remarried a Mr Logan, and passed the jewel onto the Smithsonian Museum to display as a tribute to Robert Guggenheim. Entirely without flaws, the stunning stone emanates a lush cornflower blue with violet overtones and has been set as a brooch supported by 20 white diamonds.

THE MIDNIGHT STAR SAPPHIRE



A deep purple-violet star gem, The Midnight Star Sapphire gets its name from its shadowy appearance, an appropriate hue for a 116.75 carat gem with a provenance that is anything but well illuminated.

Most experts appear to agree that it does actually come from Sri Lanka (though their reasoning can be

Babylonian to follow) but reliable records only date back to the end of the 19th century when the stone was acquired by George Kunz and sold to the American financier, J.P. Morgan.

Today it sits gleaming darkly in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

THE PRIDE OF SRI LANKA



In a world where carats are king, the 856 carats of The Pride of Sri Lanka easily catapults the stone into the rarified reaches of the celebrated Sri Lankan sapphires so rare and beautiful as to have become legendary.

The Pride of Sri Lanka was pulled from mines in Marapanna, a few kilometres from Rathnapura.

In a year overshadowed by the new violent excesses of the civil war, its discovery, along with the country's cricket team's victory in the test match against England, was one of the few triumphs of the year.

Displayed briefly in a glass box, it was soon to vanish altogether, bought by a buyer whose identity is likely to still be a mystery to the Inland Revenue.

THE PRINCESS OF WALES ENGAGEMENT RING

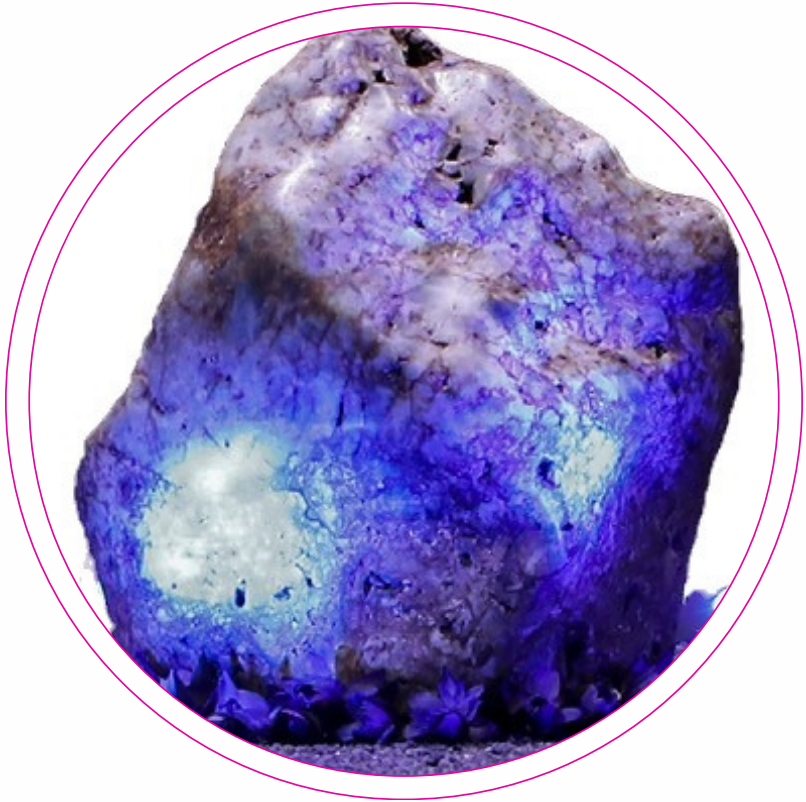


Compared to the other notable sapphires given by Sri Lanka to the world, Princess Diana's Engagement Ring, now to be seen on the hand of the current Princess of Wales, Kate, is best categorised as small but perfectly formed.

A mere 12 carats, this oval ring rocketed into the homes of anyone with a television set when the then Prince of Wales declared his love (“whatever that is”) for his future wife, Lady Diana Spencer in 1981.

It was later inherited by her elder son and at some point between 2010 and 2011 was resized to fit the finger of his own fiancée, Kate Middleton, a brilliant blue reminder of Sri Lanka in any of the millions of photographs published of her around the world every week.

THE QUEEN OF ASIA



So used to amazing discoveries, the phlegmatic world of intentional jewellery was all the same ill-prepared for the discovery of a 310 kilogram, 1.6 million carat blue sapphire pulled from the ground in December 2021 in Batugedara near Ratnapura. Despatched for deeper examination and authentication, it was rumoured to be bought by a Dubai-based company for over \$100 million - though the news trail has since gone cold on this remarkable discovery.

THE SERENDIPITY SAPPHIRE



Weighing in at around 510 kilograms and 2.6 million carats, The Serendipity Sapphire is the world's largest star sapphire cluster. It was discovered in July 2021 in Kahawatte near Ratnapura - and entirely by accident, when Mr Gamage, a gem trader, set workmen to dig a well. Since its discovery, Mr Gamage has wisely chosen to remain entirely silent on the subject of his home improvement bonanza.

THE STAR OF ADAM



Various price quotations have been given for the Star of Adam, a 1,444 carat sapphire pulled from Rathnapura's mines in 2015 - and the difference between them is more than sufficient to power the economy of a small country for several months. \$100 million; \$175 million; even \$300 million - all emerge as possible price points for this 280 ounce egg-shaped stone.

What makes the stone so remarkable, size excepted, is the distinct 6-rayed star it displays, an effect known amongst jewellers as "asterism," deriving from the complex make-up of the stone itself which produces an internal reflection effect.

The stone's owner, who has wisely chosen to remain anonymous, has gone to ground since announcing that he might be interested in a sale.

THE STAR OF ARTABAN



Once upon a time, many centuries ago, a wise man named Artaban set off from Persia to join the three Magi visiting the baby Jesus. The Bible tells us nothing about who these three wise men were - though tradition has it that they were named Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar and came respectively from Persian, India, and Arabia.

Artaban, the fourth would-be magi never actually made it to Bethlehem, despite having purchased three unforgettable gems as presents, one of which was a sapphire. This vague fable, with a sapphire at its centre, provided the perfect name for a milky blue 287 carat sapphire from Sri Lanka whose own origins are also opaque.

What little is known of the colossal stone is that it was bought in 1943 by a member of the Georgia Mineral Society and gifted anonymously to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

THE STAR OF BOMBAY



Arguments still range over whether The Star of Bombay is Sri Lankan or Indian. It was discovered at a time when the British East India company ruled over Sri Lanka and on the balance of probability, it seems more than likely that the 182 carat stone was mined on the island before setting off on its world travels. Hollywood was to be its happiest home for it was bought by Douglas Fairbanks in the 1920s for

"America's sweetheart," his wife Mary Pickford "the best known woman who has ever lived."

Star of the silent screen, her own fame came to an abrupt halt as sound was added to the movie mix a few years after she received her glamorous Sri Lankan sapphire. Hopefully its unusual violet-blue colour (caused by a singular mixture of titanium, iron, and vanadium) gave her some consolation in the decades that followed.

On her death in 1979 it was donated to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

THE STAR OF INDIA



Much debate and not a little bit of earnest patriotism has gone into confirming the origin of the Star of India - as Sri Lankan. But if the 'India' tag is wrong, so too is that of 'star' for this much misnamed stone has not one but two such stars on it making it rare beyond the dreams of avarice. Its discovery may be a mystery, but its trail becomes clear in 1905 when the gem arrived in London, brought by a British army officer

from Madras. It was cut by the jeweller Albert Ramsay to leave a 563.35-carat almost flawless star sapphire.

The milky quality of the stone was caused by the minerals within it that also produced its dreamy star effect, the tiny fibres of the mineral, reflecting light like cat's eyes.

It was bought by the American millionaire J. P. Morgan and lived a inappropriately peaceful life in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City until its theft in 1964. The thieves were helped by the gem's alarm system being battery-dead - but within days Murph the Surf and his villainous cronies were arrested and the gem returned to its museum: forever admired and never worn.

THE STUART SAPPHIRE



Arguments – all but improvable – rage gently over The Stuart Sapphire. Is it from Sri Lanka – or Afghanistan, India, or Burma? Sitting atop the very crown still worn by the Kings and Queens of the United Kingdom, it is probably the world's most visible sapphire.

Weighing in at 104 carats it can be dated back to Charles II and sits on view in the Jewel House in the Tower of London.

THE TALISMAN OF CHARLEMAGNE



Attributed to the 8th century Emperor Charlemagne, The Talisman of Charlemagne is a reliquary said to hold fragments of the hair of the Virgin Mary and a remnant of the True Cross.

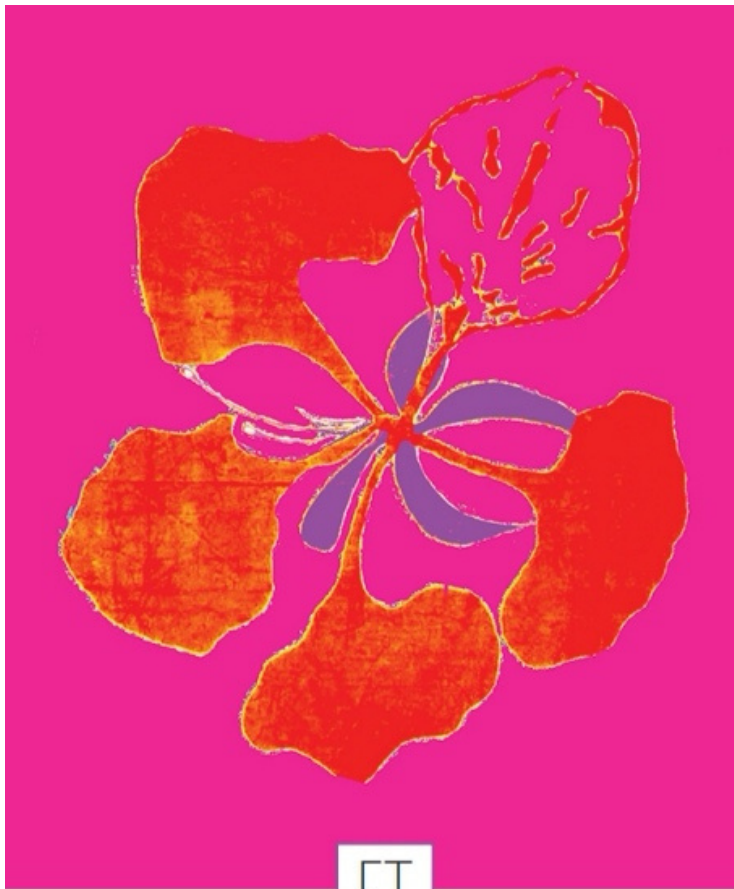
A dazzling early medieval jewel in its own right, it bears at its centre what experts at the Palace of Tau Museum in Reims, say is a 190 carat blue grey sapphire from Sri Lanka.



DISCOVER MORE

A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its complicated story more accessible.

Read its story in *A History of Sri Lanka*, or hear it as a podcast. The *Companion to Sri Lanka* makes visible more of the whole. The digital Museum of Sri Lanka unites the island's artefacts – scattered around the world – into a single exhibition. Its downloadable eBooks cover all Sri Lankan subjects. Its podcast, *Poetry from the Jungle*, presents the work of 80 poets to reset the literary canon. And in case it all gets too serious, enjoy the off-grid *Jungle Diaries* blog and Podcast. All these works are added to weekly and available free at theceylonpress.com.



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