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[Music CD's](#)

[Pottery-American Indian](#)

[Sandpaintings-Navajo](#)

[Textiles/Rugs-Navajo](#)

[New Items](#)

[Specials](#)

[Heard Museum](#)

[Knowledge Workshop](#)

[The Berlin Gallery](#)



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[Collector's Corner](#) / [Kachina Doll Facts](#) / [Jewelry Facts](#)



Let's Talk About Turquoise

Turquoise is an opaque, blue-to-green mineral that is a hydrous phosphate of copper and aluminium. It is rare and valuable in finer grades and has been prized as a gem and ornamental stone for thousands of years owing to its unique hue. Turquoise was among the first gems to be mined, and while many historic sites have been depleted, some are still worked to this day. These are all small-scale, often seasonal operations, owing to the limited scope and remoteness of the deposits. Most are worked by hand with little or no mechanization. However, turquoise is often recovered as a byproduct of large-scale copper mining operations, especially in the United States.

The Southwest United States is a significant source of turquoise; Arizona, California (San Bernardino, Imperial, and Inyo counties), Colorado (Conejos, El Paso, Lake, and Saguache counties), New Mexico (Eddy, Grant, Otero, and Santa Fe counties) and Nevada (Clark, Elko, Esmeralda County, Eureka, Lander, Mineral County and Nye counties) are (or were) especially rich. The deposits of California and New Mexico were mined by pre-Columbian American Indians using stone tools. Cerrillos, New Mexico is thought to be the location of the oldest mines; prior to the 1920s, the state was the country's largest producer; it is more or less exhausted today. Only one mine in California, located at Apache Canyon, operates at a commercial capacity today.

Arizona is currently the most important producer of turquoise by value, with the vivid Bisbee being a good example of the state's natural endowment; much of the Arizona material is recovered as a by-product of copper mining.

Nevada is the country's other major producer, with more than 120 mines which have yielded significant quantities of turquoise. Unlike elsewhere in the U.S., most Nevada mines have been worked primarily for their gem turquoise and very little has been recovered as a by-product of other mining operations.

The pastel shades of turquoise have endeared it to many great cultures of antiquity: it has adorned the rulers of Ancient Egypt, the Aztecs (and possibly other Pre-Columbian Mesoamericans), Persia, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and to some extent in ancient China since at least the Shang Dynasty. Despite being one of the oldest gems, probably first introduced to Europe (through Turkey) with other Silk Road novelties, turquoise did not become important as an ornamental stone in the West until the 14th century, following a decline in the Roman Catholic Church's influence which allowed the use of turquoise in secular jewelry. It was apparently

unknown in India until the Mughal period, and unknown in Japan until the 18th century. A common belief shared by many of these civilizations was that turquoise was thought to change colour with the wearer's health and protect him or her from untoward forces.

The Pueblo, Navajo and Apache tribes cherished turquoise. Among these peoples, turquoise was used in mosaic inlay, in sculptural works, and was fashioned into beads and free-form pendants. The Ancestral Puebloans (Anasazi) of the Chaco Canyon and surrounding region are believed to have prospered greatly from their production and trading of turquoise objects. The distinctive silver jewelry produced by the Navajo and other Southwestern Native American tribes today is a rather modern development; thought to date from circa 1880 as a result of European influences.

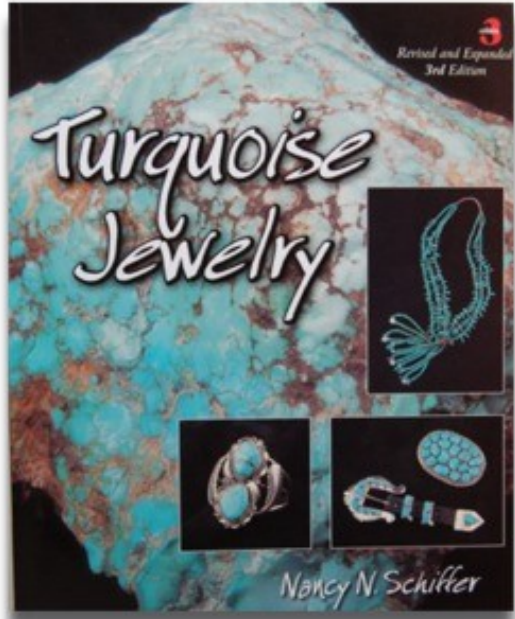
Being a phosphate mineral, turquoise is inherently fragile and sensitive to solvents; perfume and other cosmetics will attack the finish and may alter the color of turquoise gems, as will skin oils, as will most commercial jewelry cleaning fluids. Prolonged exposure to direct sunlight may also discolor or dehydrate turquoise. Care should therefore be taken when wearing such jewels: cosmetics, including sunscreen and hairspray, should be applied before putting on turquoise jewelry, and they should not be worn to a beach or other sun-bathed environment. After use, turquoise should be gently cleaned with a soft cloth to avoid a build up of residue, and should be stored in its own container to avoid scratching by harder gems.

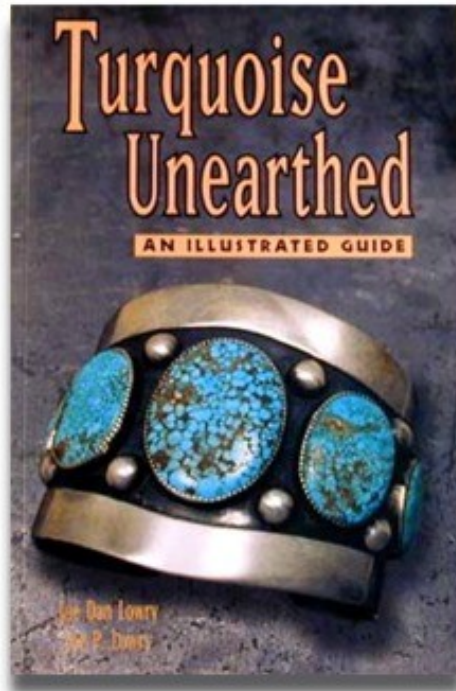
There will be much more on turquoise in the next issue!

Examples of American Indian jewelry that feature turquoise are shown below:



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