

Amber - Origins, Types, Fakes

by **Jade of the Lion Isles**

Amber n. -

A translucent yellow, orange or brownish-yellow fossil resin used for making decorative objects, especially jewelry. (Webster's dictionary)

Amber is the fossilized sap of extinct trees that lived in the temperate and sub-tropical forests of the Eocene period, 60 to 40 million years ago. Resin flowed from these trees and engulfed in its path, small insects, land snails, and other debris like twigs, bark, and sand. These deposits of resin hardened in time, and in the processes of erosion and sedimentation, eventually lay buried in a layer or stratum of clay known as "blue earth."

The most significant deposits are on or near the coasts of Sweden, Denmark, Northern Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union, buried under 100-103 feet of sand and marl. Important deposits also lie in a bed that extends 50 miles into the Baltic sea. After heavy storms, amber may be found washed up on the shores of the Baltic coast and even as far away as England and France.

Other important amber sources are Sicily, Romania, and Burma, where the sap-bearing trees were concentrated in prehistoric times. The quantity of gems obtained from these regions were comparatively small.

Due to its organic nature, the color of amber often varies depending on the types of foreign matter engulfed by the sap after secretion from the plant. The color of amber ranges from the yellow and golden honey tones we are familiar with, to reds, blues and green, as well as some opaque colors.

Baltic amber ranges from pale yellowish white to black. Most commonly, however, the color of Baltic amber is yellow or a warm golden honey tone.

Sicilian amber is also yellow but occurs in a rare ruby red hue as well as green, brown, blue and purple. Furthermore, it often has a luminescence, probably due to the volcanic soils of Mount Etna.

Rumanian amber is typified by dark colors, which include rose red, smoky gray, dark garnet, brownish red, and a greenish blue, green and brownish green variety with agate like patterns. (Called Amber of Piatra.)

Burmese amber, deep red and highly florescent, is the rarest and most valuable amber known.

Amber Substitutes

Copal (also known as African Amber is a form of semi-fossilized resin often confused with amber. Found mainly on the island of Zanzibar, copal is mined from shallow deposits after rains when the ground is soft. Raw copal is also gathered as resin off trees resembling the European birch. Both can also be found on the coast of West Africa, New Zealand, and Malaysia.

It is suggested that true copal may be a million years old and is still undergoing the processes that will transform it into true amber.

Reconstituted Amber is ground amber which is mixed with paste and pressed into bead shapes. Like Ambroid or Pressed Amber (small pieces pressed together), it is genuine amber but lacks the subtle beauty of true amber. These beads, because of their altered density, are heavier than true amber and, more often than not, will be opaque.

Cast-phenolic resins are distinguished by their intense color and translucence. Bakelite is a hard thermoset plastic, opaque, usually dark and was used in jewelry in the 1920s. If you have a piece of jewelry from that era which is said to be amber, take a second look.

Tests for Genuine Amber

True Amber is of a density that it will float in a concentrated solution of salt water. Plastic and Bakelite will sink.

Using a hot point (heated knitting needle will do), press it into a piece of amber. It will burn with an aromatic smell of Pine. Amber begins to decompose at 150° and melts at 250° Celsius.

"Touch Test" - True amber is soft and warm to the touch, whereas plastic is hard and cold.

Sources:

The History of Beads - Lois Sher Dubin

Gems & Precious Stones- Simon & Schuster

Amber & Its Substitutes - Jamey D. Allen