

'I am a lapidary and I do lapidary'

'Lapidary' describes the cutting, polishing or engraving of stones by a person who is called a 'lapidary'. This art form goes back thousands of years, to ancient civilizations such as the Aztecs, the Pharaohs, and Biblical times. Indeed, every culture has a history of using gemstones in some form or another, whether it is through superstition, religion, medicinal or wealth.

Lapidary today in our culture includes hobbyists to artists. With the ability to obtain stones from all part of the world, and the use of the Internet to connect lapidaries, there is no end to the opportunities.

A club or art class often is the beginning of the journey to becoming a lapidary. Tumbled stones, using a rotary or vibratory tumbler, diamond or carbide disks using cabochons cut from slabs, or faceting using schematic diagrams to cut faceted stones are the most common techniques.

Another term you may hear is 'rock hound', which is a term meaning 'a person who specializes in geology and collection of rocks and minerals'. Many rockhounds hunt for rocks, or purchase or swap for them.

A popular way to use the cabochons once they have been formed is to make jewelry using metalworking techniques using silver, gold or platinum. Silversmith is usually the way to begin, as the raw silver is the most cost effective. There are many different techniques used, such as fabrication, cold solder, casting, or the use of silver like Precious Metal Clay (PMC).

A simple way to make jewelry using stones is a technique called 'wire wrap', where wire is wrapped around a rock or mineral to create a form to use in the design.

Many artists sell their wares at craft shows, Gem & Mineral shows, on E-bay, private websites or sell to gift shops.

There is competition with overseas dealers, such as Thailand, Mexico and others. Because of easy access to gemstones and cost of labor, they are able to mass-produce the product.

The other end of the jeweler's trade might include taking courses and becoming certified by the Gem Institute of America (GIA) or America Gem Institute (AGI). Some bench jewelers design jewelry and enter the designs into juried contests, or display in galleries. Again, the overseas market dictates costs of typical jewelry as found in jewelry store chains. There are also political ramifications. At some of the African diamond mines, which are the most prolific in the world, workers are exploited into working long hours in hazardous mines, with little or no pay and refusal costing them their lives or those of their families. Boycotting 'blood diamonds' is urged of all diamond buyers, but there are many in this country that still do purchase from those companies.

Some other forms of lapidary include intarsia, where a picture is made using different types of stones. A common example of this is a globe of the world where different colored stones have been used to form the countries and oceans by cutting and forming the stones in an almost puzzle like fashion.

Beautiful carvings can be made from stones. An example would be the beautiful jade carvings that come from Asia.

Displaying rocks, minerals and fossils is another way to share with others the beauty of nature. From tiny micro mounts to collections of one type of rock in many different forms, even displaying rocks in gardens are all art forms.

Lapidary and rock hounding are very rewarding ways to express and display artistic talent.

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