



CONTEMPORARY

# Jade Carvers

By Naomi Sarna

It is a murder weapon; it is a sacred object. It's an enormous memorial. It is one of the toughest materials on earth. If you thought of diamonds, or steel, you are incorrect; this highly regarded and very valuable gem material is jade.

What compelled that person to pick up the jade nugget, look at the various colors, test its toughness, and finally, to spend an enormous amount of time shaping it? We can only guess, but it is certain that early people thought jade so special that it was worthy of the effort to carve it and considered it to be the most precious material on earth. Jade reverence and human history are inextricably associated; jade objects date back 8,000 years ago when Neolithic people in several areas around the world began to use it. It is sobering to consider those who carved it into ceremonial axes or ear and lip plugs or portraits, burial garments, vases and monuments, through sheer persistence and abrasive mud.

Many people think that diamonds are tough, however there is an important difference between hardness, of which diamonds are the hardest gems, and toughness. Because of the crystalline structure, both varieties are the world's toughest gem material. Jadeite is crystalline, whereas nephrite is fibrous with interlocking crystals and objects of both are supremely tough and hard-wearing, capable of lasting for eons. Both minerals have historically been called jade, are from the same family, chemically slightly different, and sharing many similarities.

Intense pressure and heat and 60 million years create this gem which can be found in hard rock areas near volcanoes and plate tectonic activity, mostly in the Ring of Fire surrounding the Pacific Ocean. In glacial areas, boulders as large as trucks can be found as well as in creeks and streams as alluvial nuggets.

Nephrite is usually found in a variety of greens and other colors including cream, orangey brown, up to the deepest blacks. Nephrite is much more widely available, found on many continents and before 1784, when Burmese jadeite came into China, was the most highly prized, especially in white colors. The Chinese interest in nephrite continues to be extremely strong.

Jadeite comes in colors from icy clear transparency, white and cream, lavender, all colors of green and blue green including the so-called emerald Imperial green. Indigenous groups such as Maori of New Zealand shaped what they called greenstone, and Aztecs, Olmecs, Mayans and Toltecs of Central America used their blue jadeite as currency. It is now considered the most precious gem to such an extent that the market in jadeite has increased dramatically and some of the most expensive jewels ever sold are made of jadeite, exceeding the value of diamonds and rubies.

Before 2011 when political conflict and mine shut-downs occurred, the largest amount of jadeite sold came from Myanmar. Subsequently, British Columbia, Canada, began filling the absence of material from Myanmar, to become the largest exporter of nephrite, selling most of it to China which remains the world's largest purchaser of jade rough (the raw material) and finished goods. The global trade in jade is currently estimated to be in excess of \$8 billion, the bulk of which is still mined in British Columbia. The largest producers of nephrite after Canada are Australia, the United States and Taiwan.

Contemporary carvers usually carve nephrite as it is more easily available. The name jade in Chinese means 'beautiful stone' and artists often voice an almost religious awe when talking of the attributes of their favorite material. They wax rhapsodic talking about various characteristics from different locations of jade, their favorite colors, how long it took them to understand how to carve with the fibers instead of against the grain. Often jade carvers are exclusive users of jade, preferring it to any other material for their art.

To work with jade requires a certain mind set, as though every important piece is the beginning of a particular ordeal which one must overcome to become stronger. The material is so tough that it takes much longer to carve than almost any other gem. One reward is that jade can be safely carved to almost paper thinness, allowing the gem to become almost transparent and luminescent. Even topaz, which is very hard, is easier to carve than jade. Corundum, such as sapphires or rubies, which are the hardest of the colored gemstones, is seldom carved



beyond a slight relief, mainly because it is very hard, not usually found in sizable pieces, and its value is very much associated with the weight of the gem. In jade carvings, the value is not only in the material but also in the beauty of the artists' skill and artfulness.

The process of carving jade is much like any other carving material, but the size and quality often dictate the price, so most carvers work with relatively small pieces, perhaps several grams or less than a kilogram. It is the fortunate and famous carvers, such as the internationally awarded Canadian carver Deborah Wilson, George Schmerholz of the United States, or Donn Salt of New Zealand, who are able to obtain and work with the very finest and the largest pieces of their favorite material.

In November of 2017, the Zie Gang Bei Suzhou Jade Association in Suzhou, China, celebrated their 10th anniversary, honoring 10 years of reclaiming China's cultural jade heritage. The Cultural Revolution had considered many of the traditional Chinese crafts to be non-forward thinking and their place in the Chinese cultural society was not encouraged. However, China is now eager to reclaim its heritage and the jade masters in China are experiencing a new level of honour and affluence. In Suzhou alone, there are at least 30,000 involved in the jade trade, including master carvers and polishers, base makers, box makers, tool and machine producers. Master carvers may still live in the old hovels in the jade district, but their Lamborghinis are parked outside in front in the alleys with the laundry strung out and flapping in the breeze overhead.



DONN SALT

A small group of International jade carvers were invited to participate in the competition and exhibition as a way of providing a different view of jade carving, refreshing the traditional Chinese styles. Donn Salt of New Zealand, was the first non-Chinese person to be awarded a Gold Medal for jade carving by the Zie Gang Bei Jade Association in Suzhou, China. Chinese carvers often say that to carve jade well, it has to be in your blood, as in many generations of carvers. In 2017, Donn was awarded not only a Gold Medal for his jade vessel, he was also awarded a special Gold Medal for overall craftsmanship, an extraordinary honor given to a non-Chinese carver.

His work often represents feminine vessel shapes or faces reminiscent of the New Zealand Maori arts. In a book on Chinese jade carving, Donn read a meaningful passage that said the piece must be too perfect to have been produced by human hands, thus the product of spirits, a so-called 'spirit or demon carving' and 'that the stone should express the essence of life, as if the carving might move.' This expresses Donn's consuming passion to investigate and reveal the mysteries of jade.



DONN SALT



DEBORAH WILSON

Deborah Wilson was similarly honored as the first non-Chinese woman carver to receive a Gold Medal from the Zie Gang Bei Jade Association and has gone on to win several more awards from them. In 1987, Deborah was considered by the National Geographic Magazine as one of the world's finest contemporary jade carvers. After an early career

as a jade carver, Deborah began offering seminars in the craft of jade carving and currently travels around the world teaching and producing monumental sculptures and objects. Given the value and difficulty of carving jade, one can only imagine the thrill of a commission such as the 6-foot tall "Kalamalka Reflections" which Deborah created in 2002.



DEBORAH WILSON



Georg Schmerholz lives in a far-away area of the mountains of California, carving in a meditative solitude, imbuing his work with a sophisticated purity and simplicity and astonishing finish. He is a multi Zie Gang Bei Association medal winner, recently for a large set of pale green jade chopsticks in a vertical holder, called Phoenix and Dragon.

After 30 years as a fine art sculptor working in a variety of materials, Georg ventured into his magical world of jade in 2007. He discovered that the 'Stone of Heaven' is in fact his 'true artistic medium'. Georg speaks of his experience as 'transcendent', and 'ineffable' to describe the qualities invoked from his art.



Naomi Sarna of New York City is an internationally awarded high jeweler and carver of many varieties of gems and recently has come to the world of jade. The magical mysteries of jade are beginning to possess her as she enjoys the challenge of carving both jadeite and nephrite. At the 2017 Zie Gang Bei competition, Naomi was awarded a Bronze medal for her nephrite jade carving 'Mossy River'.

In a future issue of Unique, modern and historical jadeite pieces will be examined.