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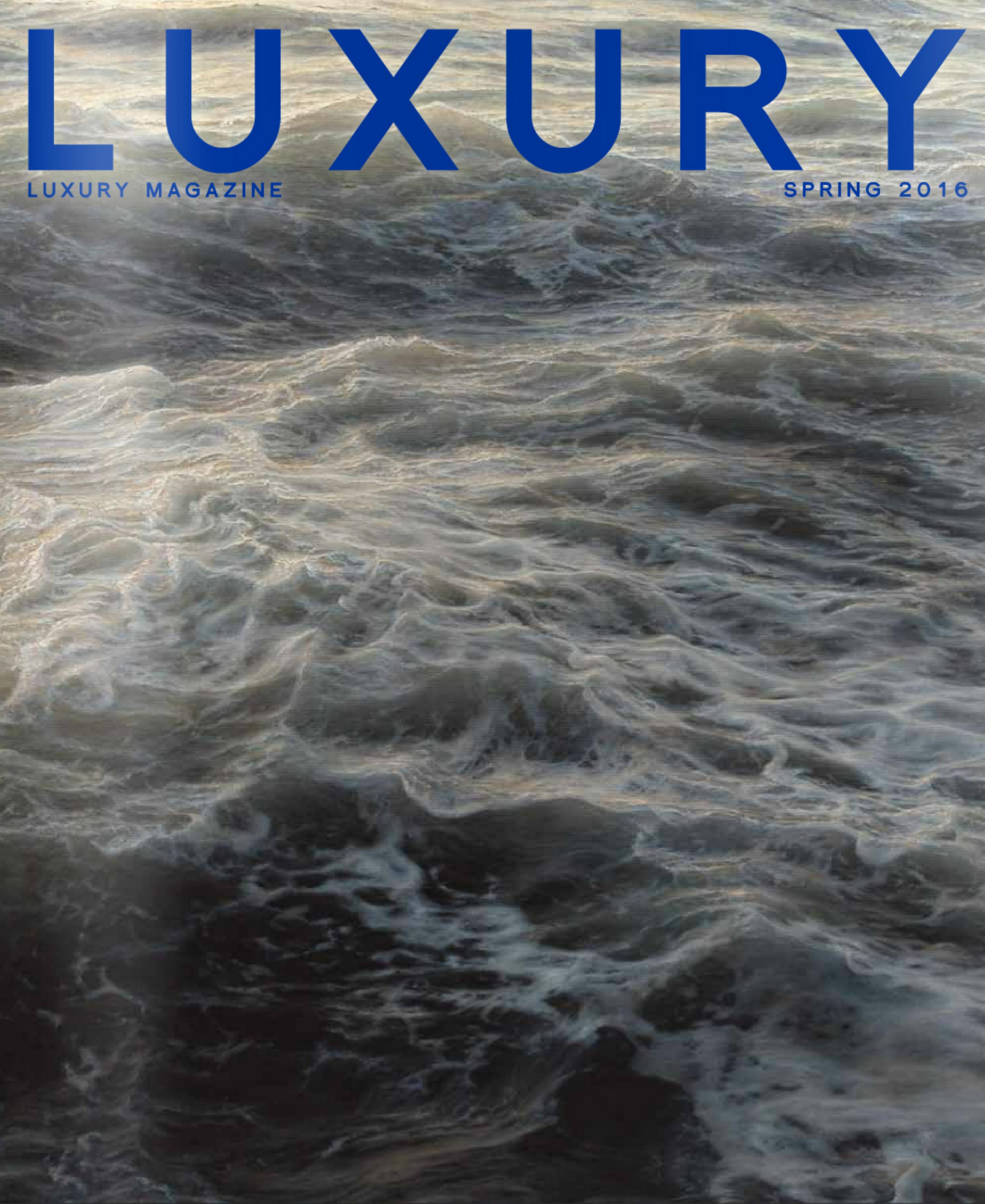




Photo: James Elliott

# HOT ROCKS

THE STARTLING BEAUTY AND ASTONISHING ORIGINS OF FINE MINERALS MAKE THEM EXQUISITE EXAMPLES OF NATURE'S ART, INCREASINGLY SOUGHT AFTER BY AN EVER-GROWING CADRE OF COLLECTORS.

by JORGE S. ARANGO

**F**ew things come as spectacularly into being as fine minerals, which formed millions of years ago from interactions between water and rocks during the earth's cooling and by being subjected to unfathomable tectonic pressure. Bringing minerals to market requires equally staggering natural events and human methods of extraction: faulting or folding of the earth's crust, volcanism, and expensive, danger-fraught mining (transporting them past bandits and trigger-happy warlords is not uncommon either).

Not many collectibles boast that kind of romance and adventure, yet it's just one reason people have been accumulating them since about 1475, the earliest recorded instance of the pastime according to Daniel Trinchillo, owner of Mardani Fine Minerals gallery in New York and a major force in the mineral, gem, and fossil world. "It was the sport of kings, tsars, and sheiks," he says. "They fell out of fashion for a time, but came back with the robber barons in the late 19th century."

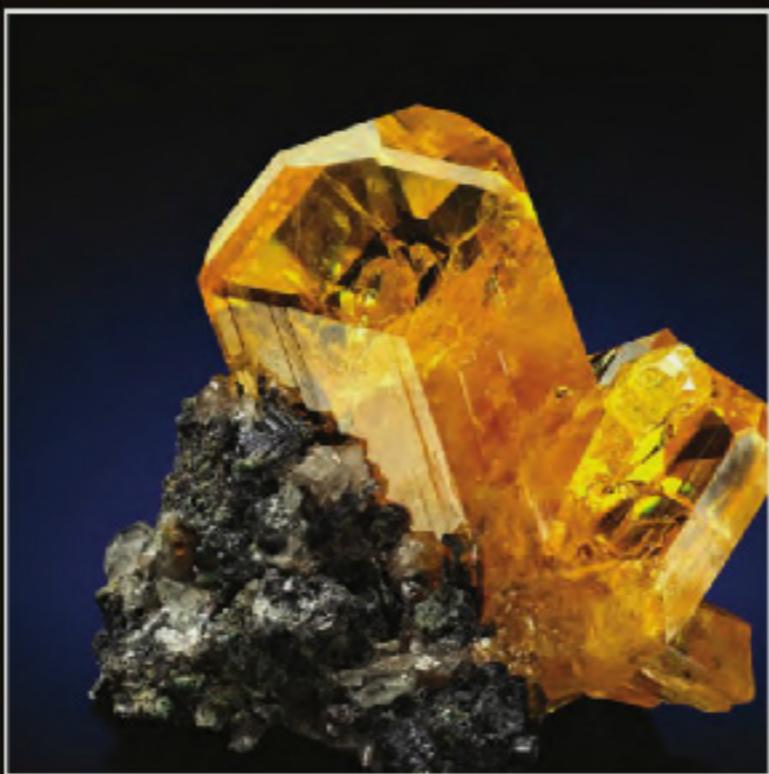
The field, far more democratic today, has never been hotter. Dale Rogers, owner of Dale Rogers Ammonite and a well-known London dealer, says, "It really is a mixed bag. We have some of the best interior designers in the world looking for that rare statement piece. We have geologists collecting smaller scientific pieces. We have art collectors looking at aesthetics and rarity...We have crystal healers and spiritualists completely taken by the believed energy of the pieces. Then we have the fossil nerds, myself included, who just want the oldest, strangest, and most bizarre-looking creature they can get their hands on."

Like any market, it has its astronomical end. "Prices for top-quality mineral specimens have skyrocketed in recent years, and prices being realized at auction would have been unthinkable just two decades ago," concedes Craig Kissick, director of the Nature & Science department at Dallas-based Heritage Nature & Science,

the premier auction house in America for this category. "A perfect example was the Madona Rosa from the Hoppel Collection, which sold at auction in 2013 for an astounding \$662,500. We are certainly now in a world of six- and even seven-figure prices for museum-quality mineral specimens." Privately, Trinchillo adds, minerals are traded for far more. The current record, he says, is a rhodochrosite that commanded \$7.5 million.

But one of the great virtues of mineral collecting, observes New York dealer Dennis Tanjeloff, whose family established Astro Gallery of Gems in New York City in 1961, is that "you can get specimens of just about any kind of rock for a few hundred dollars." He has helped many boldface names unload more cash than that, of course, including the Texas Hunt family heiress Lyda Hill and Marc Weill, son of Sanford Weill. Working with his colleague Trinchillo, Tanjeloff helped both assemble extremely fine collections. However, he says, "You can enter at any level and trade up as you build your collection. What places like Heritage have done is create some transparency in pricing, since there's no blue book for minerals."

There are as many approaches to collecting as there are collectors. Spokane collector Mitch Bernardi's career in mineral exploration sparked his holdings of mostly native gold from mines he has visited. Others collect only certain sizes or species. Interior designer Paul Vincent Wiseman and his spouse, lawyer Richard Snyder, have more catholic tastes. Snyder became enraptured by geology as a boy while on rock expeditions in the Angeles National Forest with his childhood friend, the conductor Michael Tilson Thomas (in his youth also a collector), and Thomas' father, Ted. Snyder and Wiseman have catalogued 729 of their thousands of specimens, which they display throughout their houses in Mill Valley and Belvedere, California. Snyder's geological passions are so wide-ranging, including specimens more interesting for their origin than their look, that, says Wiseman, "We eventually agreed they at least had to look beautiful." ▶



Previous: Tourmaline. This page from top, left to right: Amethyst; anglesite; aquamarine; calcite; calcite; fluorite; gold; tanzanite; rhodochrosite.  
Opposite and next page: An apartment designed by Jim Smiros.



## THINGS TO REMEMBER...

- 1.** "To date, investments have been good and prices have only ever gone up," says Rogers. "But we will always say to our clients to buy from the heart, buy what you love."
- 2.** "As with almost all arts and collectibles, the most important characteristic when building a collection that will provide both visual enjoyment and future returns, is quality," says Trinchillo. "Instead of owning 10 midrange pieces, buy one outstanding example. As a friend once told me, 'Quality will be remembered long after the price has been forgotten.'"
- 3.** "If you don't get it, don't buy it," counsels Tanjeloff. No matter how rare or fine you're told a specimen is, "it has to appeal to you."
- 4.** "Information is power," says Ward. "Learn as much as you can and always ask questions."





"Natural Beauty" mirror of amethyst (pyrite, clear quartz, and malachite also available) from the Isabella Wolfe by Nicole Fuller collection, price upon request, [isabellawolfe.com](http://isabellawolfe.com).



Russian ammonite tables by Brenda Houston, \$10,500-\$30,000 based on weight and origin, [brendahouston.com](http://brendahouston.com).



## NATURE TRANSFORMED

A NUMBER OF DESIGNERS AND FIRMS ARE INCORPORATING FINE MINERALS INTO ALL MANNER OF OBJECTS FOR THE HOME. HERE ARE A FEW "GEMS."



Brazilian quartz Rua Bela Cintra table by Simone Coste, \$6,250, [avenue-road.com](http://avenue-road.com).

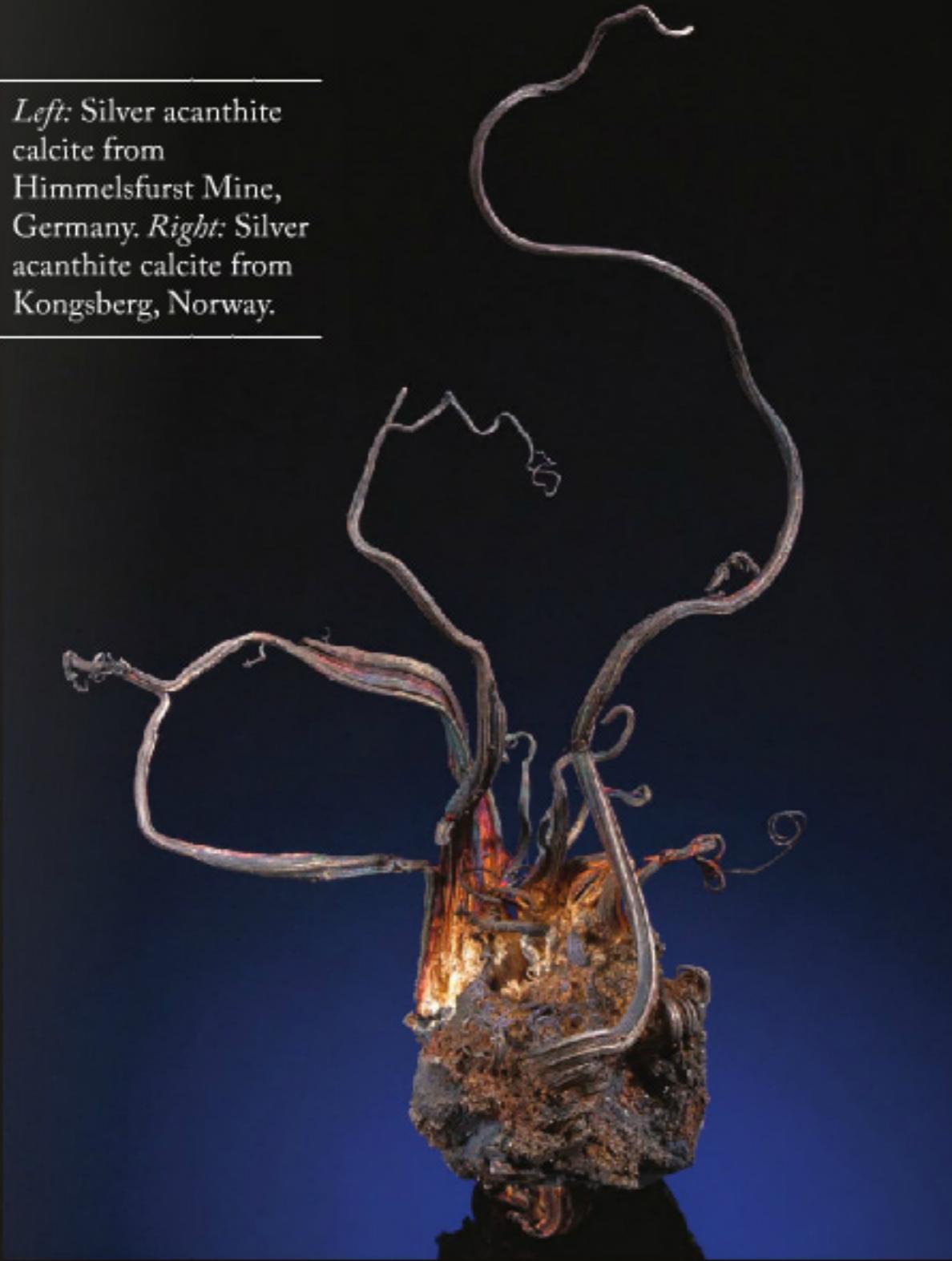


Agate "Garra" bottle stoppers, \$40, [annanewyork.com](http://annanewyork.com).



Agate "Tigela" bowls, from \$195, [annanewyork.com](http://annanewyork.com). ▶

*Left:* Silver acanthite calcite from Himmelsfurst Mine, Germany. *Right:* Silver acanthite calcite from Kongsberg, Norway.



Then there are major collectors like the late James Horner, composer of the *Titanic* score, who spent about \$100 million on minerals before switching to collecting aircraft in 2003. "He changed the model of the high-end collector," says Trinchillo, who sold Horner one of his first million-dollar minerals back in 1999. "He was willing to pay more as long as it was the best of the best." Barry Kitt also fits this mold. According to Kitt, "I was completely entranced" after beholding a blue-cap tourmaline at the Smithsonian Institution in 2010. Since then he has focused on acquiring only museum-quality minerals, preferring to collect fewer specimens in order to buy truly exquisite examples of various species. "I love them. I could stare at them for hours," says the former hedge fund manager. "Having been an investor my entire adult life, I feel that I am able to recognize an undervalued asset, and I believe top-quality minerals have been and will continue to be an excellent investment." Lebanese chemist Salim Eddé took the same approach, eventually financing the MIM Museum in Beirut, which houses what many experts consider one of the best collections in the world, over 1,400 minerals including 300 species from 60 countries.

Because of the infinite amount of predilections and methodologies among collectors, value can be extremely subjective. However, says dealer Kevin Ward of Alabama-based The Mineral Gallery—which sells through the Exceptional Minerals website as well as at events like the Tucson Gem & Mineral show, the largest of its kind in the world—"The single most important

factor, without a doubt, is aesthetics. A crystal that is flawless and clear, with deep color, sitting attractively on a matrix of another fine mineral is one of the most desirable scenarios. And certainly if a mineral specimen comes with a well-known provenance or is of notable rarity, that can also enhance its value."

Certainly aesthetics drives interior designers. "Because of their sculptural presence, their gorgeousness, and also because of the beguiling way they play with light," says New York-based architect Jim Smiros, "minerals are being used more and more in interiors, either as accessories and art or in applications such as countertops and back-lit walls." Wiseman occasionally walks the Tucson shows with clients. Before coming to Heritage Nature & Science, Kissick ran a business placing minerals in hotels, restaurants, and other design projects. And the website of Richard A. Baquero, principal of RAB/ID, his New York interior design firm, proclaims that his "design philosophy combines the use of fine minerals, sophisticated color palettes, and exceptional details."

It is a perpetually expanding market that exponentially draws more and more categories of investors and enthusiasts. And as other forms of collecting grow out of reach, the market will continue to expand and appreciate, believes Dale Rogers. "Something we are hearing a lot over recent years is, 'Why would I want to spend millions on a painting when I can have, for a fraction of the price, something on my wall that was living, breathing, and doing god knows what 55 million years ago?'" It's a fair question. ♦