



NEWS

06/11/2015

## An ethical debate concerning "pigeon's blood" rubies and "royal blue" sapphires from diverse origins

**Lucerne, 6 November 2015** – The descriptive terminology of *Pigeon's Blood* and *Royal Blue* colors first appeared on gemstone reports issued by GRS in the late 90's (see timeline below). Since then, thousands of such reports have been issued with wide acceptance by the international trade. The specific grading criteria (see [www.pigeonsblood.com](http://www.pigeonsblood.com)) has been applied to both stones of diverse origin and to those which have undergone regular heat-treatment. Market acceptance was established by global trade and via response from retail distribution channels, as well as sales throughout major auction houses. Feedback and suggestions were collected from various trade professionals at tradeshow in Basel (Switzerland), Freiburg (Germany) and Hong Kong (China) throughout the period of 2010 to 2015, of which many were implemented in our laboratory standards. GRS chose to implement a color-grading scale and to add color-terms as our laboratory opinion, e.g. vivid red (GRS-type 'pigeon's blood').

By Dr. A. Peretti, Director GRS

**G**RS lab report market acceptance transitioned into a market norm. Though GRS does not condone the external use of its trademarked (\*) and propriety color grading terminology; it recognizes the need for global consistency in this matter. GRS is of the opinion that it is not feasible, nor ethical to completely destabilize the market through redesigning a pre-accepted standard by means of origin discrimination versus beauty.

A recent press release issued by our Swiss industry colleagues asserts that historical color terms should be awarded solely on the basis of origin. This dispute is based on the historical reference of 'pigeon's blood' color to Burmese ruby. The color description is also linked to quality and particular treatment requirements (e.g. color terms only granted for unheated gemstones). GRS disagrees with this new approach for several reasons which are outlined below.

## Origin heritage argument

GRS states it is not reasonable to disqualify mining areas based on a color grading system, which only allows for those with a traditional heritage (e.g. 'pigeon's blood' label only granted from Burmese rubies). Burmese rubies include both Mogok and Mong Hsu rubies. Mogok is indeed an old mining area with a rich heritage. Mong Hsu however, is a recent mining site, hundreds of miles away from those classical deposits in Mogok. This in itself presents a contradiction to the heritage theory for Burmese rubies. Furthermore, Mong Hsu ruby formation is markedly different from that of Mogok ([read publication](#)).

A further contradiction to the above mentioned theory is that with regards to 'royal blue' colors, the heritage criterion is not applied, while it is applied for the case of rubies. Hence, Burma, Sri Lanka and recently discovered Madagascar mines are currently being awarded the 'royal blue' color descriptor, while Mozambique and other mines are excluded from the 'pigeon's blood' color term. This represents inconsistent argumentation.

## Treatment argument

GRS issues *Pigeon's Blood* and *Royal Blue* color designation for corundum that has undergone industry-wide accepted heat-treatment. However, this excludes heat-treatment with the extensive use of borax, any type of diffusion or other solid fillers. GRS believes that a gem's beauty is vital to its success. GRS has used their descriptors for the past 15 years; and in the interest of market stability it will continue utilizing this established industry wide accepted principle in combination with full treatment disclosure (see timeline below).

## Scientific criteria regarding iron concentrations of rubies

It was also recently asserted that only Burmese stones displaying the required 'internal glow' (by fluorescence) can be designated as 'pigeon's blood'. Their argument claims that iron present in the chemical composition annuls its fluorescence. GRS promotes the more critical view that the total or absolute amount of iron does not produce an absence of fluorescence in a stone. Rather, it is its ratio to, or an excess of chromium concentrations over the iron that produces fluorescence. Highly fluorescent stones from Mozambique displaying that iconic 'internal glow' actually include a considerable amount of iron (beside that there is indeed a non-fluorescence type available also).

Furthermore, several deposits are producing rubies with no iron, like Tajikistan, Vietnam and the Mahenge area in Tanzania. GRS disagrees with banning such beautiful stones with their unique heritage from color awards like 'pigeon's blood'.

## Ethical criteria not to be ignored

GRS maintains that granting the 'pigeon's blood' label only to certain origins results in driving Burmese rubies into a stronger position than other origins. GRS believes that if origin does play such a preeminent role, then it should be the industry's utmost interest to promote origins that demonstrate performance in ethical mining. Other mining areas, like those in Mozambique are being led by publicly held companies that are subject to public scrutiny. Burmese mines are often restricted in accessibility and it is difficult to check their mining practices regarding the compliance with international standards.

GRS does not unequivocally advocate the saying that a certain country does it right, while another country does it wrong. There is room for improvement everywhere, and all regions have good and bad players. It is noteworthy to mention, that the 'Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008' is still in effect in the US. The view on the effect of this ban has split the opinions in the trade; however, the introduction was made for ethical reasons by the US.

GRS grants rubies from all over the world a chance to obtain a 'pigeon's blood' color designation as equitably as it does for 'royal blue' sapphire, as long as it fits our color standards (for example basaltic-type sapphires do not qualify for the 'royal blue' color description). If there is a premium for country of origin, it should place the ethical argument at the centre of interest and not the romancing past.

## Timeline of events

UP TO  
1987

### Heritage and origin concepts

The major role of an auction house may be understood in selling heritage jewellery from kings, celebrities, film stars as well as the promotion of the origin concepts (Burma premium).

1998

### First ever 'pigeon's blood' and 'royal blue' reports at auctions

First 'pigeon's blood' and 'royal blue' gemstone reports appear in auctions catalogues on GRS reports using terminology "pigeon's blood".

*Sotheby's | Jun-1998 | London | Lot 140, Very Fine Ruby Ring | GRL 9804015*

These terms never appeared in any auction catalogues prior to the introduction by GRS to the world of gemstone reports. For more results go to our [auction results page](#).

2005

### Other labs adopt concept

The concept enters the terminology of other major labs and first reports of those labs appear in the auction catalogues all over the world.

DECEMBER  
2013

### Pigeon's blood colour grading for rubies other than Burmese origin (Mozambique) successfully auctioned

First GRS-type 'pigeon's blood' ruby with Mozambican origin was sold at Tiancheng International auction in Hong Kong. The 20.09ct ruby was sold for HK\$ 15,930,000 (approx. US\$ 2,000,000).

2015

### Trademark

GRS trademarks their 'pigeon's blood' (May 2015) and 'royal blue' terminology.

2012 -  
2015

### Important lots sold with 'pigeon's blood' and 'royal blue' label

Significant objects at international auctions are sold with 'pigeon's blood' and 'royal blue' label. PB and RB brand is used by at least 3 LMHC labs. Burmese origin exclusively singled out for 'pigeon's blood' colour grading.

NOVEMBER  
2015

## Other labs harmonise their interpretation

SSEF-Gübelin harmonise their interpretation of 'pigeon's blood' and 'royal blue'.

NOVEMBER  
2015

### GRS raises the 'ethical' argument

GRS emphasises their position regarding the more 'ethical' approach of an independent use of origins and colors (e.g. 'special color' grades for all origins).

See Lit.

Peretti, A, 2013. GRS expedition to the Mogok ruby, sapphire and spinel mines. *Jewellery News Asia*, October 2013, 54-58.

[Download Article](#)

Peretti, A, 2015. Mozambique rubies gaining favour in the gemstone world. *Jewellery News Asia*, November 2015.

## Further resources

- Peretti, A, 2013. GRS expedition to the Mogok ruby, sapphire and spinel mines. *Jewellery News Asia*, October 2013, 54-58. ([read publication](#))
- Peretti, A, 2014. Distinguishing traits of Mozambique ruby. *Jewellery News Asia*, July 2014, 67-68. ([read publication](#))
- Peretti, A, 2015. Mozambique rubies gaining favour in the gemstone world. *Jewellery News Asia*, November 2015, 1.
- Peretti, A, Falise, T, 2016. Pigeon Blood Valley – History, legends and tales of the Mogok ruby. 1st ed. Hong Kong: Peretti/Falise (in print Jan 2016)
- Dr. A. Peretti petitions the case for AIDS-Children in Mogok to Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi ([watch video](#))

## Appendix

.(\*) During the trademark registration process at the Swiss Federal Institute of Intellectual property in Switzerland, Gemresearch Swisslab AG obtained the following word / phrase trademarks: GRS type "pigeon's blood", GRS type "royal blue", and GRS type "cornflower", according to the Nice Classification (NCL) No. 14 (jewellery, gemstones & watches) and No. 42 (science & technology service industry). Swiss Federal Institute of Intellectual property declared no objections to using the terms for ruby and sapphire of different geographic origins.

The use of color terms for different gem origins appearing in GRS reports is legally protected in its legal jurisdiction. GRS is a proud holder of these proprietary trademarks furthermore holding corresponding image trademarks in Hong Kong.

Article URL: <https://www.gemresearch.ch/news/2015/11/06/an-ethical-debate-concerning-pigeons-blood-rubies-and-royal-blue-sapphires-from-diverse-origins>

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