The fascination of deep blue matrix speckled with golden colored pyrite flecks of lapis lazuli goes back several millennia, almost to the beginning of all civilizations. So much so, that the majority of Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian jewelry contained lapis lazuli and it was sourced all the way from Middle Asia, today’s Afghanistan. The trade is well known between these geographies, yet why and how will always remain as unanswered questions because it all started before any written reference could be created.

Pigments and dyes were important commodities as everything was derived from natural sources until the industrial revolution. Most dyes were plant-based while pigments were mostly from minerals such as hematite, malachite and, of course, lapis lazuli. Until the production of synthetic dyes, deep blue pigment, aka, ultramarine, from lapis was worth as gold. Today, lapis lazuli is mostly regarded as a gem material and utilized at almost all level of jewelry market from high end to inexpensive beads. Large boulders are popular display pieces and its tough but not so hard structure makes it an attractive carving material.

Lapis lazuli is mostly known to be from Afghanistan but also found in Russia, Chile, Myanmar, Tajikistan and Colorado, USA. As mentioned above, Afghan material is the oldest known. Russian lapis has been used in Faberge eggs historically and still in production. Chilean lapis is also known to be used in indigenous artefacts of the region and was part of the ancient trade.
Lapis lazuli is a metamorphic rock made of calcite, lazurite, pyrite and very small amounts of diopside, enstatite and mica. Lazurite is the cause of distinctive blue color. The most valuable samples are with higher amount of lazurite with very little calcite and pyrite. However, the porous structure of the rock creates great potential for color treatment. Lower grade lapis is mostly dyed with blue aniline dyes, sometimes heated and fracture filled to stabilize the added color. Color concentration of the dye is easily observed in fissures and around white calcite crystals when examined with a microscope. If the piece is not treated with resin or wax, the blue dye can stain a cotton swab soaked with acetone.

Gemologists are aware of treatments of lapis and always pay attention to separate it from sodalite which is a similar looking opaque blue gem material. Although the subtle color and texture difference are distinguishable to the trained eye, sodalite is much softer and doesn’t contain pyrite. Gem professionals should be aware of reconstructed materials that masquerade as lapis lazuli. One of our contributing authors, Helen Serras-Herman wrote a detailed article about lapis lazuli and its simulants in the GemGuide. It is worth revisiting as it views the subject from a gemologist-lapidarist point of view, gemguide.com/pdf/2018GG-MayJuneLapidaryLapis.pdf

Pricing lapis lazuli varies widely due to its quality and purpose differences. High quality untreated cabochons that are used in designer’s pieces certainly demand the highest prices per piece. Then there are beads varying from a few cents to tens of dollars, again, depending on the quality and size. Carvings and similar ornamental pieces are priced individually based on the quality, size and the complexity of the piece.