

*The Flower of Life pattern,  
with its frosted facets, cut by  
Victor Tuzlukov.*



# THE CUTTING EDGE

Having long played quiet supporting roles in the gem industry, gem cutters are finally having their day in the sun. Four acclaimed independent master gem cutters share more about their love of the craft and the creation of their best pieces.

Words: MINDY TEH



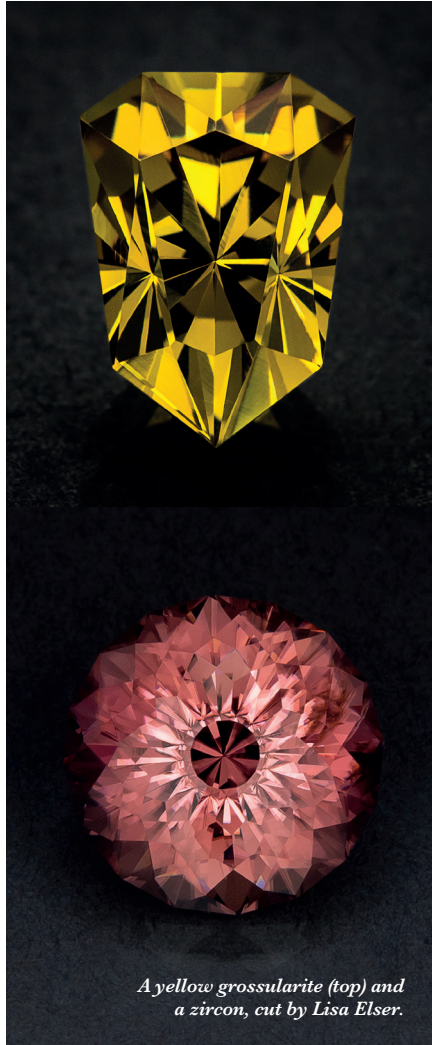
## THE STORYTELLER: VICTOR TUZLUKOV

I was born in Siberia, Russia, and qualified as a marine navigator in Vladivostok before pivoting into economics. I started learning the craft of cutting gemstones and gaining the initial know-how from a friend who is an amateur faceter.

A distinctive leap in my gem-cutting journey came in 2006 when I joined my first technical faceting contest, the Single Stone Competition held by the US Faceters Guild. A few years later, in 2010, I won the International Faceting Challenge in Australia with the highest score of 299.17 out of 300, a record that went unbeaten for a decade!

These technical competitions helped me learn to “draw” with facets and create certain images or symbols. Each stone not only has its own name that expresses the main idea of its artistic composition but is also, in itself, a philosophical concept.

The most difficult stone I’ve created is the Triumph of Life, which will be exhibited from the end of October at the Russian State Historical Museum in Moscow. This is a citrine stone cut in the shape of an egg. A significant part of its surface is covered by a Flower of Life pattern of frosted facets. Its uniqueness is that between the frosted flat “petals”, there are curved polished spaces, which makes the “petals” rounded. This technique had only been used once before on



*A yellow grossularite (top) and a zircon, cut by Lisa Elser.*

a stone cut according to a design by Leonardo da Vinci and included in the Guinness Book of Records as the most faceted quartz in the world. But this egg also contains another technique – flat polished facets and curved frosted ones between them. There is no other stone like this in the world.

When a stone is finished, I wash it, wrap it in a towel and show it to my loved ones. My wife says, “A new angel has been born.” This accurately reflects my feelings. I treat each stone not only as my child, but also my teacher. I believe there is no dead matter in the universe. When working with stone, it is important for me to find the same language with it. Before starting work, I try to mentally calm the stone, explaining that cutting will only make it better, that I will be cutting not only it, but also myself, and that together we will go to perfection.



## THE GO-GETTER: LISA ELSER

I started gem cutting as a hobby. I was an IT director at the time but my passion for gem cutting saw it rapidly become my career. I used to do all sorts of work in gem cutting, but stopped doing recuts or repairs because I got all my joy from cutting for my own enjoyment. At any given time, I have 300-plus gems in inventory.

When I started full time in 2007, there were only a handful of women cutting commercially. My poor husband got so tired of explaining that he didn’t cut and I did! I have been able to mentor a few young women, and young people of colour who’ve in turn mentored me in digital marketing and sales.

Sometimes, I know exactly what the rough wants to be. Sometimes, it sits on my bench for a while and we get to know one another before I decide on a design. How do I balance artistry and precision when working on a piece? There is sometimes a push for as much light as possible, but that can wash the colour out. I want something that is as beautiful as possible rather than trying to make things as elaborate as possible. The gem should be the star of its own story.

With gem cutting, things go wrong all the time. I’ll find an inclusion or a crack that I didn’t see initially, which might change the overall size, or the length/width. It’s important to adapt to the gem, not force the gem to adapt to my ideas. Sometimes I’ll start with a design and redesign it as I go along.

My late husband was a research mathematician. He began doing designs for me, and I’d test cut them in different materials. He won first and second place in the Lapidary Journal 65th Anniversary design contest! I still use mostly Tom’s designs.

Once, I had a stunning large blue apatite. It cut beautifully but when I went to polish it, each facet needed a different polishing lap! I had to make notes to remember which of five different polishing mediums to use. It took over a week.

When people first see precision-cut coloured stone, it’s such a shock. Light being reflected, with colour, is so beautiful. Some is simple math, some of it is “feel”.



*Garnets cut into a Winged Cushion shape by Victoria Raynaud.*

## THE ROMANTIC: VICTORIA REYNAUD

As a kid, I loved minerals and making beaded jewellery. During that time, my family used to go on skiing holidays in the Jura mountains which, coincidentally enough, used to be the main gemstone cutting centre of France a century ago. Nowadays, there are not many gem cutters left, but there are a few museums that I would visit after every skiing session. One time, one of the museums organised a faceting demonstration, and since then, I was obsessed with gem cutting. I was only 12 years old.

Later, I did a three-year gem cutting internship and then worked at a cutting factory in Switzerland. While there, I learned how to be very precise, but there was not much space for creativity. I had to

cut to the shapes and dimensions that the client asked for, using the angles that I was taught during my internship, without too much innovation. Now that I run my own business, I can be more creative, inventing new shapes, new faceting patterns; and deciding for myself what angles look the best, what can be improved upon and what cannot.

The challenges in gem cutting are not much different from any other challenges women face on a daily basis. There are more difficulties when you run your own business. The gem industry brings together a lot of different cultures from around the world, and depending on the situation, I have found it necessary to ask a male friend or my husband to accompany me and help negotiate prices for me.

In terms of signature cuts, I created a

shape, Winged Cushion, a few years ago, which is a cushion with one pointy corner. A lot of people have said it reminds them of a speech bubble from the iPhone messages app. It has become quite a popular shape in our inventory, a truly one-of-a-kind shape that only I make. I love to make unique shapes that follow the natural shape of the rough. This creates a special look that also saves as much weight as is possible. I always try to make something different that looks high end but without looking too "fantasy".

A memorable stone is the sapphire I cut for my husband's engagement ring. He wanted a ring and he loves vintage designs, so we decided on a 19th-century design, the old mine cut. It took me a while to find a sapphire that had the same colour as my engagement ring sapphire. Once I found the perfect stone, I recut it into an old mine cut and I only listened to happy songs and love songs while I worked. The stone came out beautifully.

As a gemologist, I love inclusions. As a gem cutter, I try to remove them as much as I can. If the inclusion means that it will affect the durability of the stone, then it's really important to remove it. When there are inclusions that I want to highlight, like silk or particles, it can give an opalescent, magical touch to the stone. Some crystals and needles look especially beautiful under the microscope and I try to highlight them in my stone photographs.



*The top prize-winning aquamarine cut by John Dyer.*

## THE ADVENTURER: JOHN DYER

I have loved beautiful things, and business, from a very young age. I started a series of businesses around the age of 10! Growing up, my parents bought me books on different subjects I was interested in. One of my interests was gemstones so they purchased books on gemstone identification and related topics. I studied these books and found the gemstone business fascinating.

I never planned on becoming a gem cutter. One of our first steps into the gem business was traveling to Africa to buy gem material. In the country we visited, cut gems were very expensive but rough gemstones were more affordable. Through a series of events, we ended up cutting the gemstones ourselves. During that process, I discovered I not only enjoyed cutting gems, I also had a God-given talent for it.

My greatest enjoyment is trying to match the raw material to the cut that is well suited to it. I don't like the idea of trying to conform the rough to the cut as that means a less than ideal result for a given piece of rare natural material and also often something that isn't ideally suited to the cut either in terms of colour, clarity, refractive index, or other factors.

Years ago, we were negotiating to purchase a somewhat large piece of aquamarine rough, the broker who had the rough took our offer to the miner and we didn't hear back for a while. During that time we purchased a different piece of aquamarine and so weren't especially wanting another one. Then the broker came back and told us that the miner had accepted our offer. My father (who is also my business partner) felt that we should honour our word since we hadn't set any kind of a time frame on the offer and so we ended up purchasing the rough even though we didn't think we needed it.

Once I cut it, though, it won first place at the prestigious American Gem Trade Association (AGTA) gem cutting awards. My grandmother purchased it from us and years later, she gifted it to my wife, so it is still in the family. We did okay with the other piece of aquamarine which we bought, but God blessed even more the one we had purchased to honour our word.