

Amber... Or Not?

Article written by Jasmine Younkin

When I think of Amber, I think of that one scene in Jurassic Park with the mosquito suspended in a glass like substance. Amber, however, is a variable substance with a multitude of appearances and qualities. The high demand for amber over the last 20 years has spurred more fakes into the market than ever before. Consumers need to be more aware than ever of what they're buying.

I'll be discussing golden to brown amber in this article. There are many other varieties which could be discussed, however golden amber is the most popular. Please keep in mind that this article is directed for a general audience. There's a lot of technical mumbo-jumbo I'll be simplifying for easy digestion.

GENUINE AMBER - 100,000 years or more



Amber is fossilized tree resin. The most popular colors range from gold to brown. Amber looks a lot like amber colored glass -- either clear or creamy. It comes in a rough form, but when polished will be smooth.

To be considered genuine amber, a piece must be at least 100,000 years old. High jewelry grade amber is clear – aka Jurassic park style, minus the bug. Often amber is mounted in silver and sold as a precious gemstone.

Amber is more desirable to collectors with tree branches, bugs, spiders, etc. These bugs are actually preserved specimens which were suspended in the tree resin before it hardened. The more clearly the bugs are displayed, the higher the price for the piece.

High quality amber (with or without bugs included) is a costly gemstone. If the deal seems too good to be true, look closer.

Is it Amber?:

- 1) If you put a match to genuine amber, it won't ignite
- 2) Amber has about 2-3 hardness.

YOUNG AMBER



<http://www.etsy.com/listing/64222648/930-argentium-silver-earrings-amber>

Young amber is ancient tree resin. Technically, it's not really amber and is under 100,000 years old. Most jewelry artists and dealers still call this material amber or young amber.

Young amber is a cheaper alternative to genuine amber. Young amber is very light, like plastic. It's great for earrings or large pieces where weight is an issue.

Is it Young Amber?:

1) This experiment is fun. Light it on fire! Yeap, I'm serious. Amber which hasn't fully fossilized will burn and give off a pine-y, tree-like scent. I suggest using a pair of pliers with a rubber grip, preferably outside & over concrete, stone, or some other non-flammable surface. The younger the amber, the hotter it will burn. All you need is a match.

2) Young amber was used by the Egyptians, Chinese, and other cultures as incense back in the day. Amber incense doesn't really smell like amber, though. Pretty exciting, right?

3) Young amber will become sticky in solvents like acetone and alcohol.

AMBER & PLASTIC MANMADE SPECIMINS



If you see “amber” like the stuff above, it’s not amber. This material is a manmade concoction of young amber and plastic. The two materials (and possibly other chemicals/compounds) are melted together and set in molds. Sometimes the workmanship is decent enough that it looks almost genuine.

Personally, I don’t like the look of this material, but it can be a cheaper alternative to genuine amber. However, these pieces tend to sell more expensively than young amber and not look as nice.

Some of the nicer manmade pieces will have bugs suspended inside. They're not ancient ants – they're last week's ants!

Is it Amber & Plastic?:

- 1) Look for discs, rounds spots, or fractures in the specimen which look manufactured like above.
- 2) This amber may burn, depending on the plastic and age of the amber. However, there will not be a pine-y or tree-like scent. It will smell like burned plastic.

PLASTIC

I've seen some pretty authentic looking plastic pieces before. The main way to tell they're a fake is if they burn and smell like plastic, or you can see molding lines.

Last Thoughts:

There are many different kinds of amber on the market. Each kind has its own look, variations, and can be carved into a multitude of shapes.

Never be afraid to ask weird questions. I've walked up to a bead store owner before and asked, "Excuse me, have you ignited this amber before?"

If the amber has too much going on -- perfect color, lots of bugs, cheap -- it's probably a fake or some sort of plastic/amber concoction.

Always be polite. Even the best of the best get duped sometimes. If someone's selling a fake, most likely they're not doing so purposely.