

## Mineral Spotlight: Cinnabar

This week's mineral spotlight has a bright red hue and toxic fumes. Cinnabar is a mercury sulfide ( $\text{HgS}$ ) that occurs as earthy masses and rarely as hexagonal crystals. Both forms are displayed in the Dice Museum. It is both soft and exceptionally heavy. For a reference, try picking up the galena on the touch table. Cinnabar is heavier than galena. The name "cinnabar" comes from the Persian and Arabic names for the mineral, which translate to "dragon's blood."

The finest crystals are found in the Hunan province of China, but the mineral can be found around the world. In fact, many different cultures over the past 4000 years mined and used cinnabar, including people in Egypt, Peru, Spain, Mexico, China, India, and throughout Europe.

Cinnabar was powdered to create the pigment vermilion, which was used in painting and pottery. Cinnabar was also administered medicinally for immortality beginning in the 4th century in China. Here, cinnabar-rich "elixirs of immortality" led to early deaths from mercury poisoning in many Chinese leaders, starting with the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. Medicinal use began in the 16th century in Europe, where it was used to treat syphilis among other ailments. As the only important mercury ore, it is still a useful mineral today, but for very different purposes.

This feature was posted on Dice Museum social media by Museum intern Josian Aardema on 5/23/2023.

