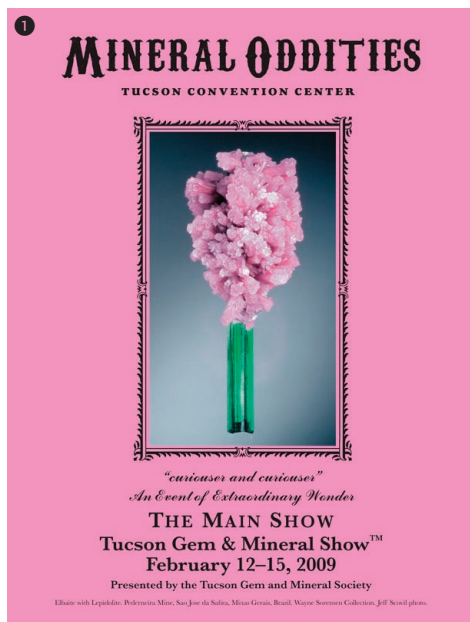


## MINERAL ODDITIES

For the mineral-collecting and gem-trading communities, there is no greater event than the annual Tucson Show. This convergence of mineral and gem devotees has been ongoing for 55 years at a most opportune time for residents of high northern latitudes—the first two weeks of February (although fanatics show up in mid-January), when the Sonoran Desert is inviting and our hometowns are frozen. Nowhere else can one see so many minerals, gems, fossils, dealers, and colleagues. As diligent as one might be looking at yet more specimens, a visit only skims the surface before saturation and numbness set in. So, thank goodness for the desert, Mexican food, limitless impotent margaritas, and friends.



For those wanting to see mineral exhibits, the focus is the Gem and Mineral Show at the Convention Center, the culmination of the entire extravaganza. After years of theme minerals, theme countries or localities, and the previous year's overwhelming "reunion" of specimens from important mineral localities in North America, the 2009 theme was "mineral oddities"—a curious topic that actually bears some pondering 1. I suspect this choice was designed to contrast with and break traditions, which it did in a most entertaining and intriguing manner. The concept of what constitutes a mineral oddity, or odd mineral specimen, ultimately depends upon the eye of the beholder or, more accurately, the exhibitor at Tucson. As a museum curator, I must admit to my egghead sensibilities, so we exhibited such things as rare twins of spinel and quartz, interesting topotactic intergrowths of augite and hornblende, a gwindel of xenotime, a large

faceted blue (irradiated) topaz, and our most curious back-scratcher quartz 2. Many exhibitors displayed specimens that resembled something else. Petrified objects were fun, including a banana from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake 3 and a shoe dropped in a mine sump encrusted with gypsum 4. A complete dinner table of suggestive but totally inedible rocks and minerals was an appreciated attraction 5. The inventive Renate Schumacher of Bonn brought a suite of tartrate crystallizations from wine corks, bottles, and barrels—maybe these aren't minerals, but they are crystals suitably interesting to most extant or would-be mineralogists 6.

"Mineral oddities" opened a small door for me as a means of demonstrating the fun and curiosity that we can share with students and society at large. A curious specimen may evoke a smile and many questions. What better way to introduce the scientific method. Moreover, minerals

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and rock specimens are real and offer an alternative to our expanding exposure to virtual reality. Maybe an odd specimen is just what you need at your next class, lab, show-and-tell, or party.

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