



## Collecting engraved gems

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# COLLECTING ENGRAVED GEMS

Hadrien J. Rambach

*This text gives an overview of the characteristics associated with engraved gems, presented from the perspective of a collector. Furthermore, it demonstrates that gem collectors have always existed and enjoyed a variation of gems based on their taste and purpose. The contribution will cover the different periods, materials and iconography of engraved gems.*

## WHY ENGRAVED GEMS?

My interest in engraved ancient gems developed through numismatics. I was in charge of the Roman coins department of a major auction-house in London, UK when I found-out their existence. Engraved gems date from the same periods as coins, their sizes are comparable, and their subjects can be very close. Engraved gems have influenced coin designs in a significant manner in time. Many later coin-types display an inspiration from gem iconography.

## WHAT ARE ENGRAVED GEMS?

Under this name are grouped two types: intaglios and cameos. Intaglios are engraved into, which allows its possessor to use it as a seal, whereas cameos are carved in relief, so they are decorative jewels and do not have a utilitarian goal.

Seals have been carved for thousands of years. For example, one can find Sumerian cylinders and Minoan intaglios. Most collectors look for Classical pieces that are cameos, intaglios and scarabs of the Greek, Etruscan and Roman periods. It is more difficult to collect Byzantine or Renaissance gems, as they are very scarce indeed. But Neo-Classical carvings, of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth- centuries, can be more easily found, they display the highest technical perfection, and they often are in excellent condition.

As a rule, gems are not signed by the stone engraver until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, there are some exceptions, but only a few tens of ancient signed gems are known. This subject has been passionately studied, and engraved gems have been collected since the publication of a book in 1724 by the British spy in Italy, Baron von Stosch.

A simple advice: beware of signed gems, as they are most unlikely to be ancient. And I must note that many neoclassical engravers signed their own names but in Greek letters, in spirit of antiquity.

Interestingly though, a very small number of Hellenistic gems can be attributed. For example, an unusually large stone (Figure 1), a large sardonyx that was either engraved

in Egypt in the time of Cleopatra or in Rome in the time of Augustus, has a very recognizable style. The figure displays oversized limbs and hands, a heavy ground line, and an extremely polished surface. This is characteristic of another large stone, depicting Venus and Mars, in the Shrine of the Three Kings in the Cologne Cathedral. Alas, the name of this engraver is not known, but six stones by him have been identified in the world, and such a piece may well be the only chance for a collector to own a gem by an engraver that has been identified.

The more valuable engraved gems are hard-stones, mostly quartz and chalcedony varieties. Intaglios can also be pressed into glass: average Roman citizens would wear such paste-intaglios set into bronze, iron, silver or even gold rings. Cameos can also be carved into shells, but the collectable ones are usually made of onyx or sardonyx.

Shell cameos are often large, but they tend to be engraved in series and not be the works of real artists.

The technical difference in difficulty between carving a hard-stone and a shell is enormous. As explained in an article of the late 1880s (John B. Marsh, "Cameo-cutting as an occu-



FIGURE 1: Ancient gold pendant, set with a Hellenistic intaglio in sard, 34.7 x 27.2 mm, depicting Dionysos pouring wine into the mouth of a panther. European private collection. Photograph by Geneva Kornbluth, © H. J. Rambach.

pation,” in *Journal of the Society of Arts*, vol. 35, 21 January 1887, pp. 148-155), carving a shell cameo normally takes a few days, whilst onyx cameos « *require long and patient labour, each occupying from three-four months in completion* ». Because of this, the price differences have always been great. I found two examples: in 1865 London, James Ronca was asking about 5 times more for hardstones than for shells, and in 1867 Rome, Paolo Neri was asking nearly 10 times more.

There is a great variety amongst engraved gems. One of the rarest type is carved diamonds. Of those, I am aware of some 25 made between 1500 and the 1870s, and some 50 to 75 made in the following quarter of a century. Most of them have disappeared, and most surviving ones are owned by museums and royalties worldwide, having been engraved for kings and emperors. Here are two rare examples. One was made in the 1740s by a celebrated German artist living in England, Lorenz Natter. He engraved it for the son of the richest man in England, Lord James Cavendish, son of the first Duke of Devonshire. This stone is well documented because Lorenz Natter planned to publish the best engraved gems kept in British collections, and he of course included this one amongst them. So, its sketch is preserved in the Hermitage Museum, Natter’s treaty about engraved gems tell us about it. Considering that Natter used to charge as high as ten to twenty-five guineas per portrait, engraved on a “normal” stone, one must wonder how much he charged for this diamond intaglio.

The other example is known as the « Queen Frederica Diamond » (Figure 2). This stone of 1.88 carat is supposed to depict the first Queen of the Netherlands, Queen Frederica Louisa Wilhelmina (1774-1837). It was preserved unset until 2013, when it was mounted into a cross-pendant by Marc Auclet – a Parisian jeweler who is known for his contemporary creations incorporating older elements.

### GEMS IN ANTIQUITY

Most ancient gems have survived without their original mountings and were almost never signed. Fortunately, there are some ancient texts that tell us about their use, their possessors and their magical properties. For example, in his *Natural History*, written around AD 77-79, the Roman writer Pliny wrote that Alexander the Great had his portrait engraved in emerald by the engraver Pyrgoteles (*chapter XXXVII.4*). Already then, engraved gems were not only used, but also collected as such. Pliny tells us that the first collection of precious stone was owned by Scarus, Sylla’s step-son (*chapter XXXVII.5*).

### GEMS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Little is known about collecting gems in the late Roman and Byzantine era but there is evidence of collecting from the medieval period. In the early thirteenth-century, magnificent gems were carved again in Southern Italy for the court

of the Hohenstaufen Holy Roman Emperor. These works were very sophisticated, but often inspired by Roman gems – suggesting that the ancient ones were owned by the Emperor or his circle.

Later, in Germany and France especially, the late Middle Ages goldsmiths re-used ancient gems in the reliquaries and crosses. They were using them for their magical virtues, or their colours, rather than their beauty. For example, many intaglios would be mounted inverted, with no possibility to see the carving.



FIGURE 2: Modern gold pendant by Maison Auclet (2013), set with a 1.88 carat diamond, 10 x 8 mm, depicting Dutch Queen Frederica Louisa Wilhelmina. European private collection. Photograph by Jérémy Zenou, © H. J. Rambach.

Arabic gems were also set as seals in the Western world, most likely without any understanding of the inscription’s meaning.

### THE COLLECTORS OF THE RENAISSANCE

After an interruption in gem carving, collecting and engraving started again with the Renaissance in the fifteenth-century. Pietro Barbo (1417-1471), the future Pope Paul II, collected cameos and intaglios with a passion, and many of the best ancient stones went through his hands. Vasari wrote that Paul II wore so many heavy cameo rings that his fingers were de-





FIGURE 3: Modern gold ring, set with an engraved sardonyx, depicting the facing profiles of Saints Peter and Paul divided by a processional cross on stand, the reverse inscribed in relief PAVLVS II PONTIFEX MAXIMVS, engraved in 1464 for the newly elected Pope Paul II. Current location unknown. Photo © Christie's.



FIGURE 4: Modern gold pendant, set with a Roman onyx cameo, 27 x 31 mm, depicting the combat between Hercules and the Thracian Diomedes, with the ownership-inscription of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492). Private collection, on loan to the Getty Museum. Photograph by Massimiliano Tursi, © H. J. Rambach.



FIGURE 5: Gold ring, set with a cameo in onyx, 16 x 13 mm, depicting French King Louis XV, signed POMPADOUR F. European private collection. Photograph by Paolo Pugnaghi © Dario Ghio.

prived of blood-circulation and that this may have accelerated his death. It was therefore very exciting when, in December 2007, his own Papal ring was offered at auction (Figure 3). It displayed an intaglio with Peter and Paul's portraits separated by a cross, and the Pope's titles on the reverse in cameo.

Paul II's collection of gem was acquired en-bloc by Lorenzo de' Medici, who kept adding masterpieces to it. (Figure 4) Interestingly, Lorenzo would have people browsing the Mediterranean world for important ancient pieces, but he would also employ engravers, and even declared: "*when something [i.e. an engraved gem] is good, even if it is modern, we should not let it go.*" The fifteenth-century, in my opinion, saw the very best gems being produced, with an unprecedented wealth spent by some major collectors to acquire and have executed the best masterpieces of glyptic.

Engraved stones were not only enjoyed by the rich and powerful, but also by artists who often were inspired by gems. One example of an artist passionate about gems was Pieter-Paul Rubens, who collected them and painted the largest of them all – the Roman 'Grand Camée' of the 1st century AD. Whilst the original stone is in the Paris Cabinet des Médailles, the painting is in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford. In 1626, Rubens sold some gems to the duke of Buckingham, but he kept some, and his collection was enlarged by

his son Albert: they reached a total of 212 pieces in 1658 according to a catalogue by Jean Chiflet.

#### MORE RECENT COLLECTORS

The times started to change in the eighteenth-century: the development of the *Grand Tour* tourism led to an increased number of gems being exported from Italy. Even the famous mistress of King Louis XV of France, Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764), learnt from the master of the time – Jacques Guay – how to engrave cameos. (Figure 5)

Major collectors of the neo-classical period were pursuing engraved gems, but often as part of wider collections. For example, Pierre Crozat owned 1,400 engraved gems at his death in 1740, but also over 500 important old masters paintings and 9,000 drawings. Some collectors were more specialized into engraved gems though, such as the Duke of Marlborough whose collection was dispersed in 1899.

These collectors from the eighteenth-century wanted to be able to wear their gems, which can often be seen on the sitters in painted portraits of the time. Even the gems that they would not wear would usually be mounted into rings (or sometimes brooches). A new type of mounts were developed; simpler and lighter than earlier rings, the collectors' swivel and signet mounts, most are still often copied nowadays.

### MASTERPIECE FAKES

Engraved ancient gems were so popular that some collectors took extreme measures. The infamous Prince Stanislas Poniatowski (1754-1833), nephew of the King of Poland, has to be mentioned here. The Prince claimed that his collection only contained genuine ancient signed gems. But in fact, he had had all his intaglios newly commissioned, about 2,600 of them to give an idea, often by the best artists of the time – such as the Pichler family, with false signatures in Greek. (Figure 6)

The first serious doubts were raised a year before his death, in 1832, when a set of 419 plaster impressions were presented by the Prince to the King of Prussia. The director of the Berlin museum, Ernst Henrich Toelken, declared that, *"The impressions are indeed the most beautiful you can expect to see in art."* But he doubted the signatures, because it was unexpected that artists – supposedly hundreds of years apart – would all have worked in the same style. I quote his incisive conclusions: *"Thus, we have here, – and I am extremely sorry to give this hard judgement! – in works and words a scientific deceit of such dimensions never seen in art history before."*

The gems were offered for sale at Christie's in 1839, and this was the first time that people had access to the actual stones. It was understood then by most that they were modern works, and a scandal ensued that lasted many years. Nevertheless, these are unusually large and well engraved gems, perfect examples of the Neo-Classical taste. It has actually been recently discovered, that several were carved by Giovanni Calandrelli (1748-1853), who had been inspired by the recent translations into Italian and German of Homer and other classical writers.

### NAPOLEONIC FASHION

When Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned emperor in 1804, a new crown was executed – in the style of the Medieval art. Named "Crown of Charlemagne," it was covered with cameos and intaglios. This contributed to an archaizing style, and to give a feeling of long-standing heritage. But this also reflected the personal taste of the new Emperor of the French, who had a passion for engraved gems. Inspired by Napoleon, a fashion developed amongst the wealthy and powerful, and this taste was then shared by many at the court. His first wife, Empress Josephine, had a stunning tiara executed. It passed through descent to the Swedish crown, and was recently worn again by Princess Victoria. (Figure 7)

An exceptional item recently acquired by Maison Chaumet for its archives, is a gold belt that was realized for Napoleon's niece to be offered to Napoleon's second wife. This confirms that the taste for cameos could be found all around the Napoleonic court – and cannot be only attributed to Napoleon himself.

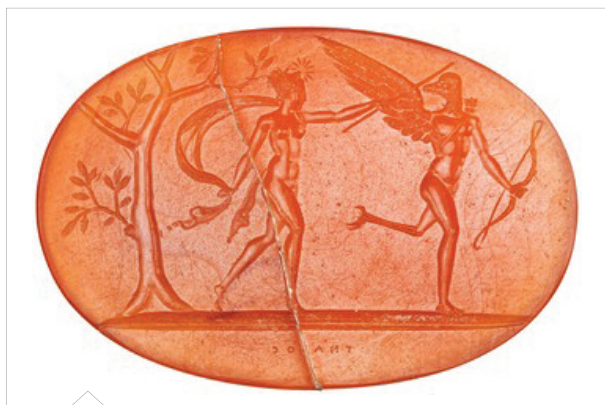


FIGURE 6: Carnelian intaglio with the signature of Gnaios, 40.5 x 27.5 mm, by an unknown "Poniatowski engraver" around 1810-1830, depicting the enchantress Circe transforming Pegasus into a woodpecker. American Numismatic Society, inv. no. 0000.999.56797. Photograph by Alan Roche © American Numismatic Society.

The provenance of the gems is noteworthy. Napoleon hired several of the best contemporary engravers, but he also used several antique pieces that were preserved in the national collection (now the Cabinet des Médailles de la Bibliothèque nationale de Paris). And, for this belt, it is an ancient cameo from the Borghese family-collection that was reset.

### MORE RECENT JEWELLERS

The fashion of cameos and intaglios declined after the Battle of Waterloo, but there was a renewed fashion when jewelers developed the "archaeological style" in the second half of the nineteenth-century. The most celebrated house is that of Castellani, with its luxurious shop on Fontana di Trevi in Rome.



FIGURE 7: Wedding cortege of Victoria, Crown Princess of Sweden, in Stockholm on 19 June 2010. She is depicted wearing a cameo crown executed for Empress Josephine – wife of Napoleon. Photograph by Holger Motzkau 2010, Wikipedia/Wikimedia Commons.





FIGURE 8: Article entitled "Secondhand but not second best. Cameos" by Vivienne Becker, in *Financial Times*, How to Spend it, supplement, 7 March 2009, p. 14.

Unfortunately, Mr. Castellani had lost a hand at war. Therefore, it was not actually he fashioning the jewels. His workshop was headed by a young Neapolitan named Giacinto Melillo, whose jewels are much rarer on the market and – in my opinion – even more desirable.

### COLLECTING ANCIENT ENGRAVED GEMS TODAY

The beauty and marvel embodied in gems from antiquity is often overlooked by the masses today. And yet, with relatively few surviving to current day, they are truly rare. It is, I believe, a good time to acquire engraved gems, because of the very limited number of buyers around. With such a niche market, serious collectors do not really have to fear competition and inflated price. For example, despite an entire page being devoted to cameo-collecting in the *Financial Times* in 2009, with my name among just 5 other dealers worldwide, I only received one phone call. (Figure 8) Truth be told, this call was from a major collector, but nevertheless there was only one...

A reason for the small number of engraved gem-collectors in our times is that they are scared of being cheated, scared of forgeries. And indeed, there is a need for expertise and advice. Whenever a friend emails me items on offer on eBay, I alternate between laughter and cries: wrongly described

items, absurd prices, etc. even from a more reliable and prestigious source, such as auction houses, items are not always as described: I published a ring that had been sold as Goethe's, though it wasn't, and as the work of a specific engraver, who hadn't carved it. But this does not justify being afraid: whatever one buys, some expertise is required, be it a second-hand car, a diamond, or a beach-house.

A recurring issue that beginner-collectors hear is that the ancient gem-market is full of forgeries and that they cannot be distinguished. There are three main reasons for this bad reputation of glyptics. The first one is an eighteenth-century writer, who pretended to be unable to distinguish genuine from fake. Then there is the issue of the Poniatowski collection, about which was covered earlier in this article. The last one is a celebrated late nineteenth-century collector, Count Tyszkiewicz, who sold his first collection for a large financial loss when he realized that he had been cheated. But then, this gentleman, who started again and built a remarkable collection, is a good example that the fear of being cheated should motivate you to be knowledgeable, rather than discourage you from buying. And then, is it really that hard to distinguish the classical gems from the neoclassical ones?

Augusto Castellani felt the need in 1862 to express a warning about large gems: "engraved gems that are larger than what can be mounted as rings are never true antiques." After a little while frequenting gems, such a statement would be obvious to anyone. However, neoclassical gems in general are larger, better polished, often with more complex scenes. They simply don't look the same! Of course, there are a few problematic gems. But, as a whole, it takes no great expert to distinguish the old from the new – providing you look at enough originals and use a critical eye.

There remains a chance of real discoveries, such as the following example. It came up at auction in England, unrecognized, and described as a "rather crude" nineteenth-century cameo. In fact, it is the fifteenth-century copy of an ancient Roman intaglio, owned by Lorenzo de' Medici, who preferred cameos to intaglios and had his most precious gems copied. Moreover, Botticelli depicted it on a portrait of Lorenzo's mistress.

Few collecting fields give a chance to acquire such masterpieces unrecognized. Likewise, few collecting fields give the opportunity to collectors to become real experts, and make historically-significant research: indeed, until the discovery of this gem, all art historians believed that Botticelli had copied a bronze medal – changing the colors – or even the carnelian intaglio – changing the colors and reversing the design.

Already in the Renaissance, Lorenzo de' Medici had declared that well-engraved gems should be bought, whatever their age. Nevertheless, most buyers restrict themselves to only one period. I would rather suggest collecting a specific

theme, which can be very wide – such as female busts, or very narrow, such as the contest between Athena and Poseidon as shown on the Parthenon.

One comment which I've heard often is that engraved gems are not collected because they are too small. In fact, the decorator Jacques Grange had created an entire cabinet of curiosities for Yves Saint Laurent (1936-2008) and Pierre Bergé, to host their collection of cameos. Nevertheless, that's true: if your goal is to decorate your living room with an antique above your chimney, a cameo will not do! But the argument has never stopped coin collectors. This factor allows you to own several hundred pieces without needing a castle to store them.

Also, if engraved gems are not useful to decorators, they are instead your only chance to wear an antiquity: I cannot imagine anyone with a vase on his finger, or a Picasso painting around her neck.

#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF ANCIENT ENGRAVED GEMS IN ART HISTORY**

The so-called "seal of Nero," the Augustan carnelian intaglio which was copied in cameo and depicted in the Botticelli painting, was valued at 1,000 florins in the Medici inventory, when a masterpiece of sculpture such as Michelangelo's *David* was only worth 400 florins.

Engraved gems can often be accurately dated, which can assist archaeologists. Gems tend to be perfectly preserved,

whereas not all coins and almost no sculptures are. If you take the name of Winckelmann, possibly the most prestigious of all amongst art-historians, you will see that his first work of importance, the book that led him to be famous, was the catalogue of the engraved gems in the collection of Baron von Stosch. Similarly, well-known artists have been involved with engraved stones. Michelangelo advised Lorenzo de' Medici in his acquisitions of gems, and he supplied designs to engravers. More recently, both Dali and Braque have designed cameos.

One special name must be mentioned is Augustus Saint-Gaudens. This American artist of French origin is the most celebrated of all modern coin-engravers. He is especially famous for the 1907 gold coinage which President Roosevelt commissioned in 1905. But his trade as a young man was cameo carving. He undoubtedly later used these skills to design his coins and medals.

This proves that – though American cameo art tends to be limited, and most Americans of the Gilded Age would hire Italian artists to depict them and their beloved family members – this art is an integral part of American visual culture. ♦

**About the Author:** *Hadrien Rambach, owner of HJR Fine Arts sprl, is an advisor in Ancient numismatics, based in Brussels, Belgium. He is also an antique dealer, specialized in engraved gems of Antiquity, the Renaissance, and Neo-classical Europe.*

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