



The Gem Collection of Prince Poniatowski

Hadrien Rambach

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DEPARTMENTS



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Facing page: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, Orestes scattering the bones of Pyrrhus, cornelian intaglio with the signature of Admon, 41 × 30 mm. Private collection, London (photo by Jérémy Zenou). Formerly in the collection of Raphael Esmerian (1903–1976), sold in 2001 to S.J. Phillips Ltd., who sold it to Richard Trescott. Poniatowski [1830?–1832, no. V-394; auction 1839, no. 893 (sold to Bayle); Rambach 2010, p. 20.

THE GEM COLLECTION OF PRINCE PONIATOWSKI

Hadrien J. Rambach

During a recent visit to the ANS, I took the opportunity to look over the engraved gems in the collection. These are not coins or medals of course, but numismatists have traditionally collected them along with ancient coins, because of their similar sizes, their similar types, and even sometimes their shared engravers.¹ Gems were engraved in antiquity, the medieval period, the Renaissance, and in modern times.² Even the famed American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens started his career as a cameo-carver (fig. 1).³ I knew that the ANS had a small holding of gems, as the late Frances and James Schwartz published four articles about them. Two of these papers are devoted exclusively to so-called magic/gnostic gems, a type of Roman apotropaic intaglios with powers against various ailments (fig. 2).⁴ I wondered how many more gems the ANS owns: indeed the collection contains a number of non-magic gems (fig. 3). There is no cameo in the collection, which is of unequal quality.

Amongst these ancient stones (of about 10 mm each), two gems stand out: they are much larger, and they

are signed, which was an exceedingly rare occurrence in antiquity. Only one has a ticket: “modern copy”. Modern indeed (200 years old), inspired by ancient art indeed, but much more than “fakes”, these two stones deserve to be reconsidered and appreciated again. Both gems are signed in minuscule Greek letters with the name Gnaios. They can be recognized by their iconography and signature as belonging to the group of some 2,581 intaglios (and 20 cameos⁵) collected by Prince Stanisław Poniatowski in the early nineteenth century (fig. 4).⁶ Claudia Wagner⁷ and I succeeded to identify the subjects of the ANS’s two gems quite easily. One is an amethyst, 40.5 × 27.5 mm, which depicts the marine deities Nereus and Doris, parents of the Nereids, swimming on the waves (figs. 5–6). The other is a carnelian, 42 × 28 mm, which shows the enchantress Circe transforming Picus into a woodpecker (figs. 7–8). “Most of the Poniatowski gems betray their falsity by their large size alone”,⁸ and the ANS’s ones are large indeed—even by Poniatowski’s standards.⁹ The carnelian is unfortunately broken in two, and they are both unset—having

1. “Glyptic art” is the engraving of hardstones in relief (cameos) or in intaglio (usually called “seals”). A collection of engraved gem is called a dactyliothea.

2. Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, pp. 78–80.

3. See my forthcoming book on Saint-Gaudens and cameos.

4. Schwartz-Schwartz 1979; Schwartz 1999; Guiraud-Schwartz 2001; Schwartz 2006. Schwartz published 82 magical gems, against 56 gems with male deities or heroes, and 25 with erotes (death sadly prevented him from finishing his publication project; see van Alfen 2006 for his obituary). The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database now lists 98 items from the collection of the ANS.

5. In the early 21st century, the Poniatowski family sold a cameo with the head of Alexander (probably copied from a coin) and the pseudo-signature of Admon, but was unsure whether it actually came from the prince’s collection. Advertised online in March 2014 by Thomas Faerber S.A. (Geneva), inventory nr. 19221. Might this be the cameo Poniatowski [1830?–1832, p. 102, no.

64B, described as: “Alexandre le Grand, tête couverte d’une peau du lion. Camée à deux couches”?

6. Lucia Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli is the only one who gives a precise date for the carving of the Poniatowski gems: 1803–1822, which is when the prince lived in Rome, before moving to Florence in December 1822 (Busiri Vici 1971, p. 411; Pirzio-Biroli-Stefanelli 1996, p. 186; Tassinari 1996, p. 161). In fact, drawings for gems by the engraver Calandrelli are dated 1816–1826, which indicates that the carving continued after the prince’s move.

7. The Beazley Archive, Oxford.

8. Osborne 1912, pp. vi–vii.

9. The majority were unusually large, often 35 to 45 mm wide. Most are made of orange carnelian or brown sard, occasionally of amethyst or very pale blue chalcedony. Some very rare examples were also engraved on beryl, emerald, garnet, hematite, hyacinth, jasper, lapis lazuli, or nicolo.

lost the Prince's original gold mounts (identifiable by a thin black-enamel surround).¹⁰

Signatures on Gems

Of these "Poniatowski gems", an incredible 1,737 are signed stones, two-thirds of the entire collection. These numerous "signatures" can be names of actual testified engravers (such as Gnaios), or names found in the Classical literature (such as Apollonides—found in Pliny's *Natural History*, and Dioscourides—found in Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*), but even names of various historical figures (some of them misspelt).¹¹ Worldwide, far less than a hundred genuine ancient intaglios and cameos survive that bear the artists' signatures, of which some very rare ones are signed "Gnaios". These signatures are always in Greek capital letters, either in the nominative or in the genitive (in the nominative, it is implicitly followed by *epoiei*, i.e. "Gnaios made [it]"). Gnaios/Gnaeus is the name of an actual engraver in hardstones, of the late first century BC, whose biography is still being discussed. Some unsigned gems have been ascribed to him,¹² but I can safely list here four gems by this master.¹³ In London is preserved a damaged head of Herakles in aquamarine, published as early as 1606¹⁴ (fig. 9). In Baltimore, one can admire a standing athlete (after a statue by a follower of Polykleitos), first published in 1736.¹⁵ In New York, the identity of a bust of a Ptolemaic queen (supposedly found in 1736/37) has not been yet agreed upon: Cleopatra Selene maybe (fig. 10).¹⁶ And in Chatsworth is a banded

agate of Diomedes and Palladium which was first published in 1784.¹⁷

Since the publication of Baron von Stosch's splendid volume devoted to the signed gems of antiquity (*Pierres antiques gravées, sur lesquelles les graveurs ont mis leurs noms*—Amsterdam 1724) (fig. 11),¹⁸ gems with inscriptions (names of engraver, of subjects, and of possessors were sometimes confused) had become the ultimate prizes of the eighteenth-century collectors, leading to the addition of forged inscriptions on genuine older gems and to the creation of forged gems. The fact is well attested, for example by the engraver Lorenz Natter: "Immediately on my arrival at Rome, I was employed by the Chevalier Odam to copy the Venus of Mr. Vettori, to make a Danae of it, and put the name Aulus to it. [...] I saw lately at Dresden a Head of Hercules when a Youth, done by him [i.e. Carlo Costanzi], with the name of Gnaios to it."¹⁹

Provenance Research

After Prince Poniatowski's death, both the ANS's gems were offered for sale at auction at Christie's in London: the sale lasted from 29 April until 21 May 1839. Many lots, including these two, were unsold and purchased after sale by a certain John Tyrrell. The ANS's gems reappeared in 1902, as part of an extensive collection offered to the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, offered for sale by Tiffany & Co.²⁰ This group "of about one thousand gems," includ-

10. Wagner 2007, p. 566. The 1839 auction catalogue was not illustrated, and it is therefore not easy to study the gems' original mounts (many stones are unset nowadays, and many others were obviously reset later). Most gems seem to have been set as pendant, though there might have also been some brooches and/or rings. It might be that the descriptions as "rings" / "medallions" in the 1839 catalogue might simply be a size description (small / big) rather than the indication that some were actually set as rings (no ring is known with a black border). The gem auction 1839, no. 544, was mistakenly described as set in a "gilt metal clasp" (Charterhouse Auctioneers, 13 February 2014, lot 252): the Poniatowski gems were set in gold.

11. For example Myrton (auction 1839, no. 1440) which should read Myron (a sculptor whose work probably inspired a series of coins under Augustus, see Rambach-Walker 2012).

12. Vollenweider 1966, pp. 45–46.

13. The 16.5mm amethyst head of Mark Antony inscribed ΓΝΑΙΟC, from the Rosanna collection (acquired by Constantine Alexander Ionides, 1833–1900, and now J. Paul Getty Museum inv. 2001.28.1), will be re-published by Kenneth Lapatin. For a glass stamp of this gem, and earlier bibliography, see Pirzio-Biroli-Stefanelli 2007, no. III-136.

14. This gem is a good example of the complexity of studying ancient signed gems: Donald Strong himself, of the British Museum, did not believe in its age. About the gem's many copies, see the remarkable study in Tassinari 2012, pp. 266–269.

15. Garnet intaglio by Gnaios (fl. 30–20 BC), signed ΓΝΑΙΟΥ, 18 mm. Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore), inv. 42.109. Vollenweider

1966, pl. 42-5; Platz-Horster 1993; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, fig. 476; Pirzio-Biroli-Stefanelli 2007, no. III-550. Originally from the collection of the famed numismatist Apostolo Zeno (1669–1750), it was later owned by Baron Philip von Stosch, the Earl of Bessborough, and the Marlborough dukes.

16. Chipped in the nineteenth century. The gem was acquired by the Museo Kircheriano, according to Visconti (Visconti 1829, pp. 163–164) and Köhler (Köhler 1851, pp. 191 sqq.). Athanasius Kircher had died in 1680, but the museum went on collecting: I am grateful to Erika Zwierlein-Diehl for informing me that the museum bought Roman asses from the collection of Sibylle Mertens-Schaaffhausen (after 1855/56), and that Mertens-Schaaffhausen herself wrote in April 1849 that they had just bought some bronzes. The fact that it would—at some point—have been owned by the Este family was indicated by Gisela Richter only (in 1956), and she did not give her source.

17. Garnet intaglio by Gnaios (fl. 30–20 BC), signed ΓΝΑΙΟΥ, 19 × 17 mm banded agate, in an ancient gold ring. Collection of the Dukes of Devonshire. Vollenweider 1966, pl. 41-1/2.

18. See the author's forthcoming work on Philipp von Stosch (1691–1757) and the drawings for this book.

19. Natter 1754, pp. xxviii–xxix.

20. Tiffany & Co. 1902, pp. 111–112. Prices in that catalogue ranged from \$90 to \$150. Quoting an article from *The Times* (London) in 1841, the author of the catalogue was still trying in 1902 to suggest that though they could not all be genuine, some of the Poniatowski gems were indeed ancient.



Fig. 1: Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), Portrait of John Tuff's 1861–1864, shell cameo. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), inv. 1990.78.1a,b



Fig. 2: Anonymous engraver of the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD, four-winged Pantheos on the back of a lion striding left / three figures (possibly the Dioscuri and a goddess) standing above a tabula ansata, obsidian intaglio inscribed in Greek on both sides and the edge. (photo by C.A. Faraone). The inscriptions are magical spells, one of which simply tells: "Protect the wearer from all evil". More specifically, Pantheos could protect from snakes, scorpions, and all other harmful animals thanks to its frightening appearance. Schwartz-Schwartz 1979, no. 34.



Fig. 3: Anonymous engraver (2nd century AD), The facing Dioscuri, carnelian intaglio (ANS 0000.999.33892), 18.2 × 15 × 4 mm (image enlarged). Guiraud-Schwartz 2001, no. 48.



Fig. 4: Anonymous painter c.1831, Portrait of Prince Stanisław Poniatowski (1754–1833). Private collection, Paris, by family descent (photo from Busiri Vici 1971, pl. 155).

ing nearly one hundred Poniatowski gems, was “the result of some thirty years’ research of a gentleman who has resided abroad during that period.” The collector’s identity was revealed in 1912: Edward McK. Holly (d. Rome, 1909).²¹ It seems that this catalogue did not attain a great success: “many still remain at the Organization rooms in New York City and whoever desires a Poniatowski gem can secure one there.”²² It would be interesting to know whether the donor of these two stones had voluntarily chosen them because they both had the same pseudo-signature. Although they have sat in the collection for a long time, they were, unfortunately, only recently accessioned, and so we are not sure when they were offered to the ANS, or by whom. The most likely hypothesis is that these two stones were bequeathed by Samuel Duffield Osborne (1858–1917), who bequeathed 303 engraved gems to the ANS.²³ Osborne was a collector and specialist of glyptic, and he published in 1912 a book on engraved gems, signets, talismans, and ornamental intaglios, ancient and modern. But in this book, Osborne only illustrated one Poniatowski gem,²⁴ and not one of the ANS’s, so we cannot be certain that he was the source of these rediscovered stones.

Prince Poniatowski (1754–1833)

The last king and grand-duke of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (fig. 12), Stanisław II August (1732–1798), was an attested collector, and his collection is documented by a catalogue of stones mounted and unset from 1782 (with 389 entries), and by a dactyliotheca of the Polish king from 1785 (with 292 entries).²⁵ His nephew Prince Stanisław Poniatowski, son of his brother, was also a collector of gems, whose first collection (154 gems) was documented in the 1790s.²⁶

He then built a “second collection”, of almost 3,000 gems —published in c. 1830/32 and sold by Christie’s in 1839.²⁷ The auctioneers at the time, and most scholarly articles about the collection, said that the prince’s first collection had been inherited from the king, and that it was later merged with the second collection.²⁸ But, as already noticed, the royal inventory of 1782 “proves that the engraved gems that belonged to Stanisław August were not incorporated, as one may assume, into the dactyliotheca of the king’s nephew prince Stanisław Poniatowski, an extensive and famous collection, since the content of its catalogue, published in print around 1830, differs completely.”²⁹

“His charm was legendary, his intellect sharp,” but above all Prince Poniatowski was for a while “the richest man in Europe” thanks to his Polish and Lithuanian estates.³⁰ With surprisingly modern ideas, he freed his serfs, built modern manufactures, and reformed the treatment of peasants. The king of Poland (who reigned since 1764) had to abdicate in 1795, but the Prince had expected this political evolution and had left his native country relatively young—having been well prepared by some time spent in Paris, and at Cambridge University in 1771. Prince Poniatowski had visited Italy in 1775–76, and again in 1785—when Angelica Kauffman painted his portrait (fig. 13), visiting ruins and collectors, taking detailed notes in a diary. He was known to enjoy the arts in general: music, antiquities, contemporary architecture, and he settled in Rome in 1791³¹—remaining in Italy for the rest of his life.³²

Writing in the 1860s, Charles William King said that the Poniatowski “gems of the original royal cabinet

21. Osborne 1912, p. 192. The collector’s widow, who died in 1912 in Florence, bequeathed an enormous \$420,000 to the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York.

22. Osborne 1912, p. 192. The prices were rather high: the c. £2 per gem of the 1839 auction represented only ¼ ounce of gold, whilst the 1902 prices were equal to some 5 to 7 ounces.

23. The ANS’s usual Maecenas, Edward T. Newell (1886–1941), was too young at the time to be the purchaser from Tiffany. Newell left 235 of the ANS’s 538 ancient engraved gems (Schwartz-Schwartz 1979 and Schwartz 2006). S. Duffield Osborne bequeathed the ANS’s other 303 gems.

24. Chalcedony intaglio of Capaneus killed by Jupiter, signed by Pyrgoteles. Osborne 1912, fig. XXXII-21 = Auction 1839, no. 2423 = Tiffany & Co. 1902, no. 938.

25. French inventory of 1782: Bąkowski 1958, p. 101; Neverov 1981 (Russian), n. 18; Laska 2001. Latin inventory of 1785: Batoski 1902.

26. Visconti 1829.

27. Poniatowski [1830?–1832; Auction 1839.

28. Wagner 2007, p. 566. I am working on another, longer article on this subject. The fate of both the royal and the first princely collections remains unclear to this date.

29. Batoski 1902, col. 398, translation by Joanna Baczmaga.

30. Seidmann 1999, p. 266. The portrait of Prince Poniatowski used to illustrate Auction 2012 (lot 23), sold at Christie’s in London on 9 December 2009 as attributed to G. B. Lampi, may in fact depict Prince Karl Christian Joseph of Saxony (1733–1796).

31. In 1822, Prince Poniatowski moved from Rome to Florence in order to have his five illegitimate children recognized: “Finally freed from so many worries in Russia, with Napoleon and with the priests, I preferred to establish myself in Florence, because I already had there a married girl” (Korzeniowski 1895, p. 531). Indeed, the Pope would not approve of his intimacy with a certain Cassandra Benloch née Luci, whilst the Grand Duke of Tuscany was more accommodating (Busiri Vici 1971, pp. 411–412 and p. 419). The prince finally married her in 1830, when her legitimate husband had died. According to his own memoirs, the prince had previously refused twice to marry: once in the mid-1780s when the Queen of Naples suggested that he might marry one of her daughters, and once in 1796 when Catherine the Great offered him the hand of the teenage grand-duchess Alexandra Pavlovna (Korzeniowski 1895, pp. 514, 520).

32. He only moved for a few years to Austria because of his opposition to Napoleon.



Fig. 5: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver” (c.1810–1830), *The marine deities Nereus and Doris, parents of the Nereids, floating on the waves*, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Gnaios (ANS 0000.999.56796), 42 × 28 mm (image enlarged). Poniatowski [1830?–]1832, no. II–15; Auction 1839, no. 2411 (unsold); Predeville 1841, no. 253; TIFFANY 1902, no. 985 (\$125).



Fig. 6: Plaster impression of the *Nereus and Doris* carnelian intaglio. American Numismatic Society.



Fig. 7: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, *The enchantress Circe transforming Picus into a woodpecker*, amethyst intaglio with the signature of Gnaios (ANS 0000.999.56797), 40.5 × 27.5 mm. PONIATOWSKI [1830?–]1832, no. IV–302; Auction 1839, no. 2485 (unsold); Predeville 1841, no. 698; Auction 1851, no. 56 (unsold at £2.18); Tiffany 1902, no. 1015 (\$120).



Fig. 8: Plaster impression of the *Circe and Picus* carnelian intaglio. American Numismatic Society.

may be recognized by their peculiar setting, a band of blue enamel enclosing each in its ring, instead of the customary grooved moulding.³³ If this is true, then it would explain where Prince Poniatowski got the idea of surrounding his mounts with a thin line of black enamel: from his uncle's collection. But it is not attested, and I have only found one ring that seems to fit the description (fig. 14).³⁴

The prince reported that, just two days before she died, Catherine the Great (1729–1796) and he “spoke of a project to publish Homer with—on one side the text in Greek characters—on the other the translation in Russian language and characters. This edition would have been illustrated with engravings after the most beautiful ancient stones.”³⁵ Is it a coincidence that so many of his gems in the “second collection” illustrate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? It really does seem that Prince Poniatowski set himself to the task of carrying out the late tsarina's idea. Indeed, the majority of the Poniatowski gems illustrate classical texts such as Vergil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod, Tibullus, Pindar, and especially Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*.³⁶ Accordingly, the iconography of the two gems in the ANS is classical.³⁷ The story of Nereus and Doris, the parents of the fifty Nereids, is told in various texts, as well as the myth of the handsome Picus—first king of Latium (the

area of Rome)—whom the witch Circe tried to seduce and who was punished for his rejection.³⁸ The second story was illustrated twice amongst the Poniatowski gems (fig. 15). Let's note here that some rare Poniatowski gems do not depict scenes taken from Homer, but rather the poet himself: Homer playing on the lyre, attended by Fame and a genius (fig. 16), the Apotheosis of Homer, the frontal bust of Homer, and Homer and Demosthenes.³⁹

The subjects too were one more argument against the authenticity of the Poniatowski gems: for example, how could the engraver Admon (supposedly active around 450 BC) have chosen to illustrate a scene told by Virgil (born about 70 BC), “unless we at once take it for granted that Admon attained a patriarchal age, and engraved it when he was about 420 or 430 years old”?⁴⁰ The Poniatowski gems have been accused of depicting “some very unclassic attitudes in the figures ... often in extravagant attitudes”.⁴¹ But this attack is actually unfair and untrue. Some portraits are rather good—too good maybe, and some scenes do seem directly copied from classical reliefs. In fact, for example, the composition of a Roman mosaic found in Greece⁴² is not so different from that of some Poniatowski gems, such as Lycaon supplicating Achilles⁴³ (figs. 17–18). Altogether, the Poniatowski are excep-

33. King 1866, p. 268. King was often fanciful, so too much weight should not be given to this source.

34. Prince Poniatowski did own a carnelian intaglio (Auction 1839, no. 1781), signed “Solonos” with this iconography (Furtwängler recognized a pseudo-Cicero rather than Maecenas) so it seems unlikely that his uncle the king would already have had an example, and this is a fairly common type (see Vollenweider 1966, pl. 99-5 for an agate signed “Solonos” in the Capitoline Museum, and Neverov 1981, pl. 8-23 for another example in the Hermitage). The blue enamel band is probably coincidental.

35. Korzeniowski 1895, pp. 520–521.

36. Gertrud Platz-Horster was able to identify the precise sources for Calandrelli's compositions: Henrich Voss's *Homers Odüßee* (Hamburg 1781) and *Homers Ilias* (Hamburg 1793) for Homer, and Karl Philipp Moritz's *Götterlehre oder mythologische Dichtungen der Alten* (in its second edition: Berlin 1795) for the general mythology. Calandrelli wrote himself a reference to the *Odisea di Omero traduzione di Giovanni Heinrich Voss*, but this is most surprising considering that he never learnt German—not even later in his life when he lived in Berlin (Platz-Horster 2005, p. 8, 80). Gertrud Platz-Horster has suggested that a German-reader in Rome gave him short quotes in Italian, from Voss and from Moritz, which he noted at the back of his drawings. Calandrelli might have also completed these by reading Homer in Italian, for example from Vincenzo Monti's translation, *Iliade di Omero*, second ed., Milan 1812, 2 vols. The Poniatowski library contained Dacier's French translation of Homer in the 1756 edition (Auction 1951, lot 640).

37. The Beazley Archive in Oxford, and especially Dr. Claudia Wagner, are currently building an online database of the Poniatowski gems, trying to locate and photograph the entire collection. Until this project is completed, and every gem illustrated, it will

be difficult to really analyze the group, but some trends already appear, and for example it seems that the prince favored violent movements to be depicted rather than static figures (Wagner 2007, p. 267).

38. On Nereus and Doris, see: Homer, *Iliad*, 18. 141; Homer, *Odyssey*, 24. 58; Virgil, *Aeneid* 2. 418; Hesiod, *Theogony* 233 etc.; Apollodorus, 1. 2 and 1. 6; Apollonius Rhodius, 4. 772; Statius, *Thebaid* 8. 478; etc. On Circe and Picus, see: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14. 320–620; Virgil, *Aeneid* 7. 45–49, 7. 170–191; Diodorus Siculus, 6. fragment 5. In the prince's own catalogue (Poniatowski [1830?]-1832), the two stones of the ANS are listed under the numbers II-15 (Nereus and Doris) and IV-302 (Circe and Picus): this catalogue was ordered along twenty “classes”: classes I to IV covering subjects from Moritz's *Götterlehre*, class V the *Iliad*, class VI the *Odyssey*, and class VII the *Aeneid*. For a detailed analysis of the content of these various classes, see Toelken 1832.

39. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. VIII-6.4 = Prendeville 1841, no. 1208. Auction 1839, no. 2515. Auction 1839, no. 2516.

40. Ogle 1842, p. 82 gives the example of the gem Christie 1839, no. 2438 (Aeneas killing Mezentius who, falling to the ground, is begging for mercy, and praying to be buried with his son Lausus).

41. Ogle 1841. This is a commentary typical of a certain old-fashioned literature: e.g., about an intaglio by Moor/Moro, “the design is full of the violent action characteristic of non-classical work” (Osborne 1912, p. 386 no. XXX-18, quoted in Tassinari 2014).

42. Spiropoulos 2006, fig. 40.

43. Auction 1839, no. 825 (unsold) = Prendeville 1841, no. 861 = auction 1851, no. 43 (sold £3 to L. Benjamin) (after a drawing by Calandrelli); now lost but known from its impression.



Fig. 9: Gnaios (fl. 30–20 BC), head of Heracles, aquamarine intaglio signed ΓΝΑΙΟC, 25.5 mm high. British Museum (London), inv. 1867,0507.318. From the Orsini, Andreini, and Schellersheim collections before that of L. Strozzi, from whom purchased by Duke P.-L. J. C. de Blacas d'Aulps, from whose family the British Museum acquired it. Vollenweider 1966, pl. 42-1/2/4; Howard 1978, p. 42, n. 33; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, fig. 477; Pirzio-Biroli-Stefanelli 2007, no. III-446.



Fig. 10: Gnaios, Bust of a Hellenistic queen (Cleopatra Selene?), carnelian intaglio signed Γναίoy, 16.8 x 13 mm. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), inv. 10.110.1 (Rogers Fund 1910). Found in Rome near the Colosseum, acquired on 29 March 1737 by Alessandro Gregorio Capponi (1683–1746). Visconti 1829, pp. 163–164; Richter 1956, no. 463; Vollenweider 1966, pl. 43-1/2/3; Ubaldelli 2001, no. 233; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, fig. 478; Pirzio-Biroli-Stefanelli 2007, no. I-153.



Fig. 11: Attributed to Bernard Picart (1673–1733), Hercules and Iole, 175 x 110 mm red-chalk drawing, preparatory to the plate LXVIII of Philipp von Stosch's book *Pierres antiques gravées, sur lesquelles les graveurs ont mis leurs noms* (Amsterdam 1724). Private collection, London. From the collection of François Fagel (1659–1746), and later in the "Northwick/Spencer-Churchill album", later owned by Burnet Pavitt (1908–2002), by whom bequeathed to the Royal College of Music. The gem illustrated is a 25mm-high amethyst intaglio, by Teukros (last quarter of the first century BC). Museo Archeologico, Florence. Formerly owned by Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), the intaglio entered the collection of Pietro Andrea Andreini before being stolen and temporarily remaining with Antonio Maria Zanetti. Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, fig. 445.



Fig. 12: Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Le Brun (1755–1842), portrait of King Stanisław August Poniatowski (1732–1798), oil on canvas, 98 x 78 cm. Versailles, Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, inv. MV 5878 RF 413 (photo © J. L'hoir / Réunion des musées nationaux).



Fig. 13: Angelica Kauffman, Portrait of Prince Stanisław Poniatowski (1754–1833), oil on canvas, 77 x 54 cm, painted in Rome in January 1786. Given by the sitter to Cavalier Luigi Vagnuzzi (d. 1861), inherited by his sister Mrs Andrea Busiri Vici, then by descent. With Galerie Canesso at TEFAF (Maastricht) in March 2014.

tional amongst neoclassical gems in that they are not reproducing existing models. Quite fascinatingly, the prince himself wrote in his catalogue that two of his gems—instead—had inspired some of the best works by Antonio Canova (1757–1822):⁴⁴ his Mars and Venus and his Hercules and Lichas.⁴⁵ This seems impossible to believe, and it is known that Poniatowski's Mars and Venus intaglio was designed by Calandrelli (see below)—it is the latter who was copying Canova! But it is true that, as often with neo-classical gems, parallels can be drawn between sculptures by Canova and engraved gems⁴⁶ (figs. 19–22).

The Exposure of the Fraud

Late 1838, the London auction house of Christie started to advertise the forthcoming sale of the prince's collection.⁴⁷ It was consigned by the prince's heirs: Carlo and Giuseppe. The sale took place in April–May 1839, but the auction was a disaster: the rumors of forgery were already too widespread by then. How could all the gems in the collection be genuine, considering that it contained over 2,600 pieces—of which over 1,700 were signed?⁴⁸ Rumor had long since spread that Prince Poniatowski owned wonders, but that he would not let connoisseurs access his collection. A German scholar failed to get entry, despite repeated attempts during a two-year stay in Rome.⁴⁹ At last, around 1830, the prince had some casts made, and he published an unillustrated catalogue, a copy of which he sent to the University of Cracow, highlighting the “wealth and completeness of this collection”⁵⁰ (fig. 23). As soon as 1831, a French curator denounced most of the group as the work of modern forgers.⁵¹ And when the prince presented 419 plaster impressions of his gems to the king of Prussia in summer 1832, the

set was shown to a German archaeologist who condemned the authenticity of these gems.⁵² His main argument was that the gems's engravers—though supposed to have worked hundreds of years apart—had all worked in a similar style.

The German scholar who in 1832 denounced the Poniatowski gems to be forgeries blamed Italian engravers for having “got the better of a naïve northern enthusiast.”⁵³ It is difficult to believe that Prince Poniatowski had really just been a fool: what makes the deceit so hard to believe is the sheer scale of it. But another huge fraud did take place some decades later, and in this case, it is attested that the principal owner of the fakes did believe that they were genuine, and he did lose what would now be several millions.⁵⁴ The forger, a Frenchman named Denis Vrain-Lucas (1818–1862), created a quantity of handwritten documents, supposedly by the most famous names such as Blaise Pascal, Alexander the Great, or Mary Magdalene. These documents, from all periods of history, were all written on modern paper and in French. The highly respected mathematician Michel Chasles, recipient of the Copley medal in 1865, invested an absolute fortune in some 27,000 of these manuscripts, before being ridiculed when he gave scholarly communications about them: “Ye gods, annihilate but space and time, And make collectors happy.”⁵⁵

Considering the numbers involved, there can be no doubt that several engravers contributed to the carving of the Poniatowski gems, but their identities remains uncertain. It is almost certain that Giovanni Giuseppe / Johann Joseph Pichler (c. 1760–1819) was part of the group. But a known name is that of Giovanni Calandrelli

44. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, p. ix: “on voit le bon résultat de l'imitation des pierres gravées dans trois des plus beaux ouvrages de Canova” (Kolender 1981, p. 93, quoted from Predeville 1841 instead).

45. Mars and Venus: marble statue, 210 cm high, now in London (Buckingham Palace), commissioned in 1815 and delivered in 1824 (Praz and Pavanella 1976, no. 307). The pretended model being the gem Auction 1839 no. 766 = Predeville 1841 no. 112 = Auction 1861 no. 182. Hercules and Lichas: marble statue, 335 cm high, now in Rome (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea), commissioned in March 1795 and finished in 1815 (Praz and Pavanella 1976, no. 131). The pretended model being the gem Auction 1839 no. 2303 = Predeville 1841 no. 463.

46. Tassinari 1996.

47. E.g. in *The Athenaeum*, issue 575 (3 Nov. 1838), p. 796.

48. It remains uncertain exactly how many gems the “second collection” contained. The figure commonly used (2,601 gems) is that found in the prince's catalogue (Poniatowski [1830?]-1832). Several of these, near-duplicates notably, were not included in the catalogue of Auction 1839. Nevertheless, this 1839 catalogue lists a higher number of pieces: 2,644 auction lots, consisting in 6 cabinets, 1374 rings, 1244 “medallions” (i.e. unset stones), and

20 group lots consisting of various artifacts (not “Poniatowski gems”).

49. Toelken 1832, p. 310.

50. Letter to Count Zaluski quoted in Busiri Vici 1971, pp. 442–443. Is it not yet clear when Bartolomeo (1757–1834) and Pietro Paoletti (1785–1844/45) made their glass stamps of various Poniatowski gems (from both collections).

51. Raoul-Rochette 1831, p. 163. In 1834, the same French scholar suggested again that a Poniatowski intaglio of Diana surprised by Actaeon, of which he owned a cast, was a modern forgery (Raoul-Rochette 1834, p. 270. This must have been the gem Auction 1839 no. 268, or Auction 1839 no. 2166). If “it takes a forger to expose a fake” (Grafton 1990, p. 123), what does it say about Raoul-Rochette, Toelken, and Ogle?

52. Toelken 1832, p. 309. The gift was recorded in the *Journal of the Antikensammlung Berlin*, p. 26 of the entry at the date of 23 July 1832.

53. Toelken 1832, translated by Seidmann 1999, p. 267.

54. Over 140,000 francs—the equivalent of over 26,000 ounces of gold, Bordier 1998.

55. Ogle 1842, p. 84.



Fig. 14: Anonymous engraver of the 16th/18th century, bust of Maecenas, amethyst intaglio, 17 mm (image enlarged). Private collection, sold as ancient in Auction 2007, no. 324 (photo kindly provided by Christie's).



Fig. 15: Unknown "Poniatowski engraver", The enchantress Circe transforming Picus into a woodpecker, amethyst intaglio with the signature of Gnaios, 35 × 28 mm. Private collection, Lausanne (photo: The Beazley Archive). Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. IV-301; Auction 1839, no. 1083 (unsold); Prendeville 1841, no. 697; Wagner-Boardman 2003, no. 668.



Fig. 16: Unknown "Poniatowski engraver", Homer playing on the lyre, attended by Fame and a Genius, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Allion, 25 × 33 mm (image enlarged). Private collection, London (photo by Massimiliano Tursi). Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. VIII.6.3; Auction 1839, no. 2460 (unsold) = Prendeville 1841, no. 1207 = Auction 1854, no. 77 (sold £1.12 to a Mr. Ware).

(1784–1853), whose contribution (possibly one tenth of the group) between 1816 and 1826 is attested by a group of drawings (figs. 24–25). Though they pretended to be genuine antiquities, Prince Poniatowski's gems were masterpieces by contemporary engravers who were famously expensive to employ. Giovanni Pichler was advertising prices of up to 40 zecchini on his cards,⁵⁶ Nathaniel Marchant once charged £105 for a sard intaglio of a facing head of Homer:⁵⁷ the “Poniatowski artists” had no reason to have been working at much cheaper rates. Finding such stones would have been an expensive quest too: the stones used are unusually large, and most are of excellent color, which could not easily be found in Italy at the time.⁵⁸ A great number were set in gold, and the precious-metal weight must have accounted for half the price they sold for in 1839. There is no doubt that the prince must have paid much more for them than his heirs obtained.⁵⁹

Two important antiquities collectors, Edith and Alastair Martin, dedicated their catalogue (published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art): “To the fakers and counterfeiters without whom collecting would be considerably less challenging.”⁶⁰ As a conclusion to this article, and in order to place the concept of “forged gems” into context, two collectors should be remembered. The first is Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449–1492), who wrote that a gem should be bought if it is good—whether it is ancient or not,⁶¹ and he commissioned a number of copies of his own ancient intaglios. The second is the duc de Blacas d’Aulps (1771–1839), owner of the original Hercules with the club by Gnaios (first century BC), who was also the owner of two copies: a cameo by Giovanni Antonio Santarelli (1759–1826),

and an anonymous intaglio bearing a false Gnaios signature.⁶² The auction in 1839 of the Poniatowski gems was undoubtedly a fraud, as had been their publication as ancient a few years before, but the quality of their workmanship, the originality of their designs, and the attractiveness of their stones all remain, and this is what matters for real collectors. The market for engraved gems, which were the most valuable of objects from the time of Lorenzo de’ Medici to that of Lord Hamilton, never really recovered, and prices are still comparatively low. Few collectors look for cameos and intaglios anymore, despite the fact that they are in much better condition than antiquities, and more enjoyable than coins: they can be set and worn. In fact, the Poniatowski fraud provoked fear of being cheated in generations of collectors, but this is unfounded, as Poniatowski gems look in fact very different from ancient ones, and they are almost never mistaken for Greek or Roman stones (fig. 26).⁶³ “Altogether the whole performance carries us beyond the realm of any reasonable line of explanation and one is driven to take refuge in a suspicion that Prince Poniatowski had simply become an unbalanced monomaniac on the subject.”⁶⁴ The Poniatowski “collection ... may be justly considered ... a curious specimen of the taste of gem-engraving in the eighteenth [*sic*] century. Should an authentic list ever be obtained of the artists, the value of the collection as a whole would be greatly increased, and render them worthy of being deposited in some national museum.”⁶⁵ Indeed, since we know that some gems are by Calandrelli, these are more sought-after. Many “Poniatowski gems” are nowadays preserved in many museums worldwide.⁶⁶ And thanks to an anonymous donor, two of those (anonymous as well) gems are preserved at the American Numismatic Society.

56. Undated trade card. Two examples, acquired in 1818 from the Banks collection, in the British Museum: inv. D,2.42021 and inv. D,2.4204.

57. Phillips 1977–1978, no. 611.

58. Seidmann 1999, p. 267, suggested that the prince might have had connections in Saxony, where these materials could have been found more easily. Ogle 1842, p. 83, ironically commented: “The Poniatowski collection may boast of having a series of the first period of Etruscan art on amethysts, a stone very common in Etruria, or easily procured in those early days of steamers and railways from the East.”

59. Whether he commissioned them or bought them as ancient does not change: he had—directly or indirectly—to pay for their being made.

60. Rubin 1975, p. v (their celebrated “Guennol lioness” (Rubin 1975, pp. 57–62) sold for over fifty million dollars at Sotheby’s on 5 December 2007, lot 30). The French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869) is said to have declared: “Le dernier mot de l’art, je le trouve dans la contrefaçon”.

61. Quoted in Rambach 2011, p. 140: “When something [i.e. an engraved gem] is good, even if it is modern, we should not let it go”.

62. Aquamarine intaglio, 25.5 mm (Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, fig. 477); onyx cameo, 23mm (Dalton 1915, no. 118); crystal intaglio,

23 mm (Dalton 1915, no. 682). For a remarkable study of the various copies of this celebrated type, see Tassinari 2012, pp. 266–269.

63. It is interesting to notice the difference of wording between the titles of Auction 1839 and Auction 1853, where “antique gems” has been replaced with “exquisite gems”. It is actually remarkable that none of the clients in the 1839 auction seem to have ever tried to reclaim their money and return their purchases, despite Christie’s having sold the Poniatowski gems as “antique”.

64. Osborne 1912, p. 192.

65. Ogle 1842, p. 91.

66. One example in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), 3 in the Badisches Museum (Karlsruhe), 4 in the British Museum (London), 42 in the Cabinet des Médailles (Paris), 3 in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge), 18 in the Holburne Museum (Bath), 2 in the J. and M. Ringling Museum of Art (Sarasota), 2 in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Malibu), 1 in the McGill University (Montreal), 12 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), 15 in the Museum of Fine Arts (Utah), 1 in the Numismatic Museum (Athens), 2 in the South Wiltshire Museum (Salisbury), 1 in the Staatliche Münzsammlung (Munich), 3 in the University Museum (Philadelphia), 20 in the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), 2 in the Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore), etc.



Fig. 17: Achilles and Penthesilea depicted on a Roman mosaic, from the villa of Herodes Atticus (AD 107–177). Loukou, Arkadia, Greece (photo from Spiropoulos 2006, fig. 40).



Fig. 18: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, Lycaon supplicating Achilles who is about to pierce him with his spear, and is offered a ransom of 300 bulls. Some rushes mark the spot as the bank of the Xanthus, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Polyklet. Lost. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. V.170 = Auction 1839, no. 825 (unsold) = Predeville 1841, no. 861 = Auction 1851, no. 43 (sold £3 to L. Benjamin).



Fig. 19: Antonio Canova (1757–1822), Theseus fighting the Minotaur, marble statue, 340 × 370 cm, commissioned in 1804 and delivered in 1819. Buckingham Palace (London). Praz and Pavanello 1976, no. 174.



Fig. 20: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, Theseus conquering the Minotaur, slaying him with a club, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Apollonides. Lost. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. IV.198 = Auction 1839, no. 354 = Predeville 1841, no. T609.



Fig. 21: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, Theseus capturing the bull of Marathon; the hero, unarmed, is holding the horn of the bull, which he has brought to the ground, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Dioskourides. Lost. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. VIII.7.8 = Auction 1839, no. 2386 = Predeville 1841, no. 1201.

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In Memoriam Oleg Neverov (1934–2014).

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67. A full bibliography will be provided in a forthcoming article.

Erika Zwierlein-Diehl kindly gave me access to the late Gertrud Seidmann's reading-notes on Neverov's essay.

68. Market rumor at the time said that the gems nos 301–343 were from the Sangiorgi collection.



Fig. 22: Unknown "Poniatowski engraver" Theseus killing the Minotaur, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Leukos. Lost. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. IV.197 = Auction 1839, no. 622. Berlin dactyliotheque, no. 158. (Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph: Barbara Niemeyer).



Fig. 23: Set of 237 plaster impressions (casts) of intaglios in the collection of Prince Poniatowski, supposedly executed c. 1840 for John Tyrrell. Example sold at Christie's (London), antique jewellery auction, 18 May 2004, lot 227 (photo kindly provided by Christie's).



Fig. 24: Giovanni Calandrelli (1784–1853), Hector and Ajax exchanging gifts after combat in the presence of two heralds, drawing. After Johann Heinrich Voß, Homers Ilias, Hamburg 1793, song 7, verses 303 sqq. Antikensammlung Berlin SMPK, Gerhard'scher Apparat, Anhang Nr. 11, inv. nr. A.III.14 (photo: from Platz-Horster 2005, pp. 64 and 70).



Fig. 25: Giovanni Calandrelli, Hector and Ajax exchanging gifts after combat in the presence of two heralds, carnelian intaglio with the signature of Dioskourides, 27 × 34 mm (image enlarged). W. Duke collection, Los Angeles (photo: the owner). Auction 1839, no. 808; Prendeville 1841, no. 928.



Fig. 26: Unknown “Poniatowski engraver”, head of Pittacus, carnelian intaglio with the name Pittakos, 18 mm long. Private collection, sold as ancient in Auction 2004, no. 150 (photo kindly provided by Christie's). Formerly in the Taraffe collection (Country Donegal, Ireland) in the 1930s, and with Rik Mitchell-Brovington Jewellers (London) in the 1960s. Poniatowski [1830?]-1832, no. VIII.1.7; Auction 1839, no. 909; Auction 1859, no. 605; Lang 2012, fig. 283.

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