



*Hercules and the Lion, a Greek cameo. After Thomas Woolbridge's etching of the original gem*

## COLLECTING ENGRAVED GEMS

*Both Ancient and Later Examples of the Glyptic Art  
Are Available for the Gem Enthusiast*

GARDNER TEALL

**D**IFFICULT indeed would it be to conceive of a time when the love of jewelry did not play some part in personal adornment. If prehistoric man engraved figures of mammoths on selected pieces of ivory tusk, that same decorative instinct as surely had led him to conceive the beginnings of trinkets for the person. The ancience of historic jewelry is well established. Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Rome—civilizations of these ancient states produced marvelous pieces of the jeweler's craft, things that reached so high a state of special perfection that it is the despair of the modern craftsman to attempt to compete with their workmanship.

From earliest times engraved gems have found great favor in jewelry. The ancient signet rings which have come down to us stand testimony to this, also the Biblical references in the Book of Genesis and elsewhere,—the signet with which Darius sealed up the lion's den (Gen. xii. 42), the signet which Judah found so discomfiting (Gen. xxxviii) and the signet with which Queen Jezebel signed the false letters about the vineyard of Naboth (Dan. vi. 17), to note a few instances of such mention. Undoubtedly these signet rings were set with engraved gems, cut intaglio. In the British Museum there is an egg-shaped piece of pink-veined marble, some 2½" long, pierced from base to apex and engraved with a Babylonian inscription which has been deciphered to read as follows, in translation: "I, Sargon the King, King of Agade have dedicated to Samos in Sappira". This ancient intaglio has been determined by

authorities to have been cut 3900 B. C., 5721 years ago, think of it! One of the most ancient evidences of sophisticated art.

The Egyptian engraved gems in the form of the scarab (the sacred scarabæus beetle)

were in general use as early as 2500 B. C., thirteen hundred years after the reign of the Babylonian King Sargon. From an epigram in the Greek Anthology, we learn that the sly Cleopatra's signet ring was set

with an amethyst engraved with a figure of Methe, who was the goddess presiding over drunkenness and who was depicted as a nude figure surrounded by various symbols,—cups, hydra, thyros, grapes, vine, etc. The engraved gems of steatite, rock crystal, carnelian and chalcedony of the Mycenaean period in Greek civilization survived the Dorian invasion of 1100 B. C. which submerged that power and undoubtedly gave impetus to the engraved gems of the later and glorious period of Greek glyptic art which produced the incomparable intaglios cut between 450 and 300 B. C. The Greek engraved gems of the archaic period (down to the end of the Fifth Century B. C.) were, mainly, scaraboid in form. An exceptionally fine agate gem of this sort in the collection of the British Museum represents a dancing satyr holding forth a drinking cup. The minute details are exquisitely wrought and it is, indeed, a monument of art of the Greek gem engravers of the time (circa 500 B. C.)

The engraved gems of the finest Greek period (450-300 B. C.) are more rarely to be met with than those of the earlier and later periods. The ancient engraved gems were mostly cut intaglio, that is to say, the device was cut in forming depressions which, when used as a seal would give

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*Greek cameo in Renaissance setting*



*A Roman cameo of Harpokrates mounted in gold*



*A Roman intaglio signet ring of head of a man*



*A Roman cameo of Amazons, in a modern setting*

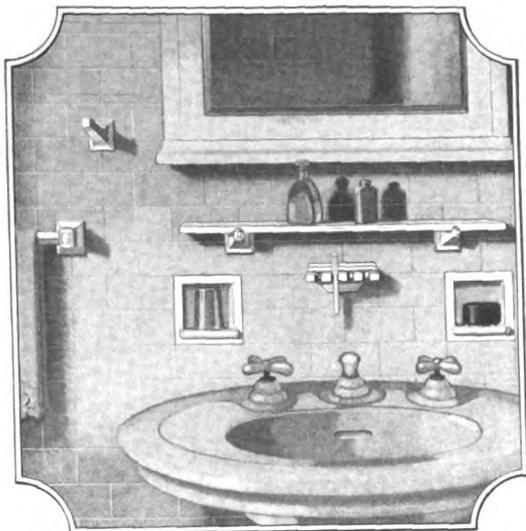
*An archaic Greek intaglio of Boreas and Orytheia*



*Engraved gems are mainly cut in two ways—intaglio, i.e. cut in, and cameo, i.e. cut in relief. The two directly above are cameo cut. To the left, Europa cut in sardonyx, dating from the Classical Roman Period; to the right, Psyche, a Greek cameo cut in amethyst. Illustrations by courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

## Collecting Engraved Gems

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## A Bathroom of Distinction

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# Fairfacts Fixtures

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an impression in relief on the wax. However, cameo gems (gems engraved in relief instead of intaglio) also date from a very early period. The Egyptian scarabs were a combination of both forms—the top part representing a beetle being cut cameo and the inscription on the under face being cut intaglio. Cyril Davenport ("Cameos"), says: "In the first Century B. C. the onyx cameo began to take a high position as a much esteemed article of adornment or possession, and its appreciation quickly increased with the more and more beautiful workmanship brought into the art of the Greek gem cutters. Following, to some extent the fashion of the small seal ring intaglios, the smaller cameos were sometimes used in the same way, but never to any great extent. The larger cameos were no doubt used as fastenings for cloaks or shoulder brooches; but they were always very interesting as wonderful works of art only, and also because they often bear portraits of great personages. No existing form of portraiture is so strong and, at the same time, so delicate and beautiful as that to be found on a first-rate antique onyx cameo. Such portraits were by masters in their art, and are comparable with the finest art of any age, or executed in any medium."

bearing portraits of King Ptolemy II of Egypt and Arsinoe, his queen, a gem of three strata which was in the collection of the Hermitage Museum in Petrograd at the time of recent revolution. The British Museum, the Louvre and the Vienna Museum are rich in ancient cameos.

Through the Middle Ages glyptic art was far less, in the deterioration, than even a shadow of the Roman decline in gem engraving. Fortunately ancient intaglios and cameos were kept and perhaps appreciated to some extent. At least the designers and makers of ecclesiastical ornaments employed them in an astounding fashion and we see Christian reliquaries, shrines, etc., decorated with gems engraved with genre subjects from pagan mythology!

### The Italian Gems

With the advent of the Italian Renaissance, the revival of learning focused again the attention of many on the beauty of the engraved gems of antiquity. Cardinal Barbo (Pope Paul II) made an extensive collection of these gems which were, upon the Pontiff's death, acquired by Lorenzo dei Medici, another ardent gem collector. Indeed, Lorenzo encouraged the revival of the glyptic art and soon Italian gem engravers were producing marvellously beautiful intaglios and cameos inspired by Greek and Roman gems. One of the gems from the Medici collection now reposes in the Cabinet des Medailles, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. It is a cameo portrait of Lorenzo himself. The cinquecento engraved gems never, of course, reached the height attained by the finest Greek gems, although the Italian work was of very high quality. At the Marlborough sale the cinquecento cameo "Eros and Psyche" fetched some £2000, and was worth more. It is difficult, if indeed it is possible, to see wherein this particular cameo is not the equal of the finest cameos of antiquity.

### Gems' Long Life

As Davenport remarks, it is true that few things made by mankind will retain their original surface, color, and beauty longer than a cut or engraved gem. The engraved gems by the glyptic masters of ancient times that have come down to us give abundant proof of this, likewise do the engraved gems of the masters of the Italian Renaissance.

It has been suggested that engraved gems became popular with the Romans in the First Century B. C. when Pompey displayed the treasure of Mithridates in the three days triumph at Rome. However this may be, it is recorded that Julius Caesar presented a collection of engraved gems to the Temple of Venus Genetrix. Probably the Romans had long used engraved gem signets and the Mithridates treasure may merely have set the fashion for more ornamental application of glyptic art by the Romans.

### Early Roman Examples

According to Pliny the Elder, Scipio Africanus was the first Roman to have a sardonyx gem and Davenport ventures the suggestion that it was a cameo. This would seem likely, for I think intaglios were certainly used by the Romans before Scipio's time. From Seneca we glean that a cameo portrait of Tiberius was owned by Paulus. Even before Pompey's day the Romans produced in glass imitations of both intaglios and cameos. However, we will not here consider what Pliny described as "the glass gems of the rings of the populace"—how modern it sounds! The year 70 A. D. marks the apex in cameo-cutting, and for some three hundred years thereafter the art of the cameo was sustained above the somewhat abrupt decline which followed and which was occasioned by Roman glyptic artists taking the place of the Greek gem cutters who had, through the earlier period, produced the so-called Roman gems. Never again was the work of such cameo cutters as Herophilus, Hyllus, Epilhynchus, Boethus, the Philemon, Scylax, Sostrates, or Diodotus to be surpassed. One wonders what has become of the famous "Gonzaga Cameo," an antique sardonyx

The 16th Century witnessed the production in Italy of an enormous number of engraved gems. Imitations of antique gems were common, frauds numerous. For some strange reason such collectors as Fulvio d' Orsino, who had contemporary glyptic artists deliberately fake antique gems, with fraudulent "ancient" signatures that he might fool the unwary with his brag, were common enough during this period. In one of his famous "Lives," good old Giorgio Vasari tells us that through the instrumentality of Lorenzo dei Medici, a young Florentine named Giovanni delle Corniole learned the art of engraving gems and earned for his excellent workmanship an enduring name, as "testified by his countless works, great and small, but especially a large one with a portrait of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the idol of Florence for his preaching." How furious Savonarola must have been at such vainglory in sardonyx, he who preached against the vanity of jewels! What a wonderful time the collectors of Vasari's day must have had when we reflect on his remark that "At Rome, cameos, the sardonyx and other fine intaglios are found daily."

### French Glyptic Art

When Catherine dei Medici came into France she brought many intaglios and cameos with her, and brought along her gem cutter, Giovanni Antonio del Rossi, to help set their fashion. French gem cutters soon became adept in the art. It was a French glyptic artist, Julien de Fontenoy, for whom Queen Elizabeth sent to do her portrait in

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## Collecting Engraved Gems

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# RADIO

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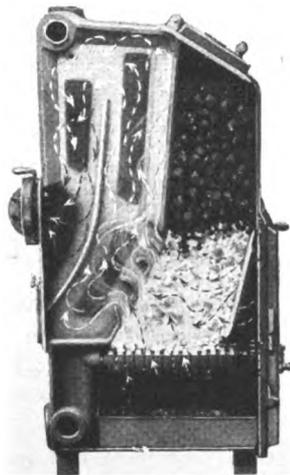
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ger in the hope that the token would lead Elizabeth to commute his sentence. The terrible Countess of Nottingham, who had no liking for Essex, overheard the Earl's instructions to the messenger and intercepted this ring and Essex was led to the scaffold. On her deathbed the Countess confessed her act to the Queen and Elizabeth, disregarding the presence of the Angel of Death, slapped the face of the Countess and cried "May God forgive you, I never can."

The 17th Century found fewer engraved gems produced, but the 18th Century Italian gem cutters produced a quantity of work of high merit. Flavio Siretti, for instance, cut some of the finest gems to be found among modern specimens, nearly approaching the ancient. German glyptic artists also produced some exceptionally fine work.—Natter of Nuremberg, Sirieas and Pichler of Vienna and others.

Some very fine gem engraving has been done in the 19th Century by such artists as Bernardo Pistrucchi, and later gem engravers, but the old "spirit" had departed with the passing of the best of the 18th Century gem engravers.

Fortunately for lovers of engraved gems, it is possible to acquire interesting specimens for collections in the reputable shops of Europe and America. Some very fine engraved gems, antique and modern, have been offered from time to time at various public art sales. Exceptionally fine pieces have brought adequate prices, but many desirable pieces have often gone for what has seemed a very small price indeed, and a little browsing in New York, London or Paris would be sure to disclose to the collector things worthwhile within reasonable expenditure.

In passing it will, I think, prove interesting to the reader to quote Vasari's description of the cutting of intaglios and cameos, found in the introduction to the 1550 edition of his "Lives," which runs as follows: "Those oriental stones . . . are cut in intaglio with wheels by means of emery, which with the wheel cuts its way through any sort of hardness of any stone whatever. And as the craftsman proceeds, he is always testing by wax impression the intaglio which he is fashioning; and in this manner he goes on removing material where he deems it necessary, till the final touches are given to the work. Cameos, however, are worked in relief, and because this stone (sardonyx) is in layers, that is white above and dark underneath, the worker removes just so much of the white ground as will leave the head or figure white on a dark ground. And sometimes, in order to secure that the whole head or figure should appear white on a dark ground, he dyes the ground when it is not so dark as it should be. In this art we have seen wonders and divine works both ancient and modern."

And indeed we have! Fortunately our American museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Boston Museum of Art are rich in antique and Renaissance engraved gems, which will prove absorbingly fascinating to those interested.

## Color Schemes for Men's Rooms

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of pewter lamps with parchment shades incorporating old sporting prints.

Or he may be interested in old French objets d'art which require an entirely different setting. Here a French atmosphere can be created successfully without being in the least effeminate. The walls can be paneled with wood moldings, and painted a gray green. The simple French mantel should be marbled in black and gold over which may be hung a fine old mirror. Let the window draperies to the floor be of yellow, green and apricot striped damask over plain apricot silk gauze draw curtains. In one corner stand a small flat top rosewood and ormolu desk, with a bronze and ormolu figure lamp and striped taffeta shade. On either side of the mantel two low black and gold bookcases, the colored bindings showing through the antiqued gold wire doors, would be an effective note. Beside the simply carved old walnut arm chair, covered in dull prune uncut velvet, stand a small blue and gold painted magazine table. One high-back walnut arm chair in black ground needlepoint would tend to balance the big upholstered arm chair done in striped silk damask. All of these colors show to advantage on the dark blue carpet. Red chalk drawings, and a few good paintings with some old lustre on the mantel bring color to the gray green walls.

There are so many ways in which color can be brought out. The draperies, carpets, furniture covering, pictures and lamp shades all stand ready to accent the desired note. The room may be monastic in its simplicity or may have the richness and elegance of a Louis XV bedroom. In either case, color can be its dominant note, expressed in great masses or by a few deft touches.

One of the bedrooms illustrated shows a putty wall, a good background for the fine old etchings over the bed. The laid walnut bed is a good foil for the dull red damask spread and the green ground lacquered screen. The walnut chairs have plain red seats, which note is repeated in the octagonal frame of the old French print. This room has a great deal of quiet charm and just enough color to warm the large expanse of cold wall. The curtains are gay colored glazed chintz in bright greens and pinks.

The study shown here is also unusual in its color scheme. Walls of greenish blue, a carpet in Venetian red, and overhangings of dull gold rough taffeta, heavy fringed at the top, are exactly right in tone value. Over the sofa hangs an interesting old map, its faded countries pictured in mellow shades. In one corner stands an antique ivory arm chair covered in multi-colored old striped damask. At the side of the black marbled mantel are a pair of soft old mythological paintings in warm reds and yellows. Over the mantel hangs an ancient Italian banner in red and gold. The carved Spanish desk and the big sofa in damask tend to pull together these numerous colors. On the mantel stands three cream white Bassano figures, an arresting spot against the green blue walls. Finally a chintz covered chair beside the fireplace adds its note of welcome, in which are the combined colors of the room.

The bedroom shows the touch of a collector, for on the walls over the black and gold mantel are hanging a series of interesting old Godey prints framed in many colors. The draperies are of multi-colored Directoire glazed chintz with double sash curtains in soft blue green. Between the windows stands a fine old Italian commode on which stands a pair of tole vases. A lovely antique Italian mirror is hung above. The chairs are Directoire, covered in old blues with a touch of apricot. The carpet is plain taupe.