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## Antique Carved Gems: Items for Interaction between Ancient and Modern Art

Pliny the Elder's 37<sup>th</sup> book of his *Naturalis Historia* provides a useful insight into the importance of gems in Greek and Roman society. This book is characterized by a more socio-anthropological perspective compared to the earlier and more philosophical Theophrastus' *Peri Lithon* [27, pp. 7–11]. Through material and figuration, gems are in Pliny's speech a relevant guide to show the articulation and transformation of ancient societies. Gems are not only valuable personal ornaments, but they are signs of status, rich in meaning having even thaumaturgical effects [22, pp. 180–181]. Stones contain, in fact, physical materiality, social structure, imagery, and symbolism and they are able to delineate cultural anthropology.

For the Hellenistic period these aspects are tested by Poseidippus' gem-poems: *Lithikà*. The epigrams address visual culture and its sociology, describing luxurious and marvelous artifacts (gems and jewels), and express life styles (male and female) and dynastic values. Literary evidence implicates the reader in the aesthetics and ethics of *tryphè*: an ideological agenda in which power seduces as well as imposing obedience [15, pp. 143–145]. Few archeological remains exemplify today the splendor of Hellenistic courts and the meaning of the ceremonial which invested the sovereign-figure. In this regard it is important to mention a royal decree — dated from 193 BC — by Antiochos III who imposed the portrait of his wife, Laodike, on the crown of the chief-priestesses vowed to worship the Queen [26, pp. 118–119; 23, p. 97]. We can assume that the *eikon* could be a *prometopidion*, a relief medallion (in metal or other material, like precious stone) bearing the features of the Queen [13, p. 40]: a practice that from the Greek-Hellenistic world continues into the Roman Imperial period until modern times, when cameos and intaglios come to adorn bands and diadems [5, p. 170; 21, pp. 468–470; 30, pp. 367–377].

### a. Memory and identity

Figurations on gem — carved or in relief — offer an impressive stock-repository of subjects and compositional schemes. They are the mirror of the major arts and they can anticipate what happens in later centuries in both stylistic and iconographical tastes. In fact, the gems interpret the needs and expectations of their owners, expressing them visually: gems are the most intimate testimonies of public and private life in antiquity and the main medium for the diffusion of classical art [1, pp. 17–19], since they are so readily portable and they could be carried as valuables, as gifts, as means of propaganda, or even as personal tale-memory [2].

The term *dactyliotheca*, to be canonized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century [12; 14, pp. 7–12], is firstly used by Pliny [23, pp. 81–82] to specify a peculiar kind of collection. Still, it is Pliny himself who recalled that the term, which came to Rome in the age of Sulla, is foreign (even if it is not documented in Greek almost today). By defining it *peregrino nomine*, Pliny makes it clear that it refers to an ‘alien’ custom with respect to Roman habits. It is a custom which opens to the Eastern courts *luxuria*.

Pliny’s book effectively introduces the reader to precious wonders of the world enclosed in a ‘curiosity cabinet’ preserved in writing [7, pp. 9–11]. Pliny’s arrangement of the subject matter provides also a model of how to organize a three-dimensional collection with its own hierarchy. Hierarchy concerns the material of gem, its shape, its size, its subject. The latter involves the human skills to work a stone in a meaningful combination of physical qualities and figural subjects.

### b. The Antique after the Antique

Brilliance, sharpness, luminosity are the elements of “magical” virtues in stones-imaginary during the Renaissance, while gems are desired by princes for their aesthetic qualities and economic value and also appreciated by amateurs and artists for their craftsmanship and for their beauty [34, pp. 134–140]. In 1445, Ciriaco d’Ancona, addressing himself to Giovanni Dolfin [10, p. 262], showed a carved rock crystal signed by Eutyches, the son of Dioskourides, then in his possession (now in Berlin), magnifying the face of Athena seen in three-quarts, highlighted by rays of moonlight [32, p. 116, fig. 72, 1–2].

...*lo insaziabile desiderio nostro de cose antiche* is what moves humanists and rulers to their possession [6, pp. 9–11]; it is a way to get close to antiquity: and the gems, with subjects ranging from myth to history, were able to summarize all the knowledge, updating it. The precious objects of Lorenzo de’ Medici increase the interest in the figural scenes on intaglios and cameos [11, pp. 25–32]. The stories rise to mirror courtly life thanks to the mythological tales present in classical texts then known (first Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*).

The pieces selected by Lorenzo show compositions realized with a classical formal language which is part of the visual culture of his time and is loyal to the *antica maniera*: namely, to the domain of the rules and formulas; to *gratia* which, combined with *diligentia*, determines the *firma facilitas* balancing compositional and iconographic features. Coherent with these assumptions is the parade of *tondi* in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence, made by Donatello’s workshop [8, pp. 142–152]. The *tondi* reproduce types and motifs of the gems based on the principle of *aemulatio* of the antique; the small differences between the original gems and the new versions on stone-roundels are devised to make them allegorical figures [3, pp. 30–34].

### c. A visual book

This is the series of engravings by Battista Franco and Enea Vico that deeply change the attitude toward gems and open to their accessibility and circulation by artists. And it is both a pleasure and an honor for me to stress here that Oleg Neverov, in an important essay published in 1984 [25], gave the right emphasis to these engravings, recovering their historical and cultural significance. Neverov was also able to identify many gems, today exhibited in public

museums and private collections in Europe [4], with a significant number preserved in the Hermitage [25; 24].

The series are an amazing visual inventory of Grimani *dactyliotheca* in Venice. The series appeared in the 1550s and the 1570s respectively [16]. A new edition of these prints in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, by Philippe Thomassin, ensured its circulation among amateurs, dealers, and artists: through Giambattista Marino, for example, they were known (and used) even by Nicolas Poussin [10, pp. 269–273]. Both sets of engravings reproduce the Grimani gems as if they were the matter of painting in their own right; the engravings ignore the texture, the size of the stone and the virtual existence of ligature. They focus only on the figural scene, which in some cases can be integrated into some details [10, pp. 264–267].

These engravings originate in the owner's desire to display his 'treasures': the *dactyliotheca* Grimani was started by Antonio and Domenico between Rome and Venice at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was housed in Rome until the death of Cardinal Domenico in 1523, when it was inherited by his nephew Marino. The collection was confiscated in 1547 by Pope Paul III Farnese in compensation for debts left by Marino. Only in 1551, it was acquired by Cardinal Giovanni Grimani at the price of 3,000 *scudi* and moved to Venice [17, pp. 86–87].

Giovanni Grimani was responsible for the enhancement of his family's glyptic-collection, which was carried out following a fine two-front strategy: 1) the way the pieces were displayed; 2) the way they were 'communicated'. On the first point, the intaglios and cameos were displayed in a studiolo-room; the 72 most valuable cameos were kept in one ebony cabinet (forerunner of the cabinet-museum). Giovanni left it in his will to the Serenissima. On the second point, as for the way of spreading their fame, in addition to the engravings, Giovanni entrusted the knowledge of gems to his very family palace in Venice, in Ruga Giuppa [9, p. 271]. Some intaglio and cameo subjects, in fact, are reproduced in stuccos that decorate the staircase leading to the main floor of Santa Maria Formosa Palace: a work made *diligentissimamente* by Federico Zuccari following the guide-lines provided by the Cardinal himself in the years 1563–1565 *...ad ornamentum... et ad ostendendum personis virtuosis*.

A very interesting stucco reproduces an enigmatic intaglio in the Cardinal collection: the so-called *Acquaiolo* [18]. Its attributes, a scorpion (zodiac sign) and a vase full of water, maintain a symbolic value; the subject depicts possibly one of the Decan in the zodiac (the similar motif appears in a Natalizi/Peiresc intaglio). The curiosity for this specific category of gems follows Ligorio's reflections on so-called Gnostic gems (later examined by Peiresc, Macarius and Chiflet) [22, pp. 182–186]. In the Venice area it also attracts the interest of Lorenzo Pignoria, precisely to some specimens owned by Charles Patin. And, discussing Salus-Hygieia in his *Annotazioni* to a new edition of Cartari's *Imagini de gli dei antichi*, Pignoria writes: "Questa figura s'è tolta da i Camei del Reverendissimo Patriarca Grimani" [17, pp. 101–102]. The precise reference to the Grimani gems, testifying to their fortune, comes from a Dionysian subject, reproduced in an engraving by Adamo Scultori entitled *L'Autunno*, dependent on the drawing by Giulio Romano [34, p. 146].

Moreover, motifs deriving from the gems were already present in the stuccos of Callisto room in the Grimani Palace. Some iconographies and compositional schemes, the work of Giovanni da Udine [33], come from gems, following a process of deduction almost never straightforward [9]. They interpret stories known by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* according to

Giovanni Bonsignori's Italian edition [29, pp. 156, 158, 165]. Many of Grimani gems rivaled the Medici gems in quality and iconography and Lemburg-Ruppelt has clearly underlined the emulative elements with the Lorenzo's collection and its display [20].

#### d. Not everything is as it seems

This last aspect is well exemplified by the fame of the so-called *Gemma Mantovana*: a cameo whose carving represents Ariadne unveiling in the presence of Dionysus and his *thiasos*. A similar piece was possessed by Lorenzo il Magnifico [19].

The popularity of Dionysiac subjects might have been partly a product of the meaning they were given in intellectual circles: Dionysos/Bacchus was a fitting model for any prince since the Ancient painted him not only as a great conqueror but also a benevolent pacifier and dispenser of justice. According to Phyllis Pray Bober, for Renaissance secular rulers, the appropriation of Bacchic imagery could also encompass Arcadian imagery of a revived Golden Age [28]. John Boardman showed that the model could be adjusted in various degrees and the intention seems to have a didactic value, serving as a message of immortality for any mortal prince. The very triumph, when both Dionysos and Ariadne appear together, may also be taken, in some respect, as a marriage procession, where modern rulers interact to depict *aevum faustum* and *aevum honestum*, in the search for a deliberate classical behavior. Maenads, Nymphs, Satyrs are not simple genre characters: they are used in ephemeral decorations in rhetorical poses and carrying the joy of life [3].

These subjects are repeated even in modern gems, such as shown by two versions in Grimani collection [18]. Balancing the ancient and the modern elements, the subjects (with Nymphs and Satyrs in a Bacchic landscape) devote attention to harmony in the composition clearly inspired by general atmosphere and by the content of the divine parade. They prompt Francesco Vettori [31, p. 99] to write that it is difficult *antiquae operae a falsis discernere*, while it is easy to collect *nova opera et vetustissima*. In fact, the motifs are subsumed from multiple ancient models in the process of inventing new figures and narrative ensembles in a speculative spirit.

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**Abstract.** Engraved gems are the most remarkable repertoire of iconographic themes from antiquity. Their size allowed them to be carried everywhere in the ancient world and they were available for almost every situation in social life — an extraordinary means of expressing personal beliefs, as well as trends, religious, and political ideologies. The quality of a stone, its cutting-technique, and its subject are versatile performers illustrating the luxurious style of life of ancient societies. Gems have come haphazardly down to our days, sometimes reused into new objects or collected by wealthy amateurs: modern *dactyliothecae* reproduce the splendor of those in antiquity according to the classical sources. Since the Renaissance and occasionally even earlier, in the Middle Ages, gems collecting acts as a metonym for legitimacy and authority. At the same time, gems stimulated philosophical discussions about their magical powers and, on the other hand, they were used by visual artist stimulating inventions for new figurative ideas. If it is difficult to recognize individual patterns deriving from antique carved gems, several prints by Enea Vico and Battista Franco show rich series of intaglios and cameos, creating an impressive 'visual book', from which artists could take inspiration. Starting from some subject reproduced by Vico and Franco around the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, my paper aims to investigate the appropriation contexts of Dionysiac iconographies turned into convivial processions, triumphs, and allegorical convivial, thus following the guide-line provided by Phyllis Pray Bober and John Boardman. While taking into consideration various elements of interest, particular attention has been given to close connections with the concept of '*firma facilitas*', an ancient-modern system balancing *gratia*, *veritas*, and *diligentia*. This, in turn, supports the arguments in favor of the importance of antique gems in modern visual art and of their artistic recoding.

**Keywords:** ancient gems; Dactyliothecae; classical art; antique heritage; modern art.

**Название статьи.** Античные резные камни: Посредники между искусством древним и новым.

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**Аннотация.** Резные камни представляют богатейший репертуар иконографических тем античности. Геммы, которые в силу размера можно всегда носить с собой, в древности использовались в качестве особого средства выражения личных или общественных убеждений, а также религиозной и политической идеологии. Качество камня, техника изготовления, сюжет различны и свидетельствуют о том, сколь роскошным был стиль жизни античного общества. Многие резные камни дошли до наших дней, иногда — будучи преобразованными в новые объекты, — как предмет коллекционирования состоятельных любителей: создатели современных дактилиотек стремятся, опираясь на источники, воспроизвести великолепие античных коллекций.

Начиная с периода Ренессанса, а в некоторых случаях и ранее, в Средние века, коллекционирование гемм выступало в качестве своеобразного символа легитимности и власти. В то же время возникали философские дискуссии о магической силе гемм. С другой стороны, они использовались мастерами искусств в качестве источника новых изобразительных решений. Трудно распознать конкретные мотивы, заимствованные от античных резных камней. Несколько эстампов Энея Вико и Баттиста Франко представляют серии инталей и камей, являя собою примечательную «визуальную книгу», из которой художники могли черпать вдохновение. В настоящей статье с опорой на методологию Филлиса Прей Бобер и Джона Бордмана исследуется освоение дионисийской иконографии, которая была приспособлена для изображения праздничных процессов, триумфов и аллегорических торжеств, начиная с некоторых сюжетов, воспроизведенных Вико и Франко примерно в середине XVI в. Рассматриваются различные вопросы, особое внимание уделено связи с концепцией «*firma facilitas*» — восходящей к античности системой равновесия благодати, истины и усердия. Это, в свою очередь, подтверждает важность античных гемм для современного изобразительного искусства и их художественной расшифровки.

**Ключевые слова:** античные геммы; дактилотек; античное искусство; античное наследие; искусство Нового времени.