





In the 18th century the 4th Duke of Marlborough formed a great private collection of classical gems, dispersed at auction in 1899. **Sir John Boardman** describes his quest to track down these 800 tiny masterpieces, now scattered across the world.



# A PURSUIT OF ART IN MINIATURE

**T**he craft of engraving gems (intaglios) and cameos has flourished from classical antiquity to the present day, generally with little change over centuries, indeed millennia, in techniques and materials – at least before the advent of power tools. As a result of its ancestry, the craft has also been largely devoted to the depiction of classical subjects and in a classical style, or, in the same tradition, to portraits. The gems were the main source for the diffusion of classical art in antiquity, since they are so readily portable, and they could be carried as valuables, as gifts, even as propaganda. Through the renaissance to the 19th century, they proved a major factor in the continuing reception of classical art and subjects, no less than coins or other remains of the Mediterranean world such as architecture and sculpture.

Gems are luxurious, therefore coveted in private and, latterly, public collections. The collecting began with Hellenistic and Roman rulers in antiquity, then renaissance princes, notably the Medici, and European royalty (Holy Roman emperors and popes, Queen Cristina of Sweden, Catherine the Great of Russia) and noblemen.



**OPPOSITE PAGE 1** The 4th Duke of Marlborough holding a cameo depicting Augustus. Detail of a portrait of the duke and his family by Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), 1778, Blenheim Palace.  
**2** *Laocoön* electrotype of a shell cameo, possibly 16th century (location unknown). 5.1 x 5.1 cm. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford.  
**3** *The Emperor Augustus as Zeus*, electrotype after a sardonyx cameo in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 3.7 x 2.8 cm. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford

The story of the collecting is no less evocative than the gems themselves: they were prime quarry for the Grand Tour, and could provoke extreme rivalries. Yet the subject has remained relatively obscure and often neglected in the art books, except for the specialist market. This has been largely because it is difficult, the material is widely scattered and seldom derived from recorded sources, while the criteria for dating can sometimes seem desperate – ancient, renaissance or 18th-century?

In Britain, the story of collecting begins seriously only in the



**4** *A Roman Empress*, cornelian intaglio, 2nd century AD. 2.1 x 1.6 cm. Private collection  
**5** 19th-century electrotypes and sealing-wax impressions of Marlborough gems. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford





16th century, then with Prince Henry (1594-1612; Henry IX, had he lived), who acquired a rather provincial collection from Holland – that of ‘Gorlaeus’. But already royalty was being depicted in cameo and intaglio. The interest gathered momentum

in the 17th century with Lord Buckingham, who received many gems from Rubens, and especially with Lord Arundel, who secured a major collection in Italy, largely the residue of the collections of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua, a renaissance collection that, in its heyday, must have rivalled that of the Medici; but Mantua’s history ended abruptly in 1630. A Latin catalogue of the gem collection may copy one that goes back to Arundel’s day. He was a notable collector of antiquities, helped by his marriage to a rich wife, and he was an astute enough politician to change religion twice, only once being consigned to the Tower of London.

The Arundel collection eventually reached Blenheim Palace and the 4th Duke of Marlborough, via his sister-in-law. The duke had already started collecting in Italy, and proceeded to enlarge his cabinet of gems to over three times its original size. He was a patron of English engravers and, on his death in 1817, had probably the finest private collection of gems in Europe – nearly 800 pieces. He was a scholarly man who employed Capability Brown in Blenheim Park and collected scientific instruments. He kept his gems in 10 red morocco-bound cases in his dressing-room, a solace from his busy sister, wife and many children. In a portrait by Joshua Reynolds (Fig. 1) he is shown holding in his hand one of his cameos (a head of Augustus, now in Cologne) while his son holds one of the gem-cases.



In 1875 financial straits led the family to the sale by auction of the whole collection. It was acquired *en bloc* by David Bromilow, a colliery magnate, so there was still hope that it would remain together. However, Bromilow’s daughter disposed of it piece by piece in 1899, at one of Christie’s most exciting sales.

The ‘pursuit’ in the title of this article concerns the current research at Oxford University’s Beazley Archive Classical Art Research Centre to reconstruct the appearance of the great collection. It was catalogued by Professor Nevile Story-Maskelyne for the 7th Duke in the mid-19th century. He was a professor of mineralogy who, although no art historian, did a noble job of identification. Moreover, he made electrotype casts of all the cameos and sealing-wax impressions of the intaglios – a collection now in the Beazley Archive, having passed into the possession of Sir John Beazley (who was far more than simply a Greek-vase expert). So we have a starting point – Story-Maskelyne’s catalogue and copies – and to have located barely one third of the collection in public and private hands, from Malibu to Monaco, from Bari to Japan, is no great disappointment. We have placed online ([www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/gems](http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/gems)) pictures of copies

of all the pieces still ‘lost’, and every month a home for at least one more can be cited. This article is intended to share some of the thrill of the chase, and to demonstrate the appearance of works of art last seen together in 1899 and previously known only from the Christie’s sale catalogue and a handful of 18th-century drawings and some 19th-century photographs in a privately distributed album. There are still more than 500 Marlborough gems to be located.

Sealing-wax is still a good means of securing an intaglio impression, if less than perfect for photography. Making metal electrotypes of cameos (Fig. 5), even of intaglios, is a very rare practice indeed (see Figure 2). For cameos it provides an excellent record since the metal displays perfectly all the subtleties of carving that are often invisible or obscure in the translucent material



LEFT

6 *Horatius Defending the Bridge*, electrotype from an onyx cameo (location unknown), 3 x 2.9 cm. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford

7 *Demeter and Triptolemus*, sardonyx cameo, 1st century BC. 4.5 x 3.5 cm. Private collection

8 *Antinoos*, black sard intaglio, 2nd century AD. 3.5 x 2.9 mm. Private collection

9 *Antinoos*, cornelian intaglio by Edward Burch (1730-1814), 3.5 x 2.9 mm. This copy of Figure 8 was made for the 4th Duke of Marlborough. Private collection

10 *Crouching Leopard*, electrotype of mottled jasper cameo (location unknown). 2.6 x 2.2 cm. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford



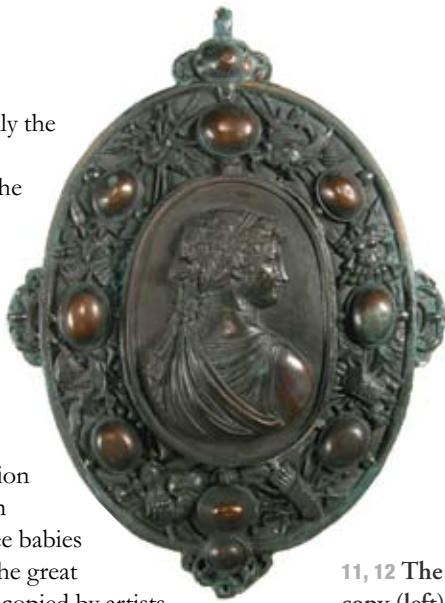


of the cameo itself. Only the colour or colours are missing. For example, the electrotype shown in Figure 2 is tiny (5.1 cm across). The original (whereabouts unknown) is in shell, not stone, and was possibly cut in the mid-16th century. The subject is a unique version of the famous Laocoön group, substituting three babies for the two youths of the great marble group, so often copied by artists after its discovery in Rome in 1506. The metal shows, more clearly than could any view of the translucent shell, the finesse of modelling on the figures.

Many of the gems in the 1899 sale were bought by London dealers, sometimes for known collectors, often not. Some went quickly to major museums in London, New York, Boston and Baltimore. Henry Walters bought no fewer than 107, but generally not the best or most expensive, and he did not give them to the Baltimore gallery (now museum) that bears his name, which had to buy them later from his widow. Most fell into private hands and many can be pursued through the 20th century in sale catalogues, which sometimes offer a clue to their later, even present, whereabouts. Some groups have passed across the Atlantic more than once.

For the earlier history of the collections there are letters and lists in the British Library and, for the activity of a New York stockbroker, in the New York Public Library. The collectors were not all well-known patrons of the arts but have included wealthy brewers, bankers, athletes and a pop-star. After a lecture on the subject in New York last year one lady came up with a cameo labelled 'Marlborough', which it was not, while another revealed her ownership of one that had been shown in the lecture and last year identified by us with a European dealer who had not known its source.

Both renaissance princes and English dukes appreciated the appeal of ancient Rome and the way its images might reflect on their own status or even imperial ambitions. This meant some proliferation of imperial portraits, also inspired by ancient coins and medals. Figure 3 is a noble Emperor Augustus dressed as Zeus wearing the magic goatskin *aegis*. This is an original but copying too was rife. Emperors' wives, from Livia on into the 2nd century, were no less popular for originals and copies, notably those with the more striking hairstyles (Fig. 4). The 18th-century gem-engraver Lorenz Natter was a busy copyist and made a set of 40 emperors for Lord



11, 12 The electrotype copy (left) of the sardonyx cameo (right) shows the 18th-century gold mount before its plain stones were replaced with cameos. Both 12.3 x 9.1 cm. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

13, 14 Cornelian intaglio set in gold, turquoises and enamel. Intaglio, 1st century BC; mount, mid-17th century. 5.3 x 3.3 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Bessborough. He had been inspired to collect by his wife, who was a Devonshire and so attuned to gem collections; he sold the collection to the Duke of Marlborough soon after her death. Natter's 40 are still to find.

It was not just portraiture that attracted, and scenes of Roman history or myth-history were no less evocative. Schoolboys in Britain used to be taught from Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* 'How Horatius held the bridge in the brave days of old'. It inspired renaissance artists too, as in the yet-to-be-

located cameo (Fig. 6) where he stands facing the Latins while the bridge behind him is broken, and the Tiber swirls past ready to receive and save him.

Other mythical scenes were as much inspired by literature as ancient art. Many ancient gems were based on Homeric themes but later engravers cast their net wider and invented new compositions for classical moments. For an ancient religious subject there is Figure 7, showing Demeter and Triptolemos, a cameo which was well enough known in the renaissance to be copied in bronze plaquettes. A Medici gem that must have been given to a Gonzaga, it is now in a private collection in London.

Private collectors are generous in sharing their knowledge. Last year we were able to handle one of the most famous of the Marlborough gems (Fig. 8), which the duke bought from Zanetti, a collector in





Venice, and is now in private hands. It is a splendid contemporary portrait of the Emperor Hadrian's favourite, Antinoos, in a mysterious black stone, like sard, broken but repaired in gold, and with traces of an inscription. It had been copied more than once in Italy (examples are in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle) and then again in England for the Duke of Marlborough by the English engraver Edward Burch, whose work the duke patronised; at least one of his copies was for the duke (Fig. 9). The duke coveted another of Zanetti's gems, a cameo of a crouching leopard in mottled stone. But Zanetti sold it to the duke's cousin, Lord Spencer of Althorp. Not to be outdone, the duke appears to have a replica made, also in mottled stone (Fig. 10), which we know only in electrotype (the Althorp original is in private hands).

The gems are often the better for their elaborate mounts, renaissance or later in date. Not all museums have retained them unless they are as interested in jewellery as in engraving. The Victoria & Albert Museum is an obvious exception. Figures 13 and 14 show a gem mounted in gold and turquoise with enamelled back. Figure 11 is the electrotype of a cameo now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. It had its original 18th-century mount, but before 1899 this was set with plain stones; a new owner had replaced them with 11 small cameos (Fig. 12) and only early photographs and the electrotype show its original form. The mounts themselves can sometimes be as historically important as their contents. The great cameo in the British Museum (Fig. 15) with two divine or imperial heads boasted a metal mount of some complexity, of 16th-century date. I show it also in Story-Maskelyne's electrotype (Fig. 16)



**15** *Two Divine or Imperial Heads*, sardonyx cameo, 1st century AD. 22 x 15 cm. British Museum, London

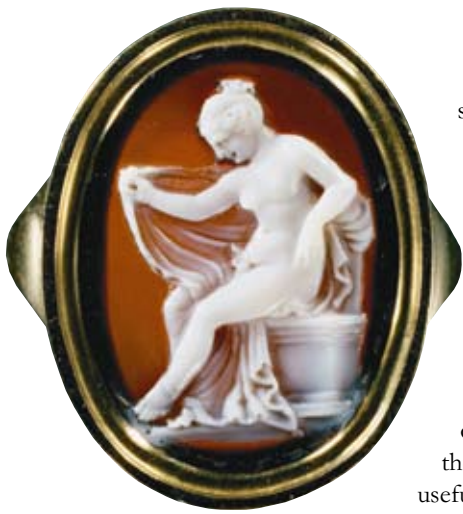
**16** *Two Divine or Imperial Heads*, electrotype copy of Figure 15, showing its now lost 16th-century silver-gilt mount. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford.

**17** *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*, sardonyx cameo, 18th century. 3.9 x 2.8 cm. Private collection

because the original gilt silver had been replaced with a copy by the time it reached the museum, and it had lost the two inscriptions in the wreaths. A metal back had been added in the 18th century recording its possession by a mysterious 'Marquis de Fuentes' – this also survives only in a cast.

Popular subjects for all periods of creation and collecting were those associated with Venus (and Cupids), Bacchus and drinking generally and the heroes. Of the last, Hercules was the favourite and it was a fashion from antiquity on to Napoleon and later for rulers to assimilate themselves to him. His Labours were the obvious subjects. One cameo (Fig. 17) shows the familiar struggle with the lion, but the 18th century has added what was seldom added in antiquity – the lion's cave (below), and moreover placed in it his consort and a cub. The attraction and significance of 'the nude' in art was accommodated by Venus and sometimes a hermaphrodite (Fig. 18). The theatrical was popular in the same circles, usually





18 *Hermaphrodite*, sardonyx cameo, 1st century BC. 1.8 x 1.5 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

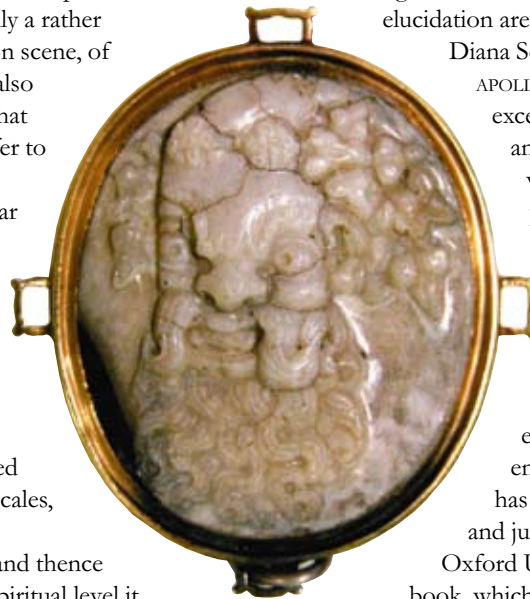
19 *A Comic Mask*, onyx cameo, 1st century BC/AD. 2.4 x 2.0 cm. Private collection

20 *Scene of Religious Initiation*, sardonyx cameo, 1st century AD. 4.5 x 3.7 cm. Boston Museum of Fine Art

21 *The Marriage of Cupid & Psyche* by James Gillray (1756-1815), 1797. Etching with aquatint, 26 x 36.5. Private collection

served by representations of stage masks, comic (Fig. 19) or tragic. And there was a good range of grotesque or conjoined heads.

Probably the most famous of the Marlborough gems, once owned by Lord Arundel to whom it had been given by Rubens (himself a collector) is the ‘Cupid and Psyche’ cameo now in Boston (Fig. 20). It was thought to represent their marriage but is really a rather complicated initiation scene, of the 1st century AD. It also usefully demonstrates what this miniaturist art can offer to other artists. In the 18th century it became a popular subject in many other media – decorating beds and mantelpieces (at Blenheim and Kingston Lacy), and thereafter was copied or excerpted for gems and cameos. It was often copied by Wedgwood at various scales, in decorative plaques for furniture and on pottery, and thence by German artists. On a spiritual level it inspired an 18th-century divine to hail it as ‘the finest allegorical representation of the marriage union I have met with’, expressing comfort, modesty, fidelity, with the wings of the Eros at the left, ‘shrivelled up...so as to render them utterly unfit for flight; to intimate that love is to abide with them...A finer or more expressive set of emblems has never, I believe, been produced, even by modern refined taste



and ingenuity.’ It served the caricaturist James Gillray (Fig. 21) to celebrate Lord Cecil’s marriage to an actress, crowned with a coronet by an Eros turned into a clown with cap and bells, while the Eros before the couple has found his blazing torch extinguished by such a love match – ‘when a lovely flame dies; smoke gets in your eyes’.

The photographs here are by Dr Claudia Wagner and the author. The pursuit and elucidation are all very much a team effort.

Diana Scarisbrick, no stranger to APOLLO readers, has shared her exceptional expertise on Arundel and on modern collections as well as her knowledge of jewellery and settings; in the Archive, Dr Wagner has become an expert gem-photographer and explorer of sources; and Erika Zwierlein-Diehl (Bonn), the acknowledged expert of our day for gem engraving ancient to modern, has freely shared her knowledge and judgement. In due course the Oxford University Press will reveal the book, which, of course, can never be quite finished nor complete. Our current score of identifications is 230, but the book will include pictures of copies of all the others.

Sir John Boardman is Emeritus Professor of Classical Archaeology and Art at Oxford University. He was profiled by Diana Scarisbrick in APOLLO May 2006.

