

# Camées et intailles, tome I : les portraits grecs du cabinet des médailles [Marie-Louise Vollenweider]

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Marie-Louise Vollenweider

*Camées et intailles, Tome 1,  
Les Portraits grecs du Cabinet des médailles, Bibliothèque nationale de France*

(Paris, 1995). Two volumes, 264 pp.; 123 pls. 490 FF. ISBN 2-7177-1915-6

During her long and distinguished career, V. has made numerous fundamental contributions to the study of ancient gems, including books on portraiture on gems of the Roman Republican period (*Die Porträtgemmen der römischen Republik* [1974]), the standard work on gem engravers of the Augustan age (*Die Steinschneidekunst und ihre Künstler in spätrepublikanischer und augusteischer Zeit* [1966]), articles on Hellenistic gem cutters, and catalogues for the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva and the Merz collection in Bern, to name only a few. This first volume of the collection of the Cabinet des Médailles, one of the finest collections of gems in the world, has long been awaited; it contains 283 gems and cameos, most of which belong to the Hellenistic period. A second promised volume by V. and Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet will publish the Roman portraits. Still, nearly ten thousand gems in Paris await publication.

After brief introductions by Jean Favier, Michel Amandry, J.-B. Giard, and Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, the catalogue begins with a surprising preliminary group, demonstrating the so-called "naissance du portrait miniature". These gems are a mixed group ranging from Syrian works to Archaic Greek, Graeco-Persian, and Punic. These are not portraits in the conventional sense, although the definition of "portrait" may be broad enough to accommodate them. Some eighth-sixth century BC scaraboids, probably from North Syrian workshops, have their backs engraved with heads in relief (*nos. 1-4*). No doubt influenced by such Eastern examples, Etruscan gem cutters occasionally carved the backs of their scarabs, and heads of young men appear on three examples in Paris, interestingly all of obsidian (*nos. 5-7*); V. describes them all differently, one a "young man", another "an Etruscan head", and the third an "Orphic head", although all appear quite similar, and connections to Orphism seem tenuous. The next selection of Archaic Greek scarabs with heads of gods, goddesses, and warriors, were presumably chosen to show the stylizations of the period, which generally do not display individualized facial features. These gems are followed by a few fifth century BC gems and rings which show the introduction of genre scenes (a warrior checking his shield, a woman at her bath), demonstrating the gem cutter's interest in pose and gesture, if not distinctive faces. A fourth century BC Punic gold ring from Agrigento in Sicily (*no. 28*), however, does display the origins of portraiture; the man is bearded, with curly hair and heavy eyebrows, high cheekbones, a prominent brow, and he sports an earring; these features may be stylizations, but are nonetheless the elements of portraiture.

The next section comprises most of the gems in the catalogue and is devoted to the portraits of the Hellenistic period. V. has always maintained a special interest in the iconography and portraiture of this age and, despite the difficulty in having to contend with the great variety of Hellenistic glyptic styles, has been willing to identify portraits with a confidence lacking in most scholars. Many of these images show the bust of a king with flowing hair and diadem in the manner of Alexander

the Great. Others show gods or goddess who sometimes appear to have features of individuals. V. notes the subtleties of style or the trace of a distinctive facial feature and usually proposes a conclusive identity and historical context.

There is no difficulty in recognizing the figure on the remarkable cameo (*no. 29*) as Alexander the Great with the horn of Ammon, but the date of the cameo and the identity of the artist are far more complicated questions. V. attributes the cameo to no one less than Pyrgoteles himself, the court gem engraver to Alexander the Great. V. argues on stylistic grounds that the Alexander cameo is best placed in the fourth century BC, and she assigns two other cameos in St. Petersburg (a Zeus and a Medusa) and the sapphire intaglio engraved with the head of Zeus and the letters Π–Υ (once in the Ionides collection) to the same hand. However, there is little evidence to date these pieces to such an early date. The sapphire bearing the “signature” of Pyrgoteles has always been puzzling and far from convincing as an early Hellenistic work. The two cameos in St. Petersburg are indeed close in style to the Alexander cameo, but are not clearly datable. To reconstruct the work of Pyrgoteles from this evidence is hazardous.

V. takes for granted that sardonyx cameos were being cut already in the fourth century BC, but several recent discussions question whether cameos existed at all before the late Ptolemaic period; see the comments by D.B. Thompson and H. Kyrieleis in H. Maehler and V.H. Stocka, eds., *Das ptolemäische Ägypten* (Mainz, 1978), 114 and 121–122; and two articles by Dimitris Plantzos on the chronology of Hellenistic cameos, “Ptolemaic Cameos of the Second and First Centuries BC”, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 15 (1996), 39–61; and *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* (forthcoming, 1996). V.’s methodology often seeks iconographical explication without considering the full corpus of material, and errors of chronology can result. In view of the lack of datable cameos before the second century BC, one must be cautious in accepting, for example, the identification of a cameo depicting Dionysos and Ariadne as the assimilated Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II (*no. 54*), a cameo bust of Hermes as a third century BC prince (*no. 60*), or a head of Athena Parthenos as bearing the features of Berenike II (*no. 63*).

A similar problem exists with the chronology and iconography of cameo glass. The fragment with the figure identified as Perseus (*no. 55*) and the Seasons Vase (*no. 115*) are both viewed as Ptolemaic, the first dated in the first half of the third century BC, the second in the mid-second century BC. However, recent studies of cameo glass which consider all the surviving material, including the Seasons Vase, suggest that these works belong to the early Roman imperial period; see K. Painter and D. Whitehouse, “Early Roman Cameo Glass”, *Journal of Glass Studies* 32 (1990), 138–165. The motif of the Seasons may indeed derive from Ptolemaic prototypes in some other medium, but the same image was popular in Roman times as well; see also J. Spier, *Ancient Gems and Finger Rings. Catalogue of the Collections, The J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, 1992), no. 289, with additional literature.

Two further cameos also pose difficulties in attribution. The first (*no. 57*) is the large (93 mm.) chalcedony bust of a helmeted hero, facing frontally in high relief, whom V. views as Ptolemy II in the guise of Alexander the Great. Is this what the earliest Ptolemaic cameos looked like? One is reminded of another large cameo in Paris, the facing, heroic bust of Augustus (from the Treasury of Saint-Denis; see

E. Babelon, *Catalogue des camées antiques et modernes de la Bibliothèque Nationale* [Paris, 1897], no. 233), similarly cut in agate. More convincingly Hellenistic is the unique cameo (67 mm.) carved from brown agate with the profile bust of a bearded king wearing a *causia*, traditionally identified as Perseus of Macedon (*no. 201*); there can be little doubt that this is a Hellenistic king, very plausibly Perseus, and a product of the second century BC. Unfortunately, no comparable cameo survives.

A methodical analysis of materials and shapes can elucidate the existence of Hellenistic workshops, and in the past V. has paid more attention to this method, as in her catalogue of the Hellenistic gems in Oxford (1978), in which a long discussion of materials is accompanied by drawings of all the shapes of the gems. I attempted to show how material and shape can be utilized in a study of a distinctive group of garnets attributable to a Ptolemaic workshop; see J. Spier, "A Group of Ptolemaic Engraved Garnets", *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 47 (1989), 21–38. Over fifty of these garnets, all of the same shape and closely similar in style, survive, and when taken together present a body of evidence from which conclusions regarding chronology and iconography can be made with some confidence. V.'s *nos. 90–92, 95, 101* (previously unpublished and convincingly identified as Ptolemy VI), and *192* all belong to this workshop, while *nos. 172* and *180* are contemporary examples of Seleucid origin. V. suggests that some intaglios depicting Tyche and Isis (*nos. 90–92*) should be identified as the deified Cleopatra I and another Tyche (*no. 95*) as Arsinoe III, but it is difficult to distinguish them on stylistic grounds.

There are many remarkable intaglios in Paris, and V.'s discussion is invaluable. A garnet, long in the French royal collection (*no. 74*), depicting a seated woman holding an ivy leaf is of unusually fine style and receives an interesting commentary (but why is there no comparison to the cameo *no. 84*, where another seated woman again holds an ivy leaf?; the "Triptolemus" on this cameo looks more like a satyr, cf. U. Pannuti, *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. La Collezione Glittica*, vol. 2 [Rome, 1994], no. 86). *No. 94*, a previously unpublished garnet in a gold ring depicting a standing Harpokrates, is clearly of Ptolemaic work, as V. explains. A fine cornelian intaglio engraved with the bust of a Hellenistic king (*no. 102*) is plausibly identified as Ptolemy VI (following Chabouillet), and an exceptional cameo (from the De Clercq collection) set in its original ring (*no. 114*) certainly portrays a late Ptolemy. Two very rare and interesting portraits of late Hellenistic eastern kings are described, one with the bust of a king of Characene (*no. 224*) and the other with the head of King Archelaos of Cappadocia (*no. 225*), both identifications secure thanks to comparisons with portraits on coins.

Many Hellenistic kings (and even Marc Antony) fashioned themselves as *Neos Dionysos*. Ptolemies especially did so, but V. also identifies Demetrios Poliorketes (*no. 42*); Demetrios II of Syria (*no. 179*), based on a clever comparison to a coin; and Mithradates VI, on two cameos (*nos. 208 and 221*), again with good numismatic parallels, and, less convincingly, on a cornelian intaglio (*no. 217*).

The Kings of Pontus are thought to have held a special interest in the glyptic arts in view of their fine coins and the reputation of Mithradates VI as a gem collector (as noted by Pliny), but recognition of surviving gems is not always simple. A chalcedony intaglio engraved with the portrait of an elegant young woman (*no. 206*) must surely be a Hellenistic princess, and V. gives her a name, Queen Nysa, the wife

of Pharnakes of Pontus. V. may be correct, but no other portraits of this queen exist. One should, perhaps, exercise caution and recall that another portrait, the famous gem signed by Apollonios (now in Baltimore), which had been accepted almost universally as picturing a Pontic or Bosporean king (in view of its findsite at Panticapaeum on the Black Sea), has now been seen as showing an Athenian; see P.A. Pantos, "Echedemos, 'The Second Attic Phoibos'", *Hesperia* 58 (1989), 277–288.

An understanding of gem cutting under the Seleucid kings of Syria is also difficult to achieve. *Nos. 172–200* are said to be Seleucid, and some certainly are (although not *no. 192*, which belongs to the Ptolemaic garnet group). Unfortunately there is no stylistic unity to the group, as there is to a far greater degree with the Ptolemies, and no surviving gem matches the Seleucid seal impressions from Uruk and Seleucia, such as *no. 174* (for bibliography on these sealings, see Spier 1989, *loc.cit.*, 36–37, n. 24).

The catalogue ends with a selection of portraits of philosophers, poets, and artisans, most datable to the Roman period, but many depending on Hellenistic prototypes, *nos. 226–283*.

The following are a few further observations:

*No. 73* is more likely late fifth or early fourth century BC in date; the Eros cannot be holding a diadem, but perhaps a wreath?; for a glass scaraboid with the same scene, see Spier, *Getty*, no. 27.

*Nos. 138–139* do not seem ancient, and are likely of seventeenth century date.

*No. 143*, a glass bead in the form of a janiform head, is one of a number of such pieces discussed by T.E. Haevernick, *Festschrift F. von Lübben* (1968), 647ff., who views them as Punic, fourth century BC; although A. Greifenhagen, *Schmuckarbeiten in Edelmetall, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Antikenabteilung*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1975), 27, no. 3, pl. 20, publishes another example on a necklace said to be from South Russia and of second-first century BC date.

*No. 164*, a cornelian head of Eros carved in relief, is identified as a "young Ptolemaic prince". Although V. may be correct in seeing Ptolemaic prototypes for this class of object, the numerous little cameo heads of exactly this type, some of which are mounted in datable jewellery, must belong to the early Roman imperial period; see my discussion, *Getty*, no. 434.

*No. 154* has an important early provenance that should be noted; it was part of the collection of Cardinal Domenico Grimani in Venice by the beginning of the sixteenth century and was subsequently engraved by both Battista Franco and Enea Vico; see E. Lemburg-Ruppelt, "Die berühmte Gemma Montovana und die Antikensammlung Grimani in Venedig", *Xenia* 1 (1981), 85–108; and O.Y. Neverov, "La serie dei 'Cammei e gemme antichi' di Enea Vico e i suoi modelli", *Prospettiva* 37 (1984), 22–32. No doubt many more of the Paris gems have interesting histories which could be investigated further.

In the Introduction to this catalogue, J.-B. Giard attributes to V. an understanding of the classical *Zeitgeist*, and V.'s idiosyncratic style does indeed display a great knowledge of and feeling for the material. Even if her methods are somewhat speculative or not as rigorous as one would like, her discussions are nevertheless always full of startling insights. The further volumes are eagerly awaited.

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