The Acquisition of Taste:

The replication, reproduction and reception of a classical gem in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

RICHARD ARONOWITZ

This article examines the influence that the three-dimensional replication and two-dimensional reproduction of classical gems in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had on these gems’ migration from being solely the preserve of aristocratic collectors in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to their being bought by men of wealth but not title in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The path of one gem, a Roman intaglio of a standing youth and a seated maiden, through two collections and the fine art trade will be used as a lens through which to examine the trajectory of the greater part of the magnificent collection of intaglios and cameos of the Dukes of Marlborough, formed in the first half of the eighteenth century and sold to pay off a portion of the Seventh Duke’s debts in 1875.

In December 2016 an extraordinary first-century BC intaglio (figure 1), ‘one of the most beautifully executed intaglios to have been offered at auction in many years,’ was sold at Sotheby’s in London to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, making forty times its pre-sale low estimate. This carved sard stone, reframed in an eighteenth-century gold mount, was remarkable for three key reasons, the first of which was its quality. Secondly, because it had been sold in occupied Holland in 1941 by a German-Jewish art dealer, Kurt Walter Bachstitz, to Adolf Hitler for Hitler’s proposed Führermuseum in Linz. Finally, and perhaps chiefly, it was remarkable because it had once formed part of the legendary gem collection built up by the Dukes of Marlborough at Blenheim Palace at Woodstock in Oxfordshire during the eighteenth century and was bought from the Seventh Duke by a colliery owner at the Marlborough sale of gems at Christie’s in 1875.

The first printed account of this gem in Britain was published in 1791, when Erich Raspe included an entry on the intaglio in his *A Descriptive Catalogue of a General Collection of Ancient and Modern Engraved Gems, Cameos and Intaglios, Taken from the Most Celebrated Cabinets in Europe; and Cast in Coloured Pastes, White Enamel, and Sulphur*. This publication was produced chiefly for commercial purposes as a form of sales catalogue to promote the casts (figure 2) taken of notable gems across Europe by his colleague in the project, the Glasgow-born artist and engraver James Tassie (1735–1799). Raspe unpicks the scene on the gem thus:

A young handsome shepherd in the attitude of the Adonis of Κοινος, with his crook in his left hand, admiring and listening to the Goddess of Love and Beauty, who being in love with him, came in the form of a nymph to Mount Ida to declare her tender passion to Anchises, the father of Eneas. Homer, in his hymn to Venus, has left us an admirable description of this engraving. The goddess is seated on a rock, without any attribute that can occasion her being suspected to be Cytheria, except her divine beauty. Her hair is dressed in a fillet, like the pretended heads of Sappho; so that taking them for such, we may here, with Lippert, discover Phaon, who was insensible to the passion of that pathetic Poetess. It is thus that the author of ‘*Veneres uti in Gemmis observantur*’ has explained this most beautiful engraving, of which he has given a print not very correct. In his print, the engraver has introduced a book placed against the rock on which the goddess, or nymph, is sitting.

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3 The *Homerica Hymn to Aphrodite* reads: ‘And so he [Zeus] put sweet desire in her thûmos—desire for Anchises. | At that time, he was herding cattle at the steep peaks of Mount Ida, famous for its many springs. | To look at him and the way he was shaped was like looking at the immortals. | When Aphrodite, lover of smiles, saw him, | she fell in love with him.’ (see: <http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/aphrodite.html>, ll. 53-57, accessed 14 January 2019).

There is undoubtedly some confusion in Raspe’s description of this intaglio, for the author of the book to which he refers (almost certainly Pierre d’Hancarville, 1719–1805), properly titled *Veneres uti observantur in gemmis antiquis* and published in France c. 1771, does not mention or illustrate this Marlborough gem in his survey of almost exclusively highly erotic intaglios. Furthermore, there is a sense of confusion in Raspe’s temporality, as Homer’s poem surely does not describe this intaglio but is, just perhaps, the *basis for* its intimate and gentle scene. Yet whatever the origin of the motif of this high-status Marlborough gem, and of its later reproduction in print, it is the eighteenth-century casts and late nineteenth-century wax impressions taken from it that will be our focus here. Casts were made of the gem during the second half of the eighteenth century by Tassie, who sold them at his premises in London, and wax impressions were taken from it towards the end of the nineteenth century by the Oxford academic Nevil Story-Maskelyne for the purposes of scholarly study. It is necessary to consider here the question of what impact these casts and impressions had on the formation of taste in Britain during that period. The central question to be examined will be whether the dissemination of replicas and descriptions of this particular Marlborough gem, and of many other Marlborough gems, might have had some impact on their later acquisition by a non-aristocrat.

John Boardman suggests in *The Marlborough Gems* that ‘[…] the collecting of gems is a subject of no less interest than their origins, and can be instructive about taste and the cherishing of the classical tradition in art’. The same is surely also true of the collecting of reproductions of gems. Tassie played an absolutely pivotal role in the replication and transmission of this gem and a multitude of other classical and Renaissance intaglios and cameos in the second half of the eighteenth century, and thus

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5 Boardman, p. 18.
in the expansion of at least a visual if not an academic knowledge of such gems, by both creating and echoing a growing taste for them and their reproductions. The information on Tassie at the Beazley Archive at the Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies, Oxford University states that:

Tassie was the most prolific collector and merchant of impressions of classical gems of the eighteenth century, providing sets and selections of impressions in a variety of materials. His collection [was] the most comprehensive of its day.\(^6\)

Boardman adds that ‘Copies of the Tassie impressions were offered for sale in various media and colours[…]’\(^7\) and, although no extant advertisements of his wares in contemporary newspapers, journals or pamphlets seem to be traceable today, Tassie’s stock-in-trade itself – the casts of gems in their display cases at his premises at No. 20 Leicester Fields (now Leicester Square), London – and word-of-mouth were no doubt

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\(^6\) See: <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/gems/tassie/default.htm> (accessed 18 December 2018).

\(^7\) Boardman, p. 27.
bought them […] you selected impressions from descriptions’. Tassie’s sales were by no means meagre and his clientele ranged from the man on the street coming in to purchase an individual cast to international royalty buying in bulk; Catherine the Great of Russia, for one, acquired a complete set of Tassie’s casts in 1783 and they are now held at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The Victoria & Albert Museum in London also has a large collection of Tassie’s casts of gems. Its webpage dedicated to them states that ‘Demand was huge, and Tassie built up a collection of moulds taken from hundreds of cabinets all over Europe, from which he made his casts. Eventually the Tassie catalogue encompassed 20,000 items.’ After James Tassie’s death in 1799, his business was inherited and continued by his nephew, William (1777–1860).

While Tassie’s casts were made for commercial gain, both fuelling and satisfying an ever-growing market for such things in Britain during the eighteenth century, the sealing-wax impressions (see figure 4) taken from the Marlborough gems and the electrotype copies made of them by the Oxford University professor of mineralogy Nevil Story-Maskelyne (1823–1911) some one hundred years later were done entirely for the benefit of academic inquiry. As a mineralogist, Story-Maskelyne’s initial interest was in the makeup of the stones that formed the gems and intaglios, but it gradually shifted into the motifs that were carved into the stones and then to the classical mythology that lay behind the imagery. Story-Maskelyne worked on his cataloguing of the Marlborough gems and intaglios through more than half a decade’s close first-hand study of them, with the full support and encouragement of the Seventh Duke, and his endeavours resulted in the catalogue The Marlborough Gems, privately printed by the Duke in 1870. Sadly, this monograph was unillustrated, but the sealing-wax impressions and the electrotypes that Story-Maskelyn made of the gems during his long study of them are today the fullest surviving visual record of the Marlborough gem collection, as Tassie only ever took casts of the most significant gems and his visual record of the collection is thus incomplete. The collection was finally dispersed through its auction sale at Christie’s in London in 1875.

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8 The author’s correspondence with Claudia Wagner, 10 January 2019.
9 See: <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/gems/tassie/default.htm> (accessed 18 February 2019).
Casts and impressions were, of course, accessible and much cheaper alternatives to the real things, which were almost exclusively the preserve of the aristocracy in Great Britain during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even if they were not actual buyers, members of the public could still go into Tassie’s Leicester Fields premises and look at the casts and impressions on display there and learn, by proxy, about the classical gems and intaglios that were secreted away in the cabinets of the aristocracy. In his preface to *A Select Collection of Drawings from Curious Antique Gems* (1768), in which he also illustrated some of the other Marlborough gems, Thomas Worlidge gives his reader an insight into one of the key reasons why wax impressions, casts and drawings after classical gems were needed, namely the difficulty of access to the things themselves:

The want of more frequent opportunities of seeing and admiring the beautiful remains of Antiquity hath long been a subject of regret to the lovers of the fine arts. The distribution of those valuable relics through the several countries of Europe, and the conservation of many of them in the private cabinets of the curious, render indeed the difficulties attending the gratification of the publick taste this way almost insurmountable.\(^{11}\)

According to Worlidge, there was then a need for the ‘gratification of the public taste’ that was not met until such figures as Tassie with his casts and Worlidge himself with his drawings filled the vacuum that was created by the absence of the classical gems themselves from public view. On the collecting of these gems by the aristocracy, David Constantine suggests that ‘bearing exact and often very beautiful depictions of famous men and mythological figures, [they] were an excellent introduction into ancient history’.\(^{12}\) He seems, then, to see such gems as the Marlborough intaglio of a standing

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youth and seated maiden as the equivalent of a ‘gateway drug’ both into the acquisition of knowledge of the ancient world and the formation of a collection of classical antiquities. Yet these classical gems were no mere sparkling trinkets that gentlemen of a certain type could pick up on the Grand Tour: depending on their quality, intaglios and cameos were often extremely expensive pieces. For instance, in 1638 Lord Arundel (whose gem collection would later be acquired, and then substantially augmented, by the Fourth Duke of Marlborough) paid very highly for the cameos and intaglios that originally came from the collection of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua – unfounded rumour\(^{13}\) had it that he had paid almost as highly as Charles I had done for his paintings from the very same source.

Gentlemen of means could perhaps afford to purchase one or two incised gems on the Grand Tour, while senior aristocrats such as Lord Arundel and the Dukes of Marlborough bought large assemblages of intaglios and cameos from Italy. To further complicate the history of collecting in this field, however, the available information on Tassie’s commercial activities seems to suggest that it may well have been the very same Grand Tourists who, having perhaps picked up a real antique gem or two while abroad, numbered amongst the buyers of casts of gems from Tassie as ‘souvenirs’ of their travels on the Continent and in the Levant once back at home. ‘The sale of casts of gems boomed as they became an essential souvenir of the Grand Tour.’\(^{14}\) It is interesting that the notion of souvenir here stretches to something bought once back at home in Britain, after the fact, rather than on the tour itself.

\(^{13}\) Boardman, p. xii.

Members of the Society of Dilettanti were exactly the sorts of upper-class gentlemen who would have purchased the real thing while away on the Grand Tour. In Joshua Reynolds’s 1779 oil painting titled *Group of Members of the Dilettanti Society* (known by the Society as the ‘Gem Portrait’, figure 5), three of the members are portrayed with their gems: they hold them up between their thumbs and index fingers and, by adopting this finger position, they form a diagonal sweep of sexually-freighted signs for the female genitalia across the left-hand half of the painting. In the ‘Gem Portrait’ Reynolds and the Society’s members themselves thus create a provocative and deliberate visual parallel between gems and genitals and this stratagem calls into question the very status of classical intaglios and cameos in late eighteenth-century Britain. Were they, after all, only trinkets of the rich, to be used as a prop in a dirty joke, or were they, as writers such as Constantine suggest, stepping-stones towards a deeper knowledge of classical civilization and a broader collection of other antiquities? It is likely that they were, to some degree, both things at once; for serious collectors, such as the Third and Fourth Dukes of Marlborough, whose desire to form collections of highly important groups of antiquities in Britain was allied with serious classical knowledge and scholarship, gems were always part of a much larger nexus of Roman and Greek carvings, whereas for the gentleman Tourist they were perhaps the only examples of classical art that they ever bought and thus less likely to be embedded in wider scholarly enquiry.

In 1875 the exquisite Marlborough intaglio of a standing youth and a seated maiden finally became accessible for the first time to a collector who was not born into the British aristocracy when the Seventh Duke of Marlborough, to pay off debts, made the decision to sell off the entire collection of classical gems that had passed down to him from the Third and Fourth Dukes. After almost 150 years, this sard intaglio left Blenheim Palace for the final time for Christie’s in London, where it was purchased by the previously unheralded David Bromilow, a wealthy owner of collieries in Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales.

It is tempting to suggest that the commercial distribution of replicas of classical gems by James and William Tassie and their reproduction through the drawings published by Worlidge in the eighteenth century played a small but by no means insignificant role in the democratisation of taste. Paradoxically, it was perhaps the very market for drawings, facsimiles and reproductions of the real thing in the second half of the eighteenth century and the widening scholarship on classical gems in the nineteenth century that led ‘ordinary’, untitled people such as Bromilow to see themselves as suitable candidates for these treasures. What the popularity of these reproductions shows is just how far the paradigms, and the whole social order, had shifted since the elite games of Reynolds’s ‘Gem Portrait’ one hundred years earlier.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Unknown artist, *Intaglio with a standing youth conversing with a seated maiden*. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Roman, 1st century B.C., yellow sard, set within an 18th-century enamelled gold pendant mount, intaglio: 49 by 33mm. Image courtesy of Sotheby’s London.

Figure 2: Unknown photographer, James Tassie’s pre-1791 cast (top row, far right) of the Marlborough intaglio. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford, undated black-and-white photograph. Image courtesy of the Classical Art Research Centre/Beazley Archive, Oxford.

Figure 3: James Tassie’s trade card, with examples of his casts illustrated. Tassie occupied No. 20 Leicester Fields from 1778 until his death in 1799. Private collection, United Kingdom, probably late 1770s, engraving on card. Image courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

Figure 4: Unknown photographer, the sealing-wax impression of the Marlborough intaglio made by Nevil Story-Maskelyne before 1870. Beazley Archive, University of Oxford, undated colour photograph. Image courtesy of the Classical Art Research Centre/Beazley Archive, Oxford.

Figure 5: Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), *Group of Members of the Dilettanti Society*. Society of Dilettanti/Brooks’s, London, 1779, oil on canvas. Reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Dilettanti, London.

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Tassie, James and Raspe, Erich, *A Descriptive Catalogue of a General Collection of Ancient and Modern Engraved Gems, Cameos and Intaglios, Taken from the Most Celebrated Cabinets in Europe; and Cast in Coloured Pastes, White Enamel, and Sulphur* (London: John Murray, 1791)

Worlidge, Thomas, *A Select Collection of Drawings from Curious Antique Gems* (London: Dryden Leach, 1768)

SECONDARY SOURCES


