

From Mikhail B. Piotrovski, ed.
Treasures of Catherine the Great, London: Hermitage Rooms
at Somerset House, 2000.
p. 94-101.

"An Imperial Affair"

YULIA KAGAN,
OLEG NEVEROV



Lorenz Natter: Portrait of Philip von Stosch
[Cat. 168]

Thus Catherine described a pastime enjoyed by many European monarchs, the collecting of cameos and intaglios. Personal dactylothèques – collections of engraved gems – were established in the 18th century by the kings of France, England, Prussia and Austria, by religious and secular rulers in Italy; their courts were flourishing centres for the creation of new works in precious and semi-precious coloured stones. Only the Russian Empress, however, was to indulge in this fashionable occupation on a truly grand scale.

Before Catherine came to the throne, there were about 150 engraved gems in St Petersburg's Kunstkammer, not including Peter the Great's precious "cameo cup" – its enamelled gold body and lid set with some 200 European cameos – presented to him by the Danish King Frederick IV in 1716. During Peter's reign, the Kunstkammer also gained a small set of casts from gems belonging to the French King. By the time of Catherine's death, however, her private collection consisted of 10,000 engraved gems, with 34,000 casts and pastes; she described it as "a bottomless pit" and her passion for engraved gems as "gluttony" or "cameo fever": "gluttony of this kind is as infectious as gall" she wrote.¹

She made her first acquisition in 1763, the second year of her reign, for her son Paul: a small collection of gems left after the death in Russia of the renowned Lorenz Natter (most of his famous collection had been sold shortly before in Amsterdam). Unfortunately these gems have been swamped in a mass of later purchases and are today almost impossible to identify. They would, however, seem to have included three works by Natter himself, one a magnificent portrait of Baron Philip von Stosch in emerald.

Catherine's agents abroad, envoys and diplomats, travellers and aristocrats, antiquaries and artists, were to assist her in accumulating her engraved gems. In her correspondence with the sculptor Etienne Falconet, for instance, mention was made of an intaglio portrait of Madame de Pompadour by Jacques Guay, court engraver to Louis XV. The Empress was to pay the considerable sum of 100 louis d'or to acquire it, but this was just one of a few sporadic acquisitions: it was only later that Catherine's thoughts and actions came to be obsessed by engraved gems.

It is Catherine's correspondence with Melchior Grimm from the late 1770s which allows us to trace her growing passion, her letters – almost like diary entries – providing us with hundreds of little details. Usually they describe the acquisition of whole collections, but sometimes particular attention is paid to individual gems. In the summer of 1779, for instance, on the death of the painter Anton Raphael Mengs, Catherine's Rome agent, Johann Friedrich Reifenstein, acquired an ancient cameo of Perseus and Andromeda. Mengs had bought the cameo in Spain (the Spanish king had thought it too expensive) and Winckelmann, whose opinion was cited by Reifenstein in recommending the purchase, was lavish in his praises of the piece. Catherine eagerly awaited as the cameo was sent first to Grimm in Paris and thence to St Petersburg. At last, on 23 September 1780, she wrote: "The cameo with Perseus and Andromeda has been



Portrait of Alexander Lansky [Cat. 212]

solemnly placed in the museum on the imperial mezzanine... When I saw the Andromeda I said: See what poor works arouse the enthusiasm of amateurs; let us look a little closer, give me my spectacles and a magnifying glass. This examination was to the benefit of the cameo, for in reality it is most perfect..."²

Catherine was apparently ready to buy everything available, but much remained beyond her reach. She found, however, the means of tearing down the walls of European cabinets: in 1781, through the court bookseller Johann Jacob Weitbrecht, Catherine discovered a small London manufactory producing casts of engraved gems. Founded 15 years earlier by the Scot James Tassie, it had a repertoire of 3,000 casts, no more than similar European workshops, but Catherine's grandiose commission for casts and copies opened the doors of dactylothèques previously closed to Tassie, who was thus able to expand his production to encompass all the European collections. In just a few years, Tassie's series of casts from ancient and modern gems grew to include 16,000 items.

Catherine's "Tassies", as they are now known, arrived in four lots between 1783 and 1788. They enabled Catherine both to find her way in the extensive European art market and to learn something of contemporary gem-engraving (flourishing in Europe and then experiencing a renaissance in England) so that she could select masters to create new pieces according to her own taste.

Two stages have been noted in Catherine's collecting of engraved gems, closely linked with her favourites Alexander Lanskoj and Alexander Dmitriyev-Mamonov.³ After the appearance of Lanskoj in 1779, Catherine could no longer write to Grimm of her gems in

the Winter Palace, as she had on 10 January 1778: "There the mice and I can admire it all".⁴ Now she had someone who was driven by the same collector's passion. In 1782 alone, Catherine acquired in Rome the collection of the artist James Byrs, in Paris those of Count Baudouin and the Baron de Bréteuil, in Rochester the gems of Thomas Slade. Catherine wrote gleefully to Grimm in April 1785: "My little collection of engraved stones is such that yesterday four men had difficulty in carrying it in two baskets filled with drawers containing roughly half of the collection; so that you should have no doubts, you should know that these baskets were those used here in the winter to carry wood to the rooms..."⁵ She was referring to the removal of her gems to a new pavilion, the Small Hermitage. It was Lanskoj who prompted Catherine to use native stones from the



Perseus and Andromeda [Cat. 140]



David Roentgen: *Cabinet for Engraved Gems* [Cat. 210]



The Fall of Icarus [Cat. 156]

Urals and Siberia for new gems. A special decree was issued to search for sources of many-layered stones – during Catherine's lifetime this led to the appearance of the Yekaterinburg and Kolyvan Lapidary (or Grinding) Works "for cameo arts". Lanskoj himself did not live to see this: he died in 1784 at just 26 years old.

The death of her favourite cooled Catherine's passion for some time, but a year later it broke out with renewed force and she acquired Lanskoj's collection from his heirs, including his gems and casts.

In 1785, through the efforts of Princess Yekaterina Dashkova, President of the Academy of Sciences, Catherine exchanged the mineralogical cabinet of Professor E. Lachsmann for a large part of the *Kunstammer* gems, including Peter the Great's "cameo cup". Despite her reverence for Peter's memory, the Empress ordered that the cup be broken up, the cameos removed, and added to her rapidly growing collection – an

apparently barbaric step which simply reflected the increasing interest in gems as independent works of art. Dashkova also presented Catherine with her own collection, accumulated during her years in Italy, France and England. The Empress wrote to Grimm that the imperial collection was now "made up of stones alone the number of which probably exceeds 4,000, not counting the pastes... God knows how much pleasure there is in touching all this every day; they contain an endless source of all kinds of knowledge."⁶

The diary entries of Catherine's secretary Alexander Khrapovitsky, which repeatedly mention engraved gems, make it clear that the Empress even took them to her summer residence at Tsarskoye Selo.⁷ She usually spent three hours after lunch on her "antiques", and one of her favourite pastimes was the making of casts from engraved gems in papier-mâché. Catherine also did much to encourage cameo engraving in her close circle. Carl Leberecht, the court engraver, taught Paul's talented wife Maria Fyodorovna, who created portrait cameos of Catherine, Paul and their sons. Maria's daughters too studied the art. Another of Leberecht's pupils was the Empress's new favourite, Count Dmitriyev-Mamonov, who himself produced a cameo portrait of her.

In the second half of the 1780s and early 1790s, Catherine's collecting of engraved



Grand Duchess Maria Fyodorovna: Catherine II as Minerva
[Cat. 196]



Giovanni Pichler: *Centaur and Bacchante*
[Cat. 172]

gems reached its heights. In 1786, Grimm sent to St Petersburg the collection of a most learned connoisseur of engraved gems, d'Ennery (called "the oracle" in their letters). Soon after this, from Alnwick Castle in England came part of the collection of Lord Algernon Percy: here Catherine found herself faced with an unpleasant reality – comparison with Tassie's casts revealed that the owner had kept back "many of the best engraved stones".⁸

Then, in the autumn of 1787, one and a half thousand engraved gems assembled by several generations of the house of Orléans poured into Catherine's collection. Amongst them were pieces which had once belonged to Princess Elizabeth-Charlotte of the Palatinate and

others from Pierre Crozat's renowned collection. Negotiations continued for two years, accompanied by a voluminous correspondence, by indecision, hesitation and stout battle with rival purchasers, until finally, under pressure from Dmitriyev-Mamonov, the deal was completed for 46,093 roubles. This coincided with the removal of the whole collection from the Small Hermitage into the new Large Hermitage and David Roentgen, a regular supplier to the Russian court, was commissioned to provide five large identical mahogany cabinets richly decorated with bronze, each with 100 sliding drawers, to house the engraved gems.

Roentgen's cabinets filled up with incredible speed: not a year later Catherine acquired a collection even larger than that of the Orléans family: 2,337 gems from Joseph France, chief keeper of the Cabinet of Antiquities in Vienna.

Catherine may have been frightened at the consequences of the French Revolution, but it enriched her dactylothèque thanks to the dispersal of collections belonging to French noble families. The emigré antiquarian Alphonse Miliotti brought to St Petersburg gems from the collections of Saint Morys (Conseiller of the French Parliament), the Prince de Conti, Dazencours, Madame Baudeville and others. In 1792, Catherine received the collection of Jean-Baptiste Casanova, Director of the Dresden Academy of Arts. With justifiable pride, the Empress wrote on 25 May 1795 to Grimm, then in exile: "All the cabinets of Europe are but child's play compared to ours!"⁹ Her will stated that she bequeathed her "antiques" to her "dear grandson Alexander".¹⁰

Catherine did much to encourage contemporary engraving in hardstones, which became a separate discipline in the medallists' class at the Academy of Arts, arranged on the model of the French Académie, with classes by Pierre-Louis Vernier. He was replaced by Johann Caspar Jäger, one of a large group of (largely German) court masters. These artists engraved numerous portraits of Catherine, often in extremely hard stones such as



Johann Weder: *Peter I* [Cat. 171]

aquamarine, sapphire and emerald, both allegorical images and gems glorifying her reign.

The Empress gave commissions to leading famous European engravers, to Giovanni Pichler, Johann Weder, Alessandro Cades, Angelo Amastini in Rome, the Abrahams (father and son) in Vienna, and to Gottfried Benjamin Tettelbach in Dresden. Between 1786 and 1796 she totally monopolised two London masters, the brothers William and Charles Brown, who exhibited not a single work in London during these years. The Browns are little known in their native land, although their gems are firmly within the British artistic tradition: an emphasis on portraiture, animalist works and the specifically English “sporting genre”. Working individually and in collaboration, they also produced important allegorical works to reflect events from Russian history.

Such rapid and extensive acquisitions could not but smack of gluttony, and indeed weakened to a certain degree the influence of the collector’s individual taste. In the 1780s, she entrusted the

classification and description of the collection to Alexander Luzhkov, keeper and librarian, whose acceptance into the Academy of Sciences Catherine had arranged “for his care in sorting the antiques and medals”. By 1794, Luzhkov had arranged her “bottomless pit” in orderly sections and subsections.¹¹ Catherine wrote on 25 May 1795: “All this is arranged systematically commencing with the Egyptians and passing through all the mythologies and stories both legendary and non-legendary, right up to the present day.”¹² This “new – enlightened – understanding of the subject”¹³ serves to provide convincing evidence of the Russian Empress’s unique personality.



William & Charles Brown: *Allegory of Marriage* [Cat. 188]