

ENGRAVED GEMS; TIMELESS SEALS AND CANVASES OF ANCIENT SCENES.

Millennia use of gemstones is not limited to adornments and jewelry. Similar to many other objects in nature, humankind facilitated them in a form of bearer's signature as a seal well before writing was discovered. A chosen design would be engraved onto either flat stones or cylinder beads and used to emboss into clay or wax to authorize a document. In time, the function has been transformed to fashion and seal stones were worn to symbolize many concepts from beliefs to family names of the bearer.

The earliest examples are the Mesopotamian and Babylonian cylinder seals and Egyptian scarabs. Scarab is an insect that symbolizes the cycle of life and death in Ancient Egypt is one of the most commonly engraved motifs of the era. Ancient Greeks revered the engraved gems mostly for its symbolism. The craft of engraving in Ancient Greece was a form of art and rated amongst the finest. The tradition had been carried to Ancient Rome. Alongside hardstones such as agate and chalcedony, shells and ivory were commonly used. Glass was also used extensively and ceramics at a lesser extent. By 3rd Century BC, the expansion of Hellenistic world thanks to Alexander the Great allowed more gem materials from the East to be utilized in engravings.

Two main groups of engraved gems are intaglios and cameos. Intaglios are engraved into the surface so that can be used as a seal. Cameos are, the opposite, carved as a relief and have no function other than being decorative. Ancient intaglios depict variety of subjects from nature to mythical abstracts. The scenes from mythology and daily lives such as a



*Sapphire Seal from 17th century.
Photo Courtesy of Gary Roskin*



*Hellenistic blue chalcedony scaraboid, 4th Century BC.
Ref: www.christies.com*

celebration or a battle were common. The engraving styles, subjects, and techniques would be the testament to their age and originality. Strangely enough, engravings were rarely signed by the engraver until the 18th century. Therefore, authentication of ancient engravings takes quite an expertise and the collector must be aware of this practice or lack thereof.

The value of an engraved gem is not only based on its age but also on its nature. Technically, hardstones such as chalcedony and quartz are much harder than shell, therefore the difficulty in engraving them is much higher. Although most popular engravings, ancient or modern, are quartz and chalcedony group of gems, other gemstones such as garnet, sapphire, emerald, aquamarine, tourmaline and peridot are known and cherished in collections. While organic gems are much softer and easier to work with, shells and corals are also very popular. Coral, in particular, has a higher value. However, the

most unusual and the rarest of all engraved gems is diamond. There are no more than 100 engraved diamonds known to collector's world today. One can only imagine the complexity of carving a diamond. Not only creating an intricate design on such durable material but also finding a large and clean enough rough diamond for such work of art is overwhelmingly impressive.



*Ancient Roman agate cameo with gold and gemstone diadem at the British Museum.
Photo Stuart Robertson*

Today, most ancient engraved gems are admired by public in museums. There are avid collectors of engraved gems and such collections may be shared on a loan in museums or published as catalogues. The materials and subject of ancient engraved gems are a wealth of information to the researchers in archaeology. The artistry of engraving still exists albeit in very small circles. Idar

Oberstein, Germany is one of the traditional centers of hardstone engraving of our era. There are other artists in different parts of the world to keep this ancient tradition alive for the collectors.

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