

A PICTURE-BOOK OF ANTIQUITY: THE NEOCLASSICAL GEM COLLECTION OF PRINCE PONIATOWSKI

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Abstract.-

Prince Stanislas Poniatowski (1754-1833) was one of the great collectors of his generation. His expansive, almost insatiable interests in the arts were not restrained by finances. The Prince settled in Rome and soon built up a gem collection renowned to be the most significant collection of classical gems, but strictly restricted access to these treasures. First doubts about the Antiquity of the gems were raised when a selection of plaster impressions were sent to the King of Prussia and the director of the Berlin Antiquarium had a chance to examine the works. The scandal, however, was slow to break: after the Prince's death, when the collection was sold at auction at Christie's in 1839, investors were paying vast amounts to acquire the gems. They were indeed stunning: about 2600 gems depicting mythological subjects, illustrating Homer and Virgil, and portraits of a most comprehensive Greek and Roman catalogue known to scholars of the Classics.

Zusammenfassung.-

Prinz Stanislas Poniatowski (1754-1833) war einer der bedeutendsten Sammler seiner Generation. Seine Kunstleidenschaft war weitreichend und nicht durch Finanzsorgen eingeschränkt. In Rom stellte er eine Gemmensammlung zusammen, die, den Gerüchten zufolge, die wichtigste Sammlung antiker Gemmen war, vom Prinzen aber nicht zugänglich gemacht wurde. Die ersten Zweifel an der Antike der Gemmen wurden geäußert, als der Prinz dem König von Preussen eine Selektion von Abdrücken zukommen lies, und der Direktor des Antiquarium die Werke untersuchen konnte. Der Skandal brach erst langsam: nach dem Tod des Prinzen boten Investoren in der 1839 Christies Auktion enorme Beträge um die Gemmen zu ersteigern. Die Gemmen waren in der Tat atemberaubend: etwa 2600 illustrierten mythologische Szenen, zeigen die Meisterwerke Homers and Vergils, und präsentieren die weitreichendste Porträtsammlung berühmter Griechen und Römer, die Forschern der Antike je zu Augen gekommen war.

Keywords: Poniatowski, Intaglio, Neoclassical.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Poniatowski, Intaglio, Neoklassisch.

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Since Antiquity gems have been desired by collectors: although small in size they are high art, comparable to the best of sculpture. They depict gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines immortalised in mythology and literature, scenes from history and daily life, the famous and infamous. Inscriptions on the gems give us the names of their owners and gem-engravers. In the story of the survival of the arts in classical antiquity gems take a special place: almost all are complete and in exactly the condition in which they left the engraver's hands, something which is true for hardly any piece of classical sculpture.

The great collections of gems were formed since the Renaissance by influential families such as the Medici or the Dukes of Gonzaga, and it became more and more difficult to acquire the very best. The gems sold by the Gonzagas to the Earl of Arundel in the 16th century and were passed on as an intact collection until the Duke of Marlborough used them to ease some financial troubles. They were completely dispersed in 1899. Like many of the great collectors the Prince published a catalogue of his gems, *Catalogue des pierres gravées antiques de S. A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*¹, but access to the gems remained restricted and the wonder of the collection became almost mythical in character.

Prince Stanislas Poniatowski had inherited a small collection of Ancient gems from his uncle, Stanislas August, last King of Poland, which were published by the renowned scholar Visconti. The prince was one of the great collectors whose expansive, almost insatiable interests in the arts were not restrained by finances: he was vastly wealthy. How could he gather more of these exquisite objects, prized by connoisseurs, scholars and students of the classics? This remained a mystery until well after the prince's death, when his collection was sold by Christie's at auction in 1839². When the gems could finally be examined the truth could not be denied any longer: they were not the work of classical but neo-classical engravers³.

This raises the all-important question: was the prince duped into buying fakes or was he himself the instigator of one of the greatest frauds perpetrated in history?

Let us first examine the collection: it consists of over 2600 gems, mostly cut on orange cornelian or brown sardonyx, but also light blue chalcedony, amethyst, and, more rarely, unusual stones as beryl were used. Many are of a large 'medallion' size and according to the Prince's catalogue, were mounted. The surviving original mounts are characterised by a thin line of black enamel – the gold-work shows variations of filigree, twisted and wrought shapes, often leaves. An astonishing proportion of the

¹ *Catalogue des pierre gravées antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*, 3 vols (Florence, 1832/ 1857–8).

² London, Christie's, 29. April 1839.

³ Busiri, A., *I Poniatowski e Roma*, Roma 1971; Seidmann, G., "A Genuine Fake Poniatowski Gem?": *BABesch-Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* 74, 1999.

collection is signed with artists' signatures, in Greek capital letters, in mirror image, so that the impression has the inscription the right way around, in relief. The names are of ancient gem engravers, passed down to us in literature, as Apollonides (fig 1) mentioned by Pliny⁴, or known from signatures on other gems, as Gnaios (fig 2)⁵ but also a selection of names randomly taken from historical and mythological figures, such as Myrton (fig 3)⁶. The famous sculptor was, of course, Myron, without the T.

The subjects depicted fall into distinct groups: mythology, with a particular fondness of metamorphoses described by Ovid, scenes from Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, from Vergil's *Aeneid*, some historical events, and a large section of portraits: a veritable illustrated who-is-who of the Greek and Roman world, from artists, poets and philosophers to emperors, generals, minor and major politicians.

Thanks to the amazing group of sketches by the gem-engraver Giovanni Calandrelli in the Antikensammlung Berlin, found and published by Gertrud Platz-Horster, we can now appreciate the design underlying the whole collection⁷.

The structure of the subjects chosen is not based on primary sources but handbooks and editions of new translations. The section on mythology illustrates Karl Philip Moritz' *Götterlehre*, the references are carefully noted by the engraver on top of his drawing (fig 4)⁸.

The designs do not copies of other works of art, ancient or modern. The cornelian Calandrelli engraved is now in Oxford (fig 5) and shows Latona fleeing from the Python. No famous ancient model exists, much less for the scenes depicting metamorphoses:

On a cornelian (fig 6) a lovely maiden's head has been attached to the body of a tortoise: Mercury is transforming the nymph Chelone into the reptile, her punishment

⁴ Current Collection: Unknown; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: I.234; Prendeville, J., *Explanatory catalogue of the proof-impressions of the antique gems possessed by the late Prince Poniatowski and now in the possession of John Tyrrell, Esq.*, 1841, 149; Christie's, London, Market: 1939, lot 99?

⁵ Current Collection: Japan, Private; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: I.326; Christie's, London, Market: 1839, lot 1360; Prendeville, J.: *Explanatory catalogue...*, 210; S.J. Phillips, London, Market: 2005, lot 22900.

⁶ Current Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, London: 949-1853; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: VII.7; Christie's, London, Market: 1839-1440; Prendeville, J.: *Explanatory catalogue...*, 1083; Lord Monson; Christie's, London, Market: 1853, lot 216.

⁷ Platz-Horster, G., "Zeichnungen und Gemmen des Giovanni Callandrelli", in: Willers, D./ Raselli-Nydegger, L. (eds.), *Im Glanz der Götter und Heroen: Meisterwerke antiker Glyptik aus der Stiftung Leo Merz*, Mainz 2003, 49-62; Platz-Horster, G., *L'antica maniera: Zeichnungen und Gemmen des Giovanni Calandrelli in der Antikensammlung Berlin*, Berlin 2005.

⁸ Calandrelli drawing, Antikensammlung Berlin: Z.II.16; Platz-Horster, *L'antica maniera...*, 32.

for being disrespectful at the wedding of Jupiter and Juno⁹. And on another cornelian (fig 1), again Latona with the babies Apollo and Diana appears: she was thoroughly displeased when she was thirsty and the peasants refused to allow her to drink from a pond by stirring the mud at the bottom. A wonderful opportunity to attach frogs' heads onto muscular male bodies: the peasants are transformed into frogs, punished for their inhospitality, forever doomed to swim in the murky waters of ponds and rivers.

Sometimes the clues to the identification of the subject are quite subtle and it is important to be very vigilant when looking at the scenes: an amethyst shows the horse Arion being washed by nymphs (fig 2). Clue to his identification are the human feet on the left side of his body. His parentage explains this oddity: his mother, Ceres, was pursued by Neptune and transformed herself into a horse, Neptune did the same and caught up with her. The happy result of their mating was Arion. The amethyst is now in Japan.

When it comes to the life of the heroes, in particular Hercules, the collection is as thorough in trying to depict every single pivotal scene in his life as we have come to expect. A Calandrelli design shows the young hero fighting the Nemean lion. In later life he is wearing the skin of the lion as a cap and cape, we see him on the cornelian dealing with some villains, the sons of Boreas (fig 7)¹⁰. But even Poniatowski seems to have set limits of taste. A drawing by Calandrelli shows Herakles pulling of the skin of the Nemean lion. This image was never executed and it is clearly understandable why not.

The gems with illustrations from the Iliad and Odyssey follow the popular translations by Heinrich Voss - recorded by Calandrelli at the top of his drawings just as the Moritz references before. His drawing and gem shows a divine intervention: Neptune rescuing Aeneas from Achilles (in Voss' translation of 1793 book 20.141). Again the subjects depict every detail of the story. The moment in which Achilles kills the Amazon Penthesileia is often depicted in art. It is a moving subject: at the moment of death Achilles falls in love. Poniatowski also has a more minor detail of the scene depicted: Thersites thought this was hilarious and is seen here getting killed for mocking him (fig 8)¹¹.

⁹ Current collection unknown, previous collections: Predeville, J., *Explanatory catalogue...*, 222; *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: I.342; Christie's, London, Market: 1839, lot 2410.

¹⁰ Current Collection: Private, Oxford; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: II.304; Christie's, London, Market: 1839 (?); Predeville, *Explanatory catalogue...*, 414.

¹¹ Current Collection: Private, Oxford; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: V.208; Christie's, London, Market: 1839, lot 1734; Predeville, *Explanatory catalogue...*, 977.

Not many great historical moments of antiquity are illustrated in the collection: here is a rare exception is Alexander cutting the Gordian knot (Fig 9)¹². However, Poniatowski seems to have been keen to acquire portrait heads of virtually anyone known from antiquity.

The portraits can be difficult to identify, mainly because they often show people never depicted in art before. Some carry an inscription: Byzaz (fig 10)¹³, denotes the mythical founder of Byzantium. The philosopher in the middle is clearly identified by the tortoise in the field: yes, it is Aeschylus, who died when an eagle mistook his bold head for a stone and dropped the tortoise on it. The legions of Roman portrait heads often only have initials, as the M.T.C. – Marcus Tullius Cicero, this makes identification extremely difficult.

When Christie's arranged the sale of the Poniatowski gem collection, none of the great collectors or museums seem to have shown interest in acquiring it. It fell to a Captain John Tyrrell to buy the majority of it for 65.000 pounds sterling. He thought he had landed a coup and secured a brilliant investment. He had a catalogue printed, which he later reissued illustrated with photos – one of the earliest art books to do this. After investing in the gems, he staunchly defended and publicised them.

Numerous sets of impressions, in particular the first 470 gems, seem to have been made.

The Oxford gem archive alone has about 5 different sets, none of them quite complete. Many of the impressions in decorative frames are Poniatowski gems in Tyrrell's collection. They were so prolific, that they even spawned copies: on Ebay earrings are sold of Poniatowski's Apollo visiting his mistress, copying the traditional blue Wedgewood colouring.

Very soon the antiquity of the collection was questioned. Ernst Heinrich Toelken, the director of the Antiquarium, Berlin, had already judged them as fakes 1832. His principal reason were the signatures of the engravers known to us from the Greek and Roman world on gems of such uniformly and very beautiful style. He writes with great admiration: 'The impressions are indeed the most beautiful you can expect to see in art.'

In 1842 the collection was again attacked in the *British and Foreign Review*. The author finds it implausible, that Poniatowski should have been able to acquire as many

¹² Current Collection: Private, Lausanne; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: VIII.68; Christie's, London, Market: 1839, lot 718; Predeville, *Explanatory catalogue...*, 1182; Calandrelli drawing, Antikensammlung Berlin: A.III.51; Wagner, C.; Boardman, J., *A Collection of Classical and Eastern Intaglios, Rings and Cameos*, London 2003, no.662; Platz-Horster, *L'antica maniera...*, 66.

¹³ Current collection unknown; Previous Collections: *Catalogue des pierres graves antiques de S.A. le Prince Stanislas Poniatowski*: VIII.50; Christie's, London, Market: 1839, lot 707; Christie's, London, Market: 7.11.2006, lot 353.

as 2601 antique gems previously unknown. He goes on to suggest that some Roman gem engravers, as Giovanni Pichler, seems to have a remarkably small number of gems attributed to them, and finds the explanation that they had been working for the Prince.

Tyrrell tried to refute all these claims as puerile, and declared, that it is ‘not probable that a nobleman of his [the price’s] high character and honour would have asserted that which he did not believe to be true’¹⁴.

Tyrrell’s protestations were to no avail: at Charles Scarisbrick’s Christie’s 1861 sale, Poniatowski gems sold for as little as £2 each¹⁵.

It is possible to group gems together using stylistic and Morellian techniques. Many names have been suggested and must be excluded¹⁶. It is very unlikely that hard proof, as the Calandrelli drawings will substantiate these attributions. So far about half of all gems are known either in impression or originals.

The database of the extraordinary collection of gems, commissioned by Prince Stanislas Poniatowski, has now gone on-line. We have managed to acquire both the rare photographic catalogue, which contains small photographs of 470 pieces, once in the collection of Tyrrell, and a copy of Poniatowski’s own summary catalogue. Correlating Poniatowski’s own catalogue with Christie’s sale catalogue of the collection has shown interesting clusters of omissions and additions. We have made good progress in finding more original gems and have been allowed access to some unique impressions given by Poniatowski and one of his gem engravers, Calandrelli, to the Antikensammlung, Berlin. Photographs of many of Calandrelli’s preliminary drawings can for the first time be seen side-by-side with the finished gem in the database.

¹⁴ *British and Foreign Review* 1842.

¹⁵ Scarisbrick, D., “English collectors of engraved gems: aristocrats, antiquaries and aesthetes” in: Henig, M. *et al.*, *Classical Gems. Ancient and Modern Intaglios and Cameos in the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge*, Cambridge 1994, 20.

¹⁶ Reinach, S., *Pierres gravées des collections Marlborough et d’Orléans, des recueils d’Eckhel, Gori, Lévesque de Gravelle, Mariette, Millin, Stosch*, Paris 1895, 151.



Fig 1. Signed as Apollonides: Latona metamorphosing the Lycian peasants into frogs, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 2. Signed as Gnaios: the horse Arion being washed by nymphs, amethyst intaglio.



Fig 3. Signed as Myrton: Venus in a cloud appearing to Aeneas. A sardonyx set in a gold filigree mount, with a line of black enamel.



Fig 4. Calandrelli drawing, Antikensammlung Berlin.



Fig 5. Signed as Diodoros: Latona being pursued by the python, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 6. Signed as Dioskourides: Mercury changing Chelone to a tortoise, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 7. Signed as Kromos: Hercules attacking the sons of Boreas, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 8. Signed as Pemallios: Achilles killing Thersites, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 9. Signed as Dioskourides: Alexander cutting the Gordian knot, cornelian intaglio.



Fig 10. Signed Byzas in the field: Byzas, founder of Byzantium, cornelian intaglio.