



# ENGRAVED GEMS

From antiquity to the present

edited by  
B.J.L. van den Bercken & V.C.P. Baan



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# The importance of gems in the work of Peter Paul Rubens 1577-1640

*Marcia Pointon*<sup>\*1</sup>

## Introduction

My approach in this contribution is neither that of a classicist nor of a student of glyptics, but that of a historian of visual culture. While I recognise that a foundation stone of gem studies is the relationship between ancient and modern, in my research I am also committed to understanding the interconnectedness between different aspects of an artist's work. Recognising the intellectual and imaginative integrity of an artist's life and work is necessarily a corrective to the compartmentalising procedures that disciplinary specialisms have imposed. Thus, for example, we read in the opening paragraph to Van de Meulen's *Petrus Paulus Antiquarius* (1975) that "by focussing on Rubens's interest in antique engraved and carved gems we do not encounter him primarily as an artist, since only a relatively small number of drawings from his hand after glyptic art are known. We meet him above all as the antiquarian scholar with a profound erudition in archaeological matters."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Rubens was remarkably knowledgeable for his period and was an active participant in the so-called Republic of Letters that extended from Flanders across France to Italy and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Claude-Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc told the artist in 1621 that he was surprised at having met so many people interested in medals and so infinitely few collectors of intaglios and cameos that he would now double the esteem in which he already held him.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, I shall argue that Rubens's work with gems impacted upon and was coloured by his artistic concerns as more conventionally understood. Peiresc, however, was not an aesthete and had little interest in the interconnected character of different aspects of Rubens's work, regarding his friend's artistic genius as something instrumental that could be harnessed to the communication of data. Thus, for example, in 1622 Peiresc reported to him in a long and pedantic letter that his tapestry cartoons for the *Life of Constantine* had been admired but also criticised in Paris

1 I would like to thank the following for their advice: Ben van den Bercken, Rachel Bowlby, Lucy Gent, Josephine Glover and Bert Watteuw.

2 Meulen-Schregardus 1975; Thomson de Grummond 1968 similarly classifies Rubens's interests into discrete categories: collector, scholar, painter. Since these publications, David Jaffé in two publications has identified a small number of paintings clearly based on antique gems: Jaffé, David 1997, 24, 38; Jaffé, David 1988.

3 Miller 2000, Miller 2015.

4 Peiresc to Rubens 26 November 1621, *Codex Diplomaticus*, vol. 2

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Fig.1 *La Favola di Ganimede*,  
 Firenze: Museo degli Argenti,  
 sardonyx cameo 5.4 × 4.1 mm.  
 (inv. 14436). Photo: Gallerie degli  
 Uffizi.

for their lack of *dessin* and disregard for classical rules; a particular objection was made by the viewing party to the curvature of men's calves and what Peiresc calls an appearance of dislocation in the arms. He recommended that his friend should improve his work by recognising the importance of truth to antiquity and the relativity of taste according to national standards.<sup>5</sup> In arguing even at the most basic level for the absorption of gemmology into Rubens's artistic make-up we might cite various instances in which Rubens's knowledge of cameos served him as a repertory from which motifs could be drawn on for incorporation into large scale paintings. One such is the pose of Henry IV at his triumphal entry into Paris in the oil painting of 1627, now in the Uffizi, which was inspired by the artist's drawing of Claudius and Messalina on a dragon chariot.<sup>6</sup>

### Early encounters with gems and gem-collecting

It would in fact be very surprising if Rubens had not been interested in gems, given that his first and most transformative training took place when, in 1600 aged twenty-two, he entered the service of Vincenzo I, the Gonzaga Duke of Mantua; among other treasures, he was able to see and study the cameo, now in the State Hermitage Museum, containing the paired portraits of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II (sardonyx, silver and copper) produced in Alexandria in the third century BC.<sup>7</sup> He later remembered holding it in his hand.<sup>8</sup> Vincenzo's wife was Eleonora de' Medici, a great collector in her own right. Moreover, while in Italy between 1600 and 1608, as well as spending time in Rome specifically to study art, he visited Florence on more than one occasion and would have been able

5 Peiresc to Rubens 1 December 1622, *Codex Diplomaticus*, vol. 3.

6 Meulen 1994-5, vol. 2, no. 165; see also Meulen 1997.

7 On questions of identification, see Brown 1997.

8 Rubens to P. Dupuy, 9 September 1627, *Codex Diplomaticus* vol.4, p. 303; Magurn 1955 no. 123.





Fig.2 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Ganymede*, 1636-38, oil on canvas, Madrid: Prado, 181 × 87.3 cm. Photo: © Museo Nacional del Prado.

to see the Medici collection.<sup>9</sup> Rubens lived in Rome with his brother Philip who included among his friends the Neo-Stoic philosopher Gaspar Scioppius and numismatist Jan de Hemelaer, librarian to Cardinal Cesi. The trade in gems by this time was extremely highly developed, as

9 Rubens's plans to study in Rome and his contacts there are set out in a letter to Duke Vincenzo's Secretary of State, Annibale Chieppio, Rome 2 December 1606, Magurn 1955, no. 14.

Barbara Furlotti has established, with networks of foragers (*frugatori*), dealers and middlemen spread across rural and urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Fulvio Orsini's inventory of gems provides a picture of this commerce, giving details of provenance, naming agents, gem cutters, artisans, common people and above all goldsmiths.<sup>11</sup> Rubens met the Medici Grand Duke Ferdinand (1587-1609) in Livorno in 1603, while waiting to board ship to Alicante on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the Duke of Mantua, and did him a favour by including in his goods a palfrey that Duke Ferdinand wanted to send to Spain.<sup>12</sup> The Grand Ducal cabinet of cameos and intaglios had been built up by successive Medici dukes through the sixteenth century and included both modern gems and works of classical antiquity.<sup>13</sup> The fact that no drawings by Rubens of Medici gems survive should not be taken as evidence that he did not see them. Rubens possessed an extraordinary visual memory, as evidenced by the fact that many years after studying the 'Aldrovandini Marriage' in Rome he was able to describe it in detail.<sup>14</sup> He may well have been thinking of the *Rape of Ganymede* cameo (Fig.1) in the Medici collection when he painted the same scene in a full-scale mythological picture (Fig.2). Drawings on paper are ephemeral objects and although Rubens valued highly his study collection of his own drawings, bequeathing it in his will to his antiquarian son Albert, it must be the case that just as there are manifest gaps in Rubens's voluminous correspondence, so also many of his drawings were dispersed and lost.<sup>15</sup>

Gem specialists understandably look for the copies after gems, whether drawn or engraved, that seemingly faithfully replicate design and content as these are what assist in identification and provenance. These were not necessarily the major or only concern in the seventeenth century (though it is true that Rubens in his correspondence with Peiresc took time to make drawings that would assist identification).<sup>16</sup> I will return to this but let us just dwell a little on *The Rape of Ganymede* and notice how Rubens has adopted what I will call a cameo-like technique, emphasizing the illuminated whiteness of the boy's body against the three lower strata of colour: blue sky, crimson cloak, and dark brown wings. Furthermore,

10 Furlotti 2010, 388.

11 De Nolhac 1884, 153-172 (cited in Furlotti 2010, 388 no. 6).

12 Rubens to Chieppio from Pisa 29 March 1603 and from Livorno 2 April 1603, Magurn 1955, nos. 3 and 4.

13 McCrory 1979; *Pregio e Bellezza*, 2010.

14 Magurn 1955, 14.

15 See Muller 1989; and especially Belkin and Healy 2004 where the 'cantoor' or studiolo in which Rubens is thought to have kept his drawings is described.

16 David Jaffé points out how few printed images of gems were available at the time, Jaffé, David 1993, 103. One of the earliest was an illustration in Conrad Gesner, *De Omni Rerum Fossilium Genere* ....1565.

the blue of the sky is rendered with streaks of white and gold reminiscent of the surface of one of the artist's much loved chalcedonies. Peiresc's first biographer referred in 1641 to Rubens as "that most renowned painter and lover of all antiquities, but especially achats [agates] in which he was very skilful."<sup>17</sup> Agate, as we shall see, whether in the form of an incised or carved gem or as raw material, played a significant part in Rubens's intellectual and creative world.

### Gem research in relation to Rubens studies

Over the past forty years there have been some major contributions to our knowledge of Rubens' relationship to gems – in particular Van de Meulen's volumes on Rubens' studies from antiquity for the *Corpus Rubenianum* (1994), an article by Oleg Neverov in 1979,<sup>18</sup> and various essays by David Jaffé, to all of which I am much indebted. This work is surely ongoing; there remains, for example, disagreement not only over what is represented but also as to whether the Leiden cameo, or *Gemma Constantiniana* of Constantine and Fausta with Crispus riding on a chariot drawn by centaurs, was once in the artist's collection.<sup>19</sup> The focus on reconstituting Rubens's collection and upon his relationship to a small number of spectacular gems, in particular the *Gemma Augustea* and the *Gemma Tiberiana*, has meant other issues have been ignored. The term 'gem' has had – and still has – many different meanings: the Oxford English Dictionary lists five nouns, of which number 3 is "a precious or semi-precious stone, bearing an engraved design either in relief or intaglio."<sup>20</sup> Collectors of intaglios and cameos in the late Renaissance and Early Modern period also collected raw minerals; it is, for example, impossible to say for certain what Michele Mercati (1541-1593) had in the drawer labelled 'Gemmae' in the cabinet of the museum he created in the Vatican for Pope Gregory XVIII, an incomplete account of which was published in 1556 entitled *De Re Metallica*.<sup>21</sup> Andrea Bacci's book on precious stones, a copy of which was in the library of Cassiano dal Pozzo, refers to *gemme* when describing raw minerals; the great Naples collector Ferrante Imperato, in his *Dell'Historia Naturale*, follows Pliny in describing as

gems the raw materials from which cameos are worked.<sup>22</sup> Similarly the word agate is used widely, not least in correspondence between Rubens, Peiresc and their associates, both as a shorthand for incised and carved gems and as a descriptor for the raw material of agate.

### Rubens the collector

Notwithstanding what I have said above, a few words on Rubens's own collection are in order. His first purchases probably date from his time in Italy; he was certainly purchasing statuary during that period and in a letter of 2 March 1612, after his premature return to Antwerp on the occasion of his mother's death, he speaks of commissioning an Italian friend to spend the money he had been paid for the altarpiece in the Chiesa Nuova for the purchase of 'a few trinkets in Rome'.<sup>23</sup> But it is only after 1619 that the dates of certain purchases of gems were recorded in correspondence. Certainly Bellori, writing in 1672, 32 years after the artist's death, claimed that Rubens had acquired, as well as marble statues, every kind of antiquity, medals, cameos, intaglios, *gemme* and *metalli* and had them transported back to Antwerp.<sup>24</sup> *Metalli* was generally the term for anything that came out of the ground rather than what we would now understand as metals. For example, the German Joannes Schreck, almost certainly known to Rubens as he was in Rome at the same time, in his preface to the *Tesoro Messicano* published in 1628 by the Accademia dei Lincei, declared: "Parlo dei Metalli, delle gemme, dei minerali, dei diversi sali e dei vari succhi ..." ("I speak of metals, gems, minerals, of various salts and juices...") going on to praise Pliny for having affirmed that contemplation of a gem is sufficient for the appreciation of nature's perfection.<sup>25</sup> The certainly generic but nonetheless interesting illustration of gem hunters in *Hortus Sanitatis* (1491) indicates that gems were closely associated with mineral excavation. Sources of information on Rubens' collection of worked gemstones include an index from 1628, listing 53 gems of which the artist sent casts to Peiresc, an inventory of a cabinet of 212 gems belonging to Rubens' son Albert, and documents concerning the estate of the Duke of Buckingham to whom Rubens sold the bulk of his collection

17 Gassendi 1657, 177, quoted Thomson de Grummond 1968, 2.

18 Neverov 1979.

19 Van de Meulen 1994-5, vol. 2, no. 166; Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1951b; Halbertsma 2015. The object is currently designated by the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden inventory number GS-11096.

20 www.oed.com.

21 Mercati 1717; On Michele Mercati, see Accordi 1980. The posthumously published catalogue of the Mercati collection would have been circulated in manuscript form in the seventeenth century.

22 Bacci 1587. On Cassiano's library see Sparti 1992, 131. See Imperato's passage on *achat* in Imperato 1599 ch. 39. On Imperato's museum see Stendardo 2001.

23 Magurn 1955, no 23.

24 Bellori 1672, 148.

25 Mottana 2013, 219. Sometimes early collectors distinguished *pietre* from *metalli* but generally *metalli* is a generic term as in Agricola 1556; Gesner 1565 who provides an image of a cameo as well as instructions on how to cut one; Mercati 1717.

in 1626,<sup>26</sup> while retaining, as he famously told Peiresc in 1634, “some of the rarest gems and most exquisite medals from the sale. Thus I still have a collection of beautiful and curious things in my possession”.<sup>27</sup>

### Rubens’ friendship with Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc

The name of Peiresc has cropped up several times. Thanks to the work of Peter N. Miller, we now know a great deal not only about who belonged to the so-called Republic of Letters, of which Peiresc was the leading light, but equally significantly the practical details of how knowledge, ideas, letters and artefacts were transmitted through Europe’s sprawling maritime networks.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the publication of Rubens’ surviving correspondence<sup>29</sup> we have long known how highly Peiresc valued his Flemish friend’s knowledge of antiquity and his skill as a draftsman and engraver capable of transferring visual data in a pre-photographic era. But we now know a great deal more as well about the context in which Peiresc and Rubens planned their never-to-be-completed Gem Book in the summer of 1620, stimulated by Peiresc’s discovery in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris of the *Gemma Tiberiana*. Much has been written about the surviving engravings executed in Rubens’ workshop and intended for publication in this book.<sup>30</sup> Less attention has been paid to why the project was aborted. The most obvious reason is that, although the two men shared a common interest in antiquity, for Peiresc cameos and intaglios were instruments in his search for information about ancient customs, religions, husbandry, mythology – a means to an end. Thus, the reason he wanted a cast of Rubens’ exquisitely beautiful agate cameo-cut vase was so that he could fill it with sand and measure its capacity in order to assist his theory of historic weights and measures.<sup>31</sup> Rubens was also committed to researching and identifying the subjects on gems, though he found coins with their lesser susceptibility to damage and therefore greater legibility more conducive. But to Rubens gems were exquisite artefacts; they were minerals wrought by human ingenuity into an object that could be held in the hand. Moreover, they furnished an artist to whom colour was paramount with exemplars of great purity: sard, onyx, carnelian, jasper. Agate and onyx were minerals that had been admired

since Pliny for their natural figurations, miraculous forms of representation devised by nature without human intervention.<sup>32</sup> Rubens would have been familiar with the ways in which artists exploited the natural banding in agate as the basis for a pictorial representation, adding figures in paint to the ‘landscape’ or ‘seascape’ invoked by the stone. Agate panels treated in this way – combining the artistry of nature with man’s artistic skills – were incorporated into cabinets such as the example made by Philipp Hainhofer, now in the Gustavianum in Uppsala, where the natural ‘landscape’ banding of agate has been worked up into biblical scenes by a painter.<sup>33</sup> In seventeenth-century Europe agates were precious stones, authorised by their presence on the High Priest’s robe in Ezekiel; while never losing their traditional virtues, they were valued beyond all others for their poetic story-telling qualities. In 1585, agate is described as coming from the Indies by an anonymous poet: “Cette pierre est toujours depeinte & bigarre ... et de plusieurs couleurs” (“This stone is always painted and streaked ... and of several colours”).<sup>34</sup> Typical is Remy Belleau’s 1604 praise of agate as “nonpareille”, a stone in whose mirror are imprinted “the faces of men and animals, the earth, sky, stars, sea, mountains, rocks ...”.<sup>35</sup>

### A love of agate

Scholars writing about the Gem Book disregard the fact that, over a long period of time in 1633, Peiresc tried unsuccessfully to purchase on Rubens’ behalf a piece of rough agate. We only have Peiresc’s side of this exchange, but it is nonetheless clear what occurred. Peiresc describes in detail a piece of agate he has located. Unfortunately, however, it has a flaw through a vein. So he has arranged for merchants to bring him all the pieces of white agate in their possession; all these turn out to be transparent white and this is not what Rubens wants. What he desires, and what Peiresc has been seeking is “un blanc laiteux et opaque” (a milky and opaque white).<sup>36</sup> Shortly thereafter he offers Rubens a fist-sized piece that he has had in Provence for around twelve years after receiving it from Aleppo. He is worried that it might be too soft for Rubens’s purposes (of which we remain ignorant) but suggests it will take a good polish and, as long as it is not exposed to

26 Significantly, according to Thomson de Grummond 1968, 38, the list includes the phrase: “twelve boxes of agates and other precious stones”, the implication being that agates and precious stones were coterminous.

27 Magurn 1955, no. 235.

28 Miller 2000; Miller 2015.

29 Codex Diplomaticus 1887-1901; Magurn 1955.

30 See, for example, Meulen 1994-5, vol. 2, 173-5; Jaffé, David 1988.

31 See Miller 2000, 343-345.

32 See, for example Pliny the Elder 37<sup>th</sup> Book, Ch. LIV, Achates (Loeb edition 1989); Aldrovandi 1648; Daston and Park 1998, ch. 7.

33 Similar, if less elaborate, cabinets were made in Flanders in the seventeenth century, Fabri 1991.

34 *Les trois livres des meteores*, 1585, 58

35 Belleau 1604, vol. i, pp. 50 verso – 51 recto

36 *Codex Diplomaticus*, vol.3, 1 December 1622.



Fig.3 Rubens Vase, agate, 19 cm height, ca. 400 AD, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Photo: © Walters Art Museum.

rain and wind, is likely to endure.<sup>37</sup> The importance here of the aesthetic as well as the physical properties of agate serve to remind us that agate has an extraordinary impact as a material even before its banded structure is exploited by a gifted gem carver. One of Rubens' greatest purchases was the vase made from a single piece of honey-coloured agate that he bought in Paris in 1619 (Fig.3), paying the enormous price of 2,000 scudi for it. We now know that in all likelihood this had been stolen from the French royal collection.<sup>38</sup> The craftsman who made this small scale deluxe object for a Byzantine patron around 400 AD used techniques of undercutting similar to those of a gem cutter, manifesting what has been described as a gem-like focus on an exquisite miniature.<sup>39</sup> As Rubens subsequently sold this object, having first made a drawing (now known only through the engraving), it was evidently not part of the group of beloved objects, including agate vases, that Rubens specified in his will should not be sold without the agreement of both his sons.<sup>40</sup> These were described as medals, agate vases, jaspers and precious/valuable stones.

37 Ibid, 15 December 1622. A further letter of 29-30 December indicates that Rubens has proved reluctant to take the piece; Peiresc assures him that it is no trouble and that he only regrets it may not be hard enough. It is noteworthy that Peiresc had this mineral in the rough.

38 For the extraordinary history of the *Rubens Vase*, as it is now known, see Ross 1943.

39 Elsner 2004, 299.

40 'Het Laatste Testament van P.P. Rubens', 27 May 1640, reprinted in *Rubens-Bulletijn Jaarboeken*, 1896, 125-181, codicil 137-138.





Fig.4 The Triumph of Licinius, cameo, sardonyx, 160 × 214 mm, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles. Photo © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

### Rubens – an astute businessman

A more mundane reason for the failure to bring the gem book to completion is that, while Peiresc was an independent bachelor scholar, an aristocrat with a private income, Rubens had many strings to his bow – diplomat and businessman, husband and father, as well as collector. Unlike Peiresc, he was making a living and (thanks to his acumen) a good one. Although undoubtedly he loved the objects he collected, he had no hesitation in disposing of them if it would be profitable. According to a story published by Sandrart in 1675, having astutely seen that the Duke of Buckingham wanted to acquire an instant collection, the artist quickly sold to him his own gem collection for 60,000 Dutch guilders, thereby demonstrating that Rubens “next to his art knew how to make money quickly”.<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, when Zacharias Brendel, ‘a well-known alchemist’, came to visit Rubens in Antwerp and told him that if the artist would furnish for him a house at his expense, he would soon find the method to make gold, Rubens is reported to have said: “you are twenty years too late because in this time I have found with my paintbrush and colours the right and true Lapidum Philosophicum”.<sup>42</sup>

### Rubens and the ‘Great Cameos’

Much of the correspondence between Rubens and Peiresc was devoted to the two great cameos – the *Gemma Tiberiana* (The Apotheosis of Germanicus) and the *Gemma Augustea* (The Apotheosis of Augustus), respectively in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Both have been extensively published and the various drawings and engravings of them catalogued. I do not, therefore, intend

41 Sandrart 1675, vol. 2, Buch 3, 292.

42 Sandrart 1675, vol. 2, Buch 3, 292. This must refer to Brendel the Younger 1592-1638 as the elder died in 1626.



Fig.5 Lucas Vorsterman I after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Triumph of Licinius*, engraving, 209 × 288 mm., 1622, © The Trustees of the British Museum All rights reserved (1874,0808.2120).



Fig.6 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Triumph of Licinius*, pen and brown ink on white paper with a wash, 1622, 189 × 249 mm, © The Trustees of the British Museum All rights reserved (1919,1111.22).



to revisit the data. Rather I shall examine what happens when an artist as knowledgeable and sympathetic to gems as Rubens sets out to make representations – and I am deliberately avoiding the word copy – either for his own records or for a recipient at a distance, who desires a substitute for the missing object, a substitute which might be an engraving in multiples and therefore open to breach of copyright.<sup>43</sup> Representations of this kind are freighted with expectation for scholars: the hope is always that they will provide a missing link, offer evidence for the condition of an object subsequently damaged or work effectively as a substitute for the original in terms of its narrative content. A look at one instance shows how ill-founded such expectations may be. When P.J. Mariette in 1750 admired the engraving of the Triumph of Licinius cameo (Fig.4), made in 1622 by the highly skilled engraver Lucas Vorsterman after Rubens (Fig.5) and intended for the Gem Book, he had not seen the cameo itself but judged it by the engraving to be one of the rarest monuments from antiquity. “Ce Camée ... m’a semblé si beau et si singulier dans l’Estampe de Rubens, que je n’ai pû me refuser à en tracer cette légère esquisse ...” (“This cameo appeared to me so unusual in Rubens’ print, that I could not resist sketching this light tracing from it”).<sup>44</sup> Rubens’ very fine drawing (Fig.6), from which Vorsterman worked, measures 189 x 249 mm whereas the cameo measures 160 x 214 mm. Drawings invariably aggrandise cameos and in this instance the artist has included an outline of the actual cameo in the lower left inscribed ‘Grandezza della Pietra’.

Rubens is likely to have seen and drawn this cameo on his first visit to France in 1622. Although the engraving indicates that the subject was intended for the Gem Book, the dimensions of Rubens’s drawing and the extensive changes he made to the composition of what is a rather crude assemblage of figures in uncertain perspective suggests that an accurate scholarly reproduction was not first and foremost in his mind. The figure of Licinius has been reduced to dimensions more proportionate to his position mid ground behind his horses. The animals are transformed from plodding cart horses to spirited steeds, the enemies are individualized and rendered with exuberant anatomical correctness and the winged Victory figures, who hold the horses’ reins to right and left, are now elegantly draped and graceful in movement. We know that Rubens was interested in Roman armour, an interest his son inherited.<sup>45</sup> Moreover the artist went on to use the winged Victory from the cameo as a source for his first sketch for *The Triumph of Henry IV* (National Gallery

of Australia, Canberra), indicating that the potential of the cameo as a source book was of equal importance to the need to record the design of the cameo.<sup>46</sup> As an engraver himself he made sure his drawing could be readily interpreted and translated into print, a process in which the decision to allow for reversal was a creative one. In the engraving, the making of which was supervised by the artist, we notice how placing the outward leaning Victory at the right instead of the left in the engraving, while reversing the cameo, lends the composition greater narrative dynamism. A similar process can be seen at work in Paulus Pontius’s engraving of the *Gemma Constantiana* in Leiden, though the quality of the engraving is not as good. The engraving of Licinius, done in Rubens’ lifetime and under his watchful eye, takes us away from the cameo that is its pre-text. The uneven edge of the stone that bespeaks its unique character is gone; what we have is an example of the artist’s belief in print-making as a valuable endeavour and a demonstration of how he hired engravers on whom he could rely for consistency of style and an ability to respond to his own pictorial idiom.<sup>47</sup>

### Representing the *Gemma Tiberiana*

In the case of the *Gemma Tiberiana* (Fig.7) we have a cameo of much superior quality and, therefore, one might conjecture there would be no temptation to embellish or ‘improve’ on the part of the artist. In addition to the cameo we have three depictions associated with the Rubens-Peiresc project. Firstly, a drawing by Rubens signed in a later hand was executed in Paris in 1622. Van der Meulen states that this “faithfully pictures the cameo, although the contrasting colours of the dark top layer of the sardonyx are not always indicated.”<sup>48</sup> This is not strictly speaking true as Rubens also ‘repaired’ the cracks in the stone, greatly elaborated the drapery and made many subtle changes. For example, the profile of the central figure at the lower margin – the seated male accompanying the woman with her baby – is tipped slightly forward so as to be on the same vertical axis as the staff held by Tiberius. These changes were incorporated into the anonymous engraving (in reverse) along with other sharpening up of details that are generally summarised in the cameo where the focus is on the dramatic rendering of profiles.<sup>49</sup> Rubens’ enhancements are articulated with the thoroughness of an archaeological reconstruction; note,

43 Rubens was afraid someone would copy his engravings of gems, see ‘Magurn 1955, no. 47.

44 Mariette 1750, 300.

45 See: Rubens, Albert 1665.

46 The borrowing was first observed by Jaffé, David 1988, 7 where he remarks that the first oil sketch was “inspired by the cameo”.

47 Vorsterman and Rubens quarrelled and Pontius took his place. On reproductive engraving, see: Zorach and Rodini 2005, 18.

48 Meulen 1994-5, no. 168a.

49 It was published by the artist’s son in his *Dissertatio De Gemma Tiberiana* in Rubens, Albert 1665, 192.



Fig. 7 *Gemma Tiberiana* (The Apotheosis of Augustus [Germanicus]) cameo, ca. 23 AD, sardonyx, 31 × 26.5 cm, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles. Photo: Annemarieke Willemsen.

for example, the claw feet of Tiberius's throne. Uniquely from the Rubens-Peiresc collaboration, we have the famous painting (Fig. 8), now in the Ashmolean Museum, which was commissioned after the engraving in 1625 and dispatched to Peiresc in 1626. It is three times the size of the original, is not a coloured drawing (in which outline would have been preminent) but a painting in oil on canvas. It is rendered in grisaille which retains the browns that make this cameo so distinctive but ignores the whites. Moreover, where the brown colouration might detract from the overall grace and elegance, a cream tint is substituted, as with the figure of Livia and in what Rubens transforms into a crush of pale knees in the foreground. The considerably divergent views of Peiresc and Rubens as to the function that such a representation might fulfil, and the extent and legitimacy of the artist's originality, can be judged if we consider that Peiresc had requested that the dimensions should match those of a painting he already possessed by Niccolò dell'Abate of the *Gemma Augustea* and that the figures should be painted in colours to resemble *real people* – surely a Disneyland fantasy for the frail antiquarian's Provençal bed chamber.<sup>50</sup> Rubens

50 See: correspondence Peiresc to Rubens and to Valavez, December 1622, *Codex Diplomaticus*, vol. 3. (author's italics).



Fig. 8 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Glorification of Germanicus (Gemma Tiberiana)*, WA1989.74, oil on canvas, 1626, 100 × 82.6, Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

was in Antwerp when he executed this painting and it is assumed that he therefore followed his own drawing and a cast.<sup>51</sup> So the painting is at two removes from the cameo and has, with good reason, come to be viewed as a monumental work in its own right. Rubens would have shared sixteenth-century concepts of the artist reaching, through divine power, to the idea that lies behind the material object; interpolation was a mark of his distinction. With engraving, a dark background (something that could be achieved in paint by washing the area around the figures) could only be reproduced by cross-hatching. Furthermore, an oil painting could reproduce something of the luminosity and above all the colour of the cameo. The overall consequences of Rubens's artistic decisions are twofold: firstly, his choices serve to emphasize individual human figures and their anatomy; secondly (as a result of this), the iconography is immediately more legible. Both are consonant with the preoccupations of a great Baroque history painter who balances his instinctual feel for a contemporary viewing public with his concern for archaeological accuracy.

51 White 1990, 144.



Fig.9 Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Still Life with Flowers and a Tazza*, oil on panel, 47.5 × 52.5, 1618, Brussels: Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts (inv. 5013) © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Photo: J. Geleyns-Ro scan.

### The appeal of gems to painters

I shall conclude by taking us back to Rubens as a painter since here the artist's knowledge of precious stones and his love of what I will call the poetry of minerals is most vividly registered as he engages with their visual allure, their centrality to theories and naming of colours, the mystery of their origin and composition, and their myths. Precious stones, meticulously observed, feature prominently in the artist's historical and mythological paintings. And we know that he dealt and traded in them, especially but by no means exclusively in diamonds.<sup>52</sup> I will focus on a small number of images in which agates and other stones of the same family (carnelians, onyxes and jaspers) are represented. It has been noticed that Rubens' close friend and collaborator, Jan Brueghel the Elder, in his *Allegory of Sight*, introduced many pieces of antique sculpture belonging to Rubens.<sup>53</sup> Several of the paintings in this series include gems and impressions along with coins which had become part of the iconography of Vanitas scenes in Flemish art. In *Still Life with Flowers and a Tazza* (Fig.9) Brueghel, who was court painter to Archduke Albert

52 This is the subject of my ongoing research.

53 Meulen 1994-5, vol. 1, 143; the painting is one of eight, all now in the Prado, executed in 1617-18. On Jan Brueghel the Elder see: Ertz 1979; Woollett and Suchtelen 2006.





Fig.10a (left) Peter Paul Rubens, *Jan Brueghel the Elder with his Second Wife and Children*, oil on panel, 125.1 × 95.2, 1612-13, The Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London. (P1978 PG.362).

Fig.10b (right) Detail of 10a.

and Isabella, unmistakably features among the jewellery spilling out of the casket two identical bracelets of mounted agates, displaying clearly visible bands of colour and suggestions of intaglio designs on some of these.

### Gems in portraits

Shortly after his return from Italy in 1608, Rubens painted a portrait of Brueghel with his second wife and children (Fig.10). The idea of mounting antique gems in jewellery is, I recognise, anathema to specialists in glyptics<sup>54</sup> even though gems mounted on rings were a commonplace of early collections and the practice of mounting gems in this way was sanctioned by the myth of Prometheus and embedded in iconography connected with early museums. To be sure, the stones in the bracelet worn by Catherina Brueghel, to which her son draws attention, may be composed of modern stones. It was common practice to mix authentic classical gems and modern imitations: the Cheapside Hoard includes both and recipes for their manufacture abounded.<sup>55</sup> However, it does not seem likely that wealthy bourgeois sitters in their best clothes would have been content to display for perpetuity *ersatz* examples. When Rubens painted the wedding portrait of himself

and his first wife Isabella Brant (the famous *Honeysuckle Bower*) (1609 Munich, Alte Pinakothek), he portrayed Isabella wearing a similar pair of bracelets which are listed in an inventory as “Een paer agaete braseletten ...”.<sup>56</sup> These were not – unlike the pair’s clothes – the height of fashion. Nor were they financially valuable as were, for example, gold chains and diamonds of which the Rubens household also owned a number. But they were evidently valued in other ways. It behoves us to discard a purist approach to material history and to recognise hybrid artefacts for the ways in which they were understood and appreciated in the past. An objection can be raised that these were not intaglios or cameos but merely coloured stones, especially as, despite the fact that figurations are discernible on a number of stones in these images, it is not possible within the economy of Rubens’ and Brueghel’s painting styles to precisely identify any single stone. This need not, however, be taken to mean there were none; the overwhelming likelihood is that they were indeed engraved gems and that this is precisely why attention is drawn to them in different ways in these images. The only surviving piece of jewellery of the kind seen in the paintings that I have been able to discover is a necklace in the Germanisches National Museum, Nürnberg, thought to have originally been two bracelets, and dated on the

54 See Henig 1994, x-xii.

55 See, for example: Leonardus 1502 and della Porta 1611; Mottana, 2016. On the Hoard see: Forsyth 2013.

56 Item 12 in inventory drawn up 17 November 1645 by Rubens and his second wife, Helena Forment, see: Duverger 1991, 266.

basis of comparison with portraits to northern Europe circa 1530-40.<sup>57</sup> It incorporates a wide range of stones, including amethyst, rock crystal, tourmaline, malachite, agate, cornelian – and one antique cameo. It may have had a prophylactic function.

### What contemporary documents can tell us

In the absence of material evidence we turn to documents. Inventories and wills in northern Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century frequently list minerals, either as individual stones or as jewellery. Here descriptions have evidently been often made in a hurry by scribes uncertain of what they were looking at, but they do give us some idea of the extent of ownership of gems in Rubens' circle and beyond. The artist's father-in-law Daniel Fourment, a merchant who had bought and shipped to the East Indies the famous *Rubens Vase*, possessed at the time of his death numerous agates, at least some of which must have been cameos or incised gems. A particularly elaborate example is described as: "Dry ... stucken agathe waervan twee groote gesneden Trogniën syn gestalt in gout met loofswerck gemailleert met esmerauden ende robynen ende andere een ovael gesneden anichil in t'gout geset den grout swert ende boven sardonix." ("Three other pieces of agate and two of them have large incised faces set in gold with enamelled foliage with emeralds and rubies and another one oval cut anichil set in gold with a black background on top of sardonix").<sup>58</sup> Other inventories describe these agates with faces mounted in bracelets like the ones we see in Rubens' portraits and in Brueghel's paintings. Thus, for example, we read of: "Noch twee andere bracheletten, al mist golden Grieksch A A ende mit ronde cornalinen, agaten ende andere diergelijcke, desommige mit personnaigien gesteken" (Two more bracelets, both with gold Greek AA and with round cornelians, agate and other such, some of which carved with personnaiges).<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion

Rubens was a man of his time. Just as the pleasure he was able to take in collecting and researching agate artefacts did not preclude his selling those very artefacts if he could make a good profit, so his recognition of their aesthetic and historical worth did not preclude acceptance that they might be mounted in jewellery which would be worn and could contribute to the impressive and costly dress worn by family and friends when sitting for their portraits. A corollary to this account, and a splendid precedent for the aforementioned paintings I have discussed, was readily available to Rubens in the form of Raphael's *Dama Velata* (1514-1515, Palazzo Pitti), which the artist could have seen in Florence in 1600 when it was in the house of a local merchant.<sup>60</sup> The sitter wears an extraordinary necklace composed of oval-cut or incised antique cameos in agate, onyx or sardonix. In the inventory of jewels in Isabella D'Este's *grotto* in 1531 was a necklace that must have appeared similar to the one worn by Raphael's sitter: "E più, camei quatordecim legati in oro, parte teste e parte figure, tutti attaccati con un catenino d'oro" ("And further, fourteen cameos set in gold, partly heads and partly figures, all linked with a little gold chain")<sup>61</sup>

57 Zander-Seidel 2007, 233-243. The lack of surviving examples is unsurprising given that jewellery, including this piece, was regularly dismantled and stones reused.

58 Inventory 23 July 1643, transcribed in Duverger 1991, 106. The AA probably refers to the clasp or the links.

59 'Uit het testament van Elisabeth, Gravin Van Culemborg', 1555, Rijksarchief in Gelderland, transcribed in Gans 1961, inventory 7, 375-376.

60 The portrait is mentioned in *Le Bellezze di Firenze*, 1591, as in the house of the merchant Matteo Botti. It passed to the Medicis in 1619. See Cocke and de Vecchi 1969, no. 121.

61 Il Codice D.XII, 6 dell'Archivio Gonzaga nell'Archivio di Stato di Mantova, transcribed in Bini 2001, no. 86, 28. Isabella D'Este died in 1539.

