



Fig. 1. Maxwell Sommerville in a photograph of about 1889. This was the frontispiece for his book *Engraved Gems* (1889).

Hidden Treasures from the Vault

Engraved Gems from the Maxwell Sommerville Collection

by Dietrich Berges

Translated from the German by Kelly McCullough

Jewels and precious stones are normally kept in the Museum vault or behind bullet-proof glass. It is unusual, however, for an entire collection of engraved gems—often in exquisitely worked settings—to be kept from public view, languishing in obscurity for decades.

The background to this story is long, and leads back into the 19th century. It introduces us to Maxwell Sommerville, a man who established one of the most important collections of engraved gems in the United States. He eventually bequeathed this collection to the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

MAXWELL SOMMERVILLE: A COLLECTOR AND HIS TRAVELS

Maxwell Sommerville, the son of Dr. Maxwell and Mary Fulton Sommerville, was born in 1829 in Clarksburg, Virginia (Fig. 1). He was educated at Central High School in Philadelphia, graduating



Fig. 2. Maxwell Sommerville during a trip to Egypt. Here, he tries to purchase a nose-ring from a peasant woman. In *Engraved Gems*, Sommerville describes this particular episode in great detail. He also engraved the plate from which this image was printed.

From Sommerville 1889, p. 168



Fig. 3. Sommerville standing before the display window of an antiquities shop in France. Inside, the dealer appraises precious stones. During the course of his many travels, Sommerville took advantage of such opportunities to acquire gems for his extensive collection.

From Sommerville 1889, p. 370; plate engraved by Maxwell Sommerville



Fig. 4. Portrait of Maxwell Sommerville by the artist Stephen Ferris (1893). The painting can be found today in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Sommerville is portrayed as the proud collector, surrounded by a number of his own seals and cameos. The "Triumph of Constantine" cameo can be seen in the left corner of the painting; and the "Jupiter Aegiochus" appears next to Sommerville's right hand. These were later revealed to be forgeries.

in 1847. In the following years, Sommerville devoted himself to business. As a partner in the Philadelphia publishing firm of Sherman & Co., he acquired a considerable fortune.

During the 1860s, Sommerville began to withdraw from business life, embarking upon long journeys which led him throughout the world: to Europe, northern Africa (Fig. 2), and the Near East, as well as China, Japan, India, Burma, and Thailand.

Sommerville, however, was no mere idler who passed his time traveling to exotic places. Rather, he was driven by a constant curiosity to explore the customs and practices of foreign lands, their religious idiosyncracies, and, most importantly, all manifestations of mysticism: magic, spells, and accompanying mystical objects. In addition to his natural inquisitiveness, Sommerville was blessed with clear literary talents. He wrote various accounts describing his travel experiences in a light and amusing style. Many of these episodes were illustrated in engravings done by his own hand. In these accounts, Sommerville's true nature is revealed; he emerges as a tireless collector who would seize any opportunity to search out engraved gemstones (Fig. 3).

Sommerville's grandfather, James McAlpin,

Fig. 5. The Buddhist temple given to the Museum by Sommerville, who is shown in the robes of a Buddhist monk in the center of the photograph. UPM neg. S8-141441. Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Archives. © Peirce & Jones, Philadelphia, 1904



owned a collection of antique gems, which, in all likelihood, served as the basis for his collection. Sommerville himself succeeded in acquiring stamp seals, cameos, and other engraved gems during his many journeys. When traveling, he loved to examine the wares of local merchants, and then barter for them. As a result, the most important parts of Sommerville's collection reflect the routes of his travels. The antique material, that dating prior to about the 4th century AD, comes predominantly from Italian regions, as well as Egypt and the Near East. The post-classical pieces are primarily from Europe, and here again, Italy is particularly well represented.

Maxwell Sommerville was neither a trained art historian nor an archaeologist. His knowledge of antiquity was based on his solid "classical" education and supplemented by his own reading.

demeanor, combined with his abundant means and his feverish collection habits, made him the dupe of many a merchant.

Sommerville was convinced that his collection was both authentic and of the finest quality. In a 1893 portrait by Stephen Ferris (Fig. 4), he appears with a number of his precious stones, looking every bit the proud collector. Ironically, he is pictured with two of his most prominent forgeries: the "Jupiter Aegiochus" and the "Triumph of Constantine." For Sommerville, the acquisition of these two cameos represented a great investment, both in terms of personal effort and finances. He was proud to have produced a small monograph on each piece.

An exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1875 gave Sommerville the first opportunity to display his collection publicly. During this period, he authored many works on ancient glyptics. These

"The presence of probable forgeries left the collection stigmatized."

Sommerville was also a man of multiple interests. Because of his passion for religious history, he was fascinated by amulets and talismans dating from all periods. He acquired countless cameos and stamp seals from the post-classical period, and was particularly interested in those dating from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries AD. The post-classical pieces from that era, many of which are of outstanding quality, constitute the most important part of his collection.

Sommerville established his collection quickly and on a grand scale. In the 1870s, the collection contained 1,000 pieces; a few years later it numbered 1,500; and by the time of his death in 1904, it had grown to 3,400 pieces. Sommerville, however, was not spared mistakes in the development of his collection. He was a dilettante in the field of archaeology and unfamiliar with critical research methods. Thus, he acquired many pieces of dubious worth. Sommerville's open, friendly, and trustworthy

publications, as well as the guided tours of his collection, met with favorable public reception. From 1888 to 1891, his gem collection was exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Luigi di Cesnola, the Metropolitan's director at that time, was interested in putting Sommerville's collection on permanent display.

At the same time, in his hometown of Philadelphia, Sommerville was forging relationships with both the University of Pennsylvania and the University Museum. After 1891, the University Museum was entrusted with the permanent exhibition of the Sommerville collection, which, among its other riches, contained the inventory of an entire Buddhist temple (Fig. 5). Thus, the Sommerville collection is among the oldest in the Museum. In 1894, Sommerville was named Professor of Glyptology (the study of engraved gems) at Penn. The appointment appears to have been made in connection with his gift. Additional honors, including membership in various



Fig. 6. Onyx cameo featuring the portrait of a noblewoman of the Italian Renaissance. Her hair is elaborately styled, and she wears a rich headdress and a robe in the court style. The subject appears to be member of the high Italian nobility, and is probably a Medici princess of the 16th century AD.

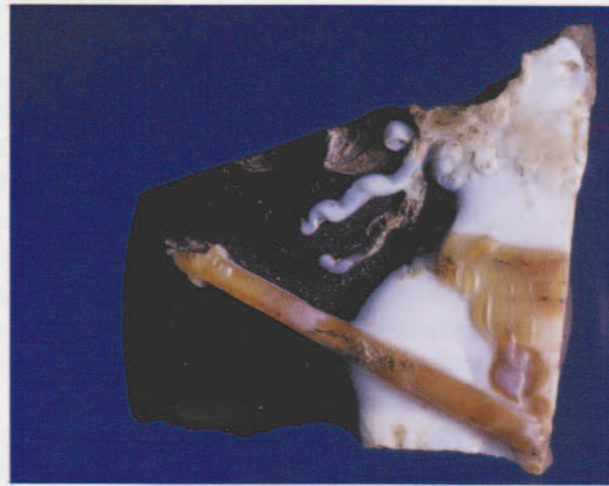


Fig. 7. The fragment of a very large onyx cameo. Parts of the head and upper body of a seated Jupiter figure are preserved. Jupiter wears a scale-patterned robe, and a scepter rests on his shoulder. The fragment was part of an especially luxurious cameo dating from the early Imperial period (1st century AD). Cameos of this sort were probably commissioned for the Roman Emperor; they are very rare.



Fig. 8. Carnelian stamp seal in a gold ring setting. The portrait depicts a bearded man; he wears an oriental headdress (a "Phrygian cap"), and has a robe wrapped around his shoulders. By implication, the figure appears to be either a Persian satrap (provincial governor), or Paris, the son of the Trojan king. The signature of the 1st century BC Greek artist Dioskourides appears on the edge of the seal, but this seal is of typical Neoclassical workmanship (late 18th–early 19th century AD).

European learned societies, would follow.

It seemed that Sommerville had arrived at the zenith of his career; soon after, the first black clouds appeared on the horizon. Voices of doubt regarding the authenticity of his finds began to resonate throughout the ranks of the Museum—and they continued to grow louder. Perhaps the most emphatic voice was that of Stewart Culin, who was Museum director at the time. Distressed by the insults hurled at his collection, Sommerville complained that it was being unfairly neglected. In 1903, Stewart Culin left the University Museum. On May 5th, 1904, Maxwell Sommerville died while on extended vacation in Paris.

Among its other provisions, Sommerville's will specified that a large endowment be left to the Museum for the upkeep of his collection. Of course, this provision was to the Museum's great advantage. The story might simply have ended here; unfortunately, however, the Sommerville collection was not destined to enjoy a moment's peace. Dramatic events involving the collection quickly unfolded. These events began in the fall of 1904, with a visit to the University Museum by Adolf Furtwängler, the eminent German archaeologist. It was on this occasion that Sommerville's gem collection caught the great Furtwängler's eye.

Upon returning to Germany, Furtwängler gave an appraisal of the Sommerville collection before the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. The notes from his trip were published in the Academy's minutes in 1905. Furtwängler's appraisal follows in its own inimitable style:

Here [i.e., the University Museum] one finds a large collection of gems which belonged to Maxwell Sommerville. Sommerville is the author of the book *Engraved Gems, their history and place in art*; I refer to this book in my work *Ancient Gems*, volume III, page 434 as "marvelously hideous, the utterly useless work of a dilettante." The collection is as grotesque as the book. It is comprised almost entirely of fakes. Through the good will of the museum staff I was able to peruse the collection piece by piece. The few true antique stones

in the collection are practically meaningless and worthless too. (Furtwängler 1905:254)

Back in Philadelphia, Furtwängler's remarks could not have been more poorly received. His appraisal was not only undiplomatic; it was, in fact, completely unfounded. Having been unfairly exposed and betrayed, the Museum staff felt compelled to fight back. They turned immediately to the American ambassador in Berlin. They wanted the embassy to arrange for another German expert to come and examine the collection. For reasons unknown, this reevaluation never took place. It is likely, however, that Sommerville's circle of friends had been rallying against the deprecation of both the collection and its sponsor. In February 1909, University of Pennsylvania trustee Samuel F. Houston arranged for the entire Sommerville collection—including the "Buddhist Temple"—to be displayed anew. With this powerful gesture, the situation appeared to have been resolved.

But not forever. The presence of probable forgeries left the collection stigmatized. Thus, at an unknown date, the Sommerville collection was removed from permanent display and banished to the storeroom. The collection has remained there until this day. Only once since then, in 1956, would representative pieces of the collection be put on public display. This exhibition was accompanied by a short catalogue written by Cornelius Vermeule.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM SOMMERVILLE'S COLLECTION OF ANTIQUE AND POST-CLASSICAL GLYPTICS

Due to the circumstances recounted above, practically no one outside of the Museum knew of the treasures languishing in the vault. Nevertheless, the Sommerville collection is extremely rich. It boasts examples of virtually every type of engraved stone, and is representative of all historical periods. In addition to special types, such as amulets and talismans, the collection contains an abundance of post-classical cameos, in which the figures are carved in a layer above the background.

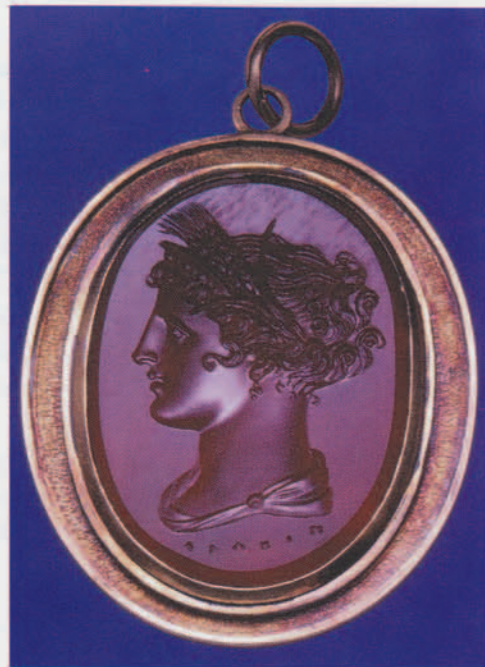


Fig. 9. Carnelian seal in a gold pendant setting. Demeter-Ceres, the Greek goddess of the harvest, is shown here with a *stephane* (a diadem fashioned from precious metals), and a wreath of ears of grain in her hair. On the edge of the seal, the artist's signature—Pichler—appears in Greek mirror-writing, running from right to left. 18th century AD.



Fig. 10. Scarab (in the Egyptian beetle-shape) made of green jasper. The god Herakles-Melkart is depicted with a bow and quiver in a position that signifies rapid movement. The raised club suggests that he is ready to strike. The relatively coarse nature of the engraving indicates the Punic origin of this seal. 5th century BC.



Fig. 11. Etruscan scarab made of sardonyx. A two-wheeled, three-horse chariot (*triga*) is shown along with its driver, who holds the whip and reins. An animal appears underneath. Here, the formal language used to represent the animals' bodies is sketchy, suggesting the beginning of the so-called *globolo* style. Chariot races were popular with members of the Greek nobility. Accordingly, this type of imagery was often used to signify noble status. Early 4th century BC.

Given the sheer extent of the collection, one might assume that a certain percentage were of poor quality. This is not the case. The cameo with the portrait of an Italian noblewoman in courtly dress (presumably a Medici princess) reflects the high quality of these pieces (Fig. 6). Even Furtwängler admired these cameos.

The same can be said of the antique cameos found in the collection. Here, a fragment from a very large, ornamental cameo dating from the early Roman Imperial period deserves special recognition (Fig. 7). The seated figure of Jupiter, who is shown with a scepter and aegis, is intact. This fragment is of very high quality and can hold its own beside famous pieces in European collections.

The largest part of the collection is comprised of intaglio engraved stones. These are pieces in which the image is incised or engraved. They were originally used as seals. Within this category, the post-classical pieces are numerous and of outstanding quality. Examples from the period of European Neoclassicism, that is to say, the 18th and early 19th centuries AD, demand particular attention. During this period, a classicism more closely modeled on the forms of antiquity was established. This was, perhaps, a reaction to the baroque richness of the post-Reformation period. Modern archaeological research, which began in the middle of the 18th century, also encouraged these stylistic developments by making authentic illustrative materials available.

The reflection of this movement can also be seen in the glyptic works of the period. Themes taken from ancient iconography appear overwhelmingly in these works. Excellent copies, as well as many first-rate forgeries, appeared during this time. The portrait of a bearded man with an oriental headdress must be placed in the latter category (Fig. 8). The portrait's subject is either a Persian satrap or Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priam. While the signature suggests that the artist was Dioskourides, a famous stone-cutter at the court of the Emperor Augustus, neither the style of the piece nor the theme fits into his oeuvre.

The best stone-cutters of the Neoclassical

period proudly signed their pieces. Today, their works are among the most sought-after in the art trade. Among the stone-cutters of the time, members of the Pichler family may be singled out for their skill and the pure classicism of their work. Here, a signed portrait of Demeter, modeled after a famous portrait appearing on a coin from the Greek Sicilian city of Syracuse, serves as a testimony to the Pichler artistry (Fig. 9).

The quality of these pieces is breathtaking. As such, the worth of the Sommerville collection quickly becomes clear. It is probably the largest collection of classicistic seals and cameos in the United States. The collection contains fewer antique seals: barely 500 pieces are ancient in origin. This number, however, is hardly surprising given the length of time that has elapsed since antiquity. One should also note that Sommerville had trouble competing with famous European collectors, who were able to send agents to antiquities markets in order to purchase the best pieces. Nonetheless, Sommerville was still able to acquire a large number of very interesting gems. A collection of this quality could no longer be assembled today. In this regard, the legacy of Maxwell Sommerville is also a genuine treasure.

ANCIENT STAMP SEALS: LASTING TESTIMONIES TO TIMES LONG PAST

Antique intaglio engraved gems were always stamp seals, used to seal documents, letters, and contracts. In most cases, the images on the seals were taken from mythological themes and subjects.

The ancient seals found in the Sommerville collection come for the most part from Italian regions. They represent the entire spectrum of ancient artistry, offering a view into varying elements of artistic practice occurring on the Italian peninsula. The oldest examples are seals in scarab form. These pieces follow the Egyptian model, in which the image is engraved into the underside of a beetle-shaped form. The Punic and the Etruscan seals (Figs. 10 and 11) are in this form. The examples shown here belong to the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

Seals were made from semi-precious stones—mostly carnelian, sardonyx, or jasper—which were



Fig. 12. Multicolored striped glass paste. The paste shows a helmeted figure with a lance on his shoulder. His shoulder is obscured by an oval-shaped shield featuring an image of a galloping horse and rider. The figure probably represents one of the two Dioscuri, who were the patrons of Roman cavalry men (*equites*). The seal is an imitation of a Roman coin dating from the end of the 2nd century BC.

Fig. 13. Carnelian stamp seal in a modern ring setting. A bearded soldier (possibly either a Roman general or a mythical hero) is represented with his helmet, armor, greaves, lance, and shield. In preparation for the sacrifice, the soldier holds a patera over a round altar which has been decorated with a garland. The sacrificial bull, whose head appears above the altar, can be seen in the background along with two more soldiers. Roman Republican period, 2nd century BC.



rare, expensive, and difficult to work with. For this reason, a great number of glass pastes were made during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. These are ancient copies made in glass from the original cut stones. They served as inexpensive surrogates for the more costly individual seals. Today, these pastes are often the only remaining representatives of the lost originals. Thus, they serve as valuable testimonials for archaeologists. Fortunately, Sommerville acquired a great number of excellent glass pastes (Fig. 12).

It is particularly exciting to come across a seal that has long been considered lost. A large carnelian depicting the sacrifice of a bull fits into this category (Fig. 13). In the center of the seal, a warrior stands with his armor, helmet, lance, and shield. Preparing for the sacrifice, he holds a patera (a shallow dish) over a round altar which

Many seals from the Roman Imperial period have also been preserved in the Sommerville collection. Those dating from the time of the Emperor Augustus (31 BC–AD 14) are of especially high quality (Figs. 14–16). Again, mythological themes predominate, providing the background for the somewhat chilly classicism of the Augustan period.

The 1st century AD saw a change in style. Fewer pictorial themes were employed, making room for a new, almost stereotypical imagery that would come to dominate the 1st to 3rd centuries AD. Representations of the deities were placed in the foreground. The figure of Victoria-Fortuna appears particularly often in pieces dating from this time (see Fig. 17). Fortuna, a fusion of many deities, embodied victory, happiness, and fertility. She holds her attributes: a rudder, a sheaf of

“It is particularly exciting to come across a seal that has long been considered lost.”

has been decorated with a garland. The sacrificial bull and two other figures are visible in the background. This piece was bought in Rome. In the mid-19th century AD, it was documented there as a plaster impression. It is a very rare example of a Roman Republican gem cutting from the 2nd century BC, and was thought to be lost until now.

A thorough examination of the seal suggests that it has been altered: the smaller figure in the left background appears to have been added in the early 19th century. In the course of this alteration, the warrior's shield was doubled, the lower portion of the lance was removed, and the background figure was given a leg in its place. Finally, the hatching on the ground and rim was added. These hatched elements were borrowed, anachronistically, from archaic scarab glyptics of the 6th century BC. They were intended to give this seal a particularly ancient appearance and to raise its market value. Today, we know more about these cases and are less likely to be caught unawares.

wheat, and a cornucopia. From a stylistic perspective, this image of Fortuna forms a bridge to the representational style of the later Imperial period. During this period, details were increasingly overlooked, and the most important parts of a given image were reduced to sketchy forms.

In Furtwängler's time, it was customary to characterize such works as “late and bad.” If, however, we look at two more pieces dating from the Imperial period, we can expose the short-sightedness of this assessment. These stones were, indeed, cut in a masterful and evocative style.

The first stone shows the portrait of an aristocratic Roman woman of the late Antonine period (ca. AD 170–180). The woman is dressed in rich clothing, and has styled her hair according to the courtly fashions of the day (Fig. 18). In terms of representational practice, the second piece goes one step further (Fig. 19). Here, the goddess Demeter-Ceres appears in a chiton, holding a cornucopia and a bowl of fruit. The representation of detail has been reduced to a



Fig. 14. Carnelian stamp seal in a modern ring setting. The seal is a bust of Hermes, who appears with a robe wrapped around his shoulders. A herald's staff (*kerykeion*) is visible at the nape of his neck, and two tiny wings at his temples. This image is a lovely example of the subdued classicism of the early Imperial period, which is also apparent in portraits of the Emperor Augustus and his family. Late 1st century BC–early 1st century AD.



Fig. 15. Multicolored striped glass paste with a depiction of Queen Omphale. The seductress of Hercules, Omphale wears his lion skin and carries his club as a sign of her power over him. Late 1st century BC.



Fig. 16. Stamp seal made of burnt gray carnelian in an ancient gold ring setting. This seal shows a sphinx resting with her wings spread; she holds an object between her front paws. Images of the sphinx were thought to ward off evil, and according to a long-held belief, these seals possessed magical properties. Most likely, this seal ring came from an ancient grave and was exposed to fire during the cremation process. 1st century AD.



Fig. 17. Carnelian stamp seal in a modern ring setting. Victoria-Fortuna, the goddess of good fortune, is portrayed here with her attributes: a cornucopia, a rudder, and a sheaf of wheat. Early Imperial period, 1st and 2nd centuries AD.




Fig. 18. Stamp seal of red jasper. In this bust portrait, a Roman woman appears dressed in a cloak over a robe. Her hair has been swept up, twisted above the temples, and fastened in a bun at the back. This hairstyle was in fashion during the age of the Empress Faustina minor (the wife of Emperor Marcus Aurelius) and Crispina (wife of Emperor Commodus). Last quarter of the 2nd century AD.



Fig. 19. Stamp seal made from carnelian. Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, is seen here with a sheaf of grain and a bowl of fruit. In this manner of engraving, images are reduced to their most essential pictorial elements. This style is characteristic of the later Roman Imperial period. 3rd century AD.

minimum, and upon first glance, the piece seems to have been made hastily. In actuality, the stone was engraved with the greatest expertise. All of the important pictorial elements have been rendered in a shorthand but precise representational form.

In treasuring pieces of this sort, Sommerville was clearly ahead of his time.

Only today can we appreciate the value of his legacy, and see the Sommerville collection in its true light. It seems to have taken more than a century for Maxwell Sommerville's wish, originally uttered in 1889, to be realized: "Then I may hope that an interest will be awakened in my subject, and many may enjoy years of pleasant research." 

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DIETRICH BERGES teaches classical archaeology at the University of Hamburg. He was editor of publications at the German Archaeological Institute in Rome. His scholarly work focuses on the areas of Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and North Africa. Currently, he is leading an interdisciplinary project team researching the ancient city of Tyana in Cappadocia (central Turkey). Dr. Berges also initiated the excavations at the sanctuary near Old Knidos, Turkey. In 1997–98, Dr. Berges was a Rodney S. Young Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. It was during this period that he conducted research for his publication on the ancient seals of the Sommerville collection.