

The Rokeby Lecture, 22 November 2018

Artful Impressions in the Archbishop's Cabinet

It was while visiting Trinity College, Dublin, in my then capacity as external examiner for its History of Art and History of Architecture modules, that I first heard of the Archbishop's Cabinet. This Library had contacted the Department in the hope that among its staff was someone with an established research interest in gem cabinets. The Armagh Public Library (as it was still called) possessed such a cabinet – in fact, it had *always* possessed one – and it was long overdue for assessment. Though offering great expertise on many things, TCD did not have such a person, but the Head of Department, Christine Casey, suspected, rightly, that I might be interested. Contact was made, and a visit was arranged. Some weeks later, bereft of documentation (Archbishop Robinson purposely left no personal archive) or any prior study on which to build an opinion, I was led into the Long Room, and with a promise of coffee and biscuits to come, was left alone with the Cabinet.



The Thomas Cooley Cabinets in the Library's Long Room

Before we proceed *into* the Archbishop's Cabinet, so to speak, I wish to provide a little cultural and historical context that will explain why such objects were created and why Archbishop Robinson thought it was appropriate – even essential – to install a cabinet, with all its fascinating contents, in his Public Library. Let me, for a moment, set aside the fact that this is a cabinet of gem *impressions* and what that means, and say something about the gems of Antiquity, and why they found their way into cabinets many centuries later.

The ancient civilizations of Egypt and the Near East, also of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, all knew how to cut figurative images onto semi-precious stones, and this practice became, in those civilizations (particularly in the Roman Republic and, later, Empire), a highly developed art form. It is possible to create an image on a stone by engraving, that is, cutting into the face of the stone; a technique called *intaglio*. Or, it is possible to scrape away the surface to leave the image standing proud; this is usually called *cameo*, though strictly speaking a cameo is created by working through differently coloured bands of stone, so that the image – a head in profile, for example – is not only left in relief but also stands out, in a contrasting colour to that of the background stone.



Gem impressions in Drawer K, Large Cabinet

This art form was used to decorate seals, brooches, and even larger objects, but far and away the commonest gem object in the ancient world was the

finger ring. Rings set with a figuratively-carved, semi-precious stone were worn as we wear rings today, though one suspects they were regarded in not exactly the same way. It seems that almost everyone in the ancient world who could afford one, wore one. Common, however, is a relative term. The Roman Empire had a population of roughly 60 million at its peak, one million of whom lived in the city of Rome itself. But that's at least 90% fewer than the number of people who live in the same area today. Nonetheless, there were many rings to be lost, many stones to fall out of their settings or to be discarded after being replaced. Fifteen hundred or two thousand years later, there were plenty lying under soil or rubble waiting to be dug up and fed onto a market that had sprung up after value had been perceived in these ancient discards. A very few of the most wondrous gems may never have been lost at all but passed on from one owner to another.



After Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Richard Robinson, Lord Rokeby, Archbishop of Armagh*
(1708-1794)

None of what ensued will make sense unless we remember that between five and six hundred years ago the civilization of Western Europe underwent a fundamental change in how it thought of itself and how it expressed itself. This historical process we now term the 'Renaissance'. It was partly characterized

by a new-found reverence for the achievements of the classical period and by attempts to retrieve and emulate as much of that civilization as possible. That desire was still strong in 1771 – a good 350 years after the dawning of the Renaissance.

Richard Robinson was not only a prelate, but also a patron and philanthropist, and his approach to those roles was framed in the classical model. As far as cabinet collections were concerned, their value, utility and appropriateness would, for him, have been validated by the example of previous collectors of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods. We very often notice the reverence that the Renaissance gave to large antiquities – to statues, sculptures, inscriptions, fragments of architecture, and to surviving classical buildings, without noticing the fascination for small antiquities – gems, coins and medals – that also characterized Renaissance collecting and scholarship. Interestingly, Renaissance portraits of connoisseurs often made a point of representing both, acknowledging antiquarian interest on all scales.



l-r: Titian, *Jacopo Strada* (1567); Lotto, *Andrea Odoni* (1527); Allori, *Young Man* (c.1562)

Renaissance Man looked for precedents, and it would have been of great reassurance to learn that not only were gems fashioned in the ancient world and given a place in daily life, but also in their own time they were recognized as works of art and the bearers of ideas. As small artefacts deserving of examination and contemplation, it was, therefore, appropriate to *collect* them. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder, essential reading in the Renaissance and still so in the late-eighteenth century, recorded that the first great collector of gems was one Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, who served as Praetor in 56BC. It is possibly not unrelated to his avid collecting that Scaurus was a venal man, only

getting off a charge of systematic bribery by hiring a remarkably effective advocate by the name of Cicero. A millennium and a half later, an interest in admiring and collecting gems still had to overcome the suspicion of an over-fondness for wealth and worldly delights.

Among the early advisers of Queen Elizabeth I were zealous Protestants who deplored the contemplation of rare and beautiful objects. One of them, John Bale, in happy anticipation of Elizabeth's accession to the throne, published *Acta Pontificum Romanorum* at Basel in 1558 – a biographical account of all the popes, which took pains to include instances of very ungodly behaviour.



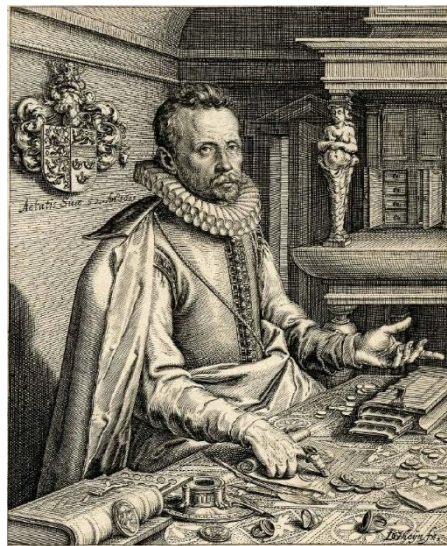
Cristoforo di Gerimia, bronze medal, *Pope Paul II*

Bale acquaints the reader with the lifestyle of Pope Paul II (1417-1471), who, 'being wholly addicted to ambition, roytousness and pleasure, spent the whole day in feasting [...] or in taking vp his money, or els in searching out and viewing olde coynes, images, or iewels'. As a collector of gems and cameos, this pope even outdid that contemporary of his, Lorenzo the Magnificent, already a third-generation gem collector having followed the examples of his father Piero de'Medici and grandfather, Cosimo. However, in this form of collecting even the cumulative achievement of three Medici generations probably fell short of that of the Gonzaga and Este dynasties, rulers of Mantua

and Ferrara respectively. Before even the beginning of the sixteenth century, therefore, there was a tradition of gem collecting, exemplified by the example of Europe's princes.

The first princely cabinet of gems to arrive in the British Isles was that acquired by Prince Henry (1594–1612), the precocious, eldest son of James VI & I of Scotland and England, whose early death in 1612 meant that it was the younger son Charles who would later succeed to the throne. Prince Henry's gem cabinet had formerly belonged to Abraham Gorlaeus, a Dutch antiquary, who had made it famous by publishing in 1601, *Dactyliotheca*, a book illustrating and describing its contents. Though preferable to having no images at all, printed engravings of gems could never be wholly accurate and could not capture relief adequately. These inherent limitations would eventually lead to the demand for impressions. Prince Henry's pioneering purchase (at least in British terms) was known to educated readers of the mid-eighteenth century (surely including Archbishop Robinson), largely thanks to Horace Walpole, who in his *Anecdotes of Painting* of 1762 wrote:

'To this library [that is, the one the prince built in St James's Palace] Prince Henry had added a large number of coins, medals, cameos and intaglios: the Dactyliotheca of Gorlaeus.'



Jacques de Gheyn II, *Abraham Gorlaeus* (1601)

At this point, I should explain that the Archbishop's cabinet is exactly that – a 'dactyliotheca', which is simply Greek for a collection of, primarily, finger rings, or at least of gems once set in rings. The term is still used today.

To conclude this hasty run-through of the origins of gem cabinets, I wish to say something about the fascination for the actual images that these cabinets retained for hundreds of years from the Renaissance through to the Neoclassical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The sheer

artistry was (and is) undeniable, and its appreciation was accompanied by that wonder at the ability of craftsmen to produce work on such a small scale that we express today. That small scale, however, serves a purpose. To gain anything from these objects, they must be examined closely, and one must spend time looking at them. Furthermore, it is almost impossible for two people to examine the same gem at the same time. It is as if they were always intended for solitary contemplation, which is how they were understood.

Lucy Countess of Bedford put it this way, writing in the 1620s (that is a full 150 years before Archbishop Robinson began collecting):

‘This curiositie of antiquities, though by some severe men censured, hath yet divers uses besides delight, not to be contemned: they are a kind of lay humanitye, teaching and inciting to morall vertue, as well and more safely then images among the new Romans, to the contemplation of divine mysteries [...] They carry in them a shadow of eternity.’



Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Richard Robinson, Lord Rokeby, Archbishop of Armagh*

As far as the art is concerned, every authentic classical design was of the greatest interest. How figures were posed, and how one figure was placed in relation to another – these compositional lessons were utterly accepted and copied. The classical pursuit of the ideal was also to be examined and followed. Symbolism was of enormous interest too. What does this bird represent? Why is that centaur carrying an urn? Today, visual theory talks much of denotation and connotation; of signs and signifiers. Archbishop Robinson may not have been familiar with such terms, but he understood the power of metaphor – as, I would venture, Christianity has always. The Catholic Church, incidentally, came to terms with pagan Rome remarkably easily during the Renaissance, as

did the Church of England and the Church of Ireland subsequently. So, it would have been the case that the Archbishop saw the gem cabinet as a complex study aid, entirely appropriate for a library such as his in Armagh; an eighteenth-century forerunner of a Web-linked work-station in a modern library.



The Large Cabinet, with Small Cabinet above; doors open.

Now, before I digressed, I left you with an image of me standing in front of the opened cabinet on my first visit here; that promise of coffee and biscuits already proposing itself as a potential displacement activity. Fortunately, I had been well trained for such challenges. Years before, at Oxford, as a postgraduate student starting out in the new (for me) discipline of Art History, I was led before painting in the Ashmolean Museum by my excellent supervisor, Christopher Lloyd, and asked to pronounce upon it. I was, of course, completely lost for words. So, he gave me this advice: 'Just begin by saying what you see. Plain description will coax out the ideas, and you will begin to see it for what it is.'

That has always remained with me, and it is advice that I passed on to my own students. I'm not sure it qualifies as what they call methodology these days.

On this occasion, I didn't speak my thoughts aloud, if only to avoid alarming the Library staff, but I did begin scrawling a series of lists and a sketch of the cabinet with arrows stabbing here and there. I was not attempting to describe the gem impressions individually – that would have taken months – I was simply feeling for the shape of a collection.

First, ignoring the flanking cabinets, as they did not contain any gem impressions and were probably not in their original relationship to what is now between them – possibly not even close, I concentrated on the furniture in the middle, which turned out not to be a single piece but two. One small cabinet was sitting on top of another, larger one.

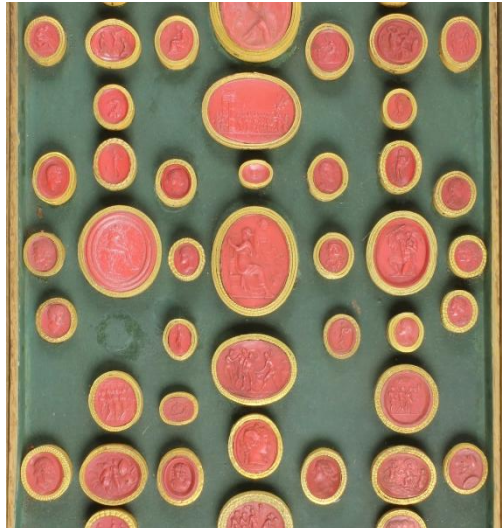


Small Cabinet, Drawer L2, containing white gem impressions

The top cabinet contained a set of beautiful, white gem impressions. Why were they separate? How did they relate to the rest? These were questions that I put to the back of my mind for later consideration.

So, delving into the main cabinet, this (broadly) is how my assessment went:

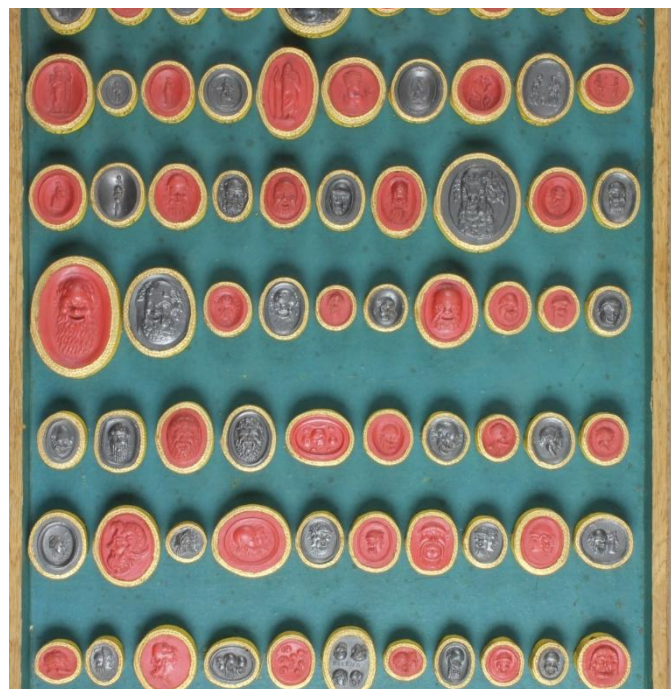
Left Side: in drawers labelled A to V, a two-colour collection in red and blue, every object numbered; numbers from 1 to 1207. Beneath these on the left side: an unlabelled drawer containing gem impressions numbered 1-46; all red.



Large Cabinet, Left Lower Drawer, Red Set (sulphurs)

Centre: in drawers labelled W to Z, and continued AA-QQ, a continuation of the two-colour collection, numbered 1208 to 2407. Beneath these: in a centre, unlabelled: bottom drawer, 30 white impressions; all except two numbered, but not placed in number order.

Right Side: in drawers labelled RR to ZZ, continuing AAA-FFF, the two-colour collection continued, numbered 2408 to 3426. Three further drawers (GGG, HHH, III), unused. Then, three drawers (KKK, LLL, MMM) containing orange impressions numbered 1 to 172. Beneath these, in an unlabelled bottom drawer, 35 gem impressions, all red-coloured.



Large Cabinet, Drawer RR, Red and Blue Set (sulphurs)

What to make of it all? It was apparent that there was more than one 'set' here. The principal set, clearly, was the two-colour set, comprising over 3,400 items. I had a good idea as to what they were, as, being impressions of originals, that is, actual gems sitting securely in the finest European collections, they were of a particular type – they were made by a specialist, London-based, dealer, a Scotsman called James Tassie. A few similar collections exist. The one closest in form to the Armagh cabinet that I have found, is now kept in the Walters Art Museum, in Baltimore, Maryland. This appears to have been the Tassie shop's own display cabinet, containing examples of its early stock.

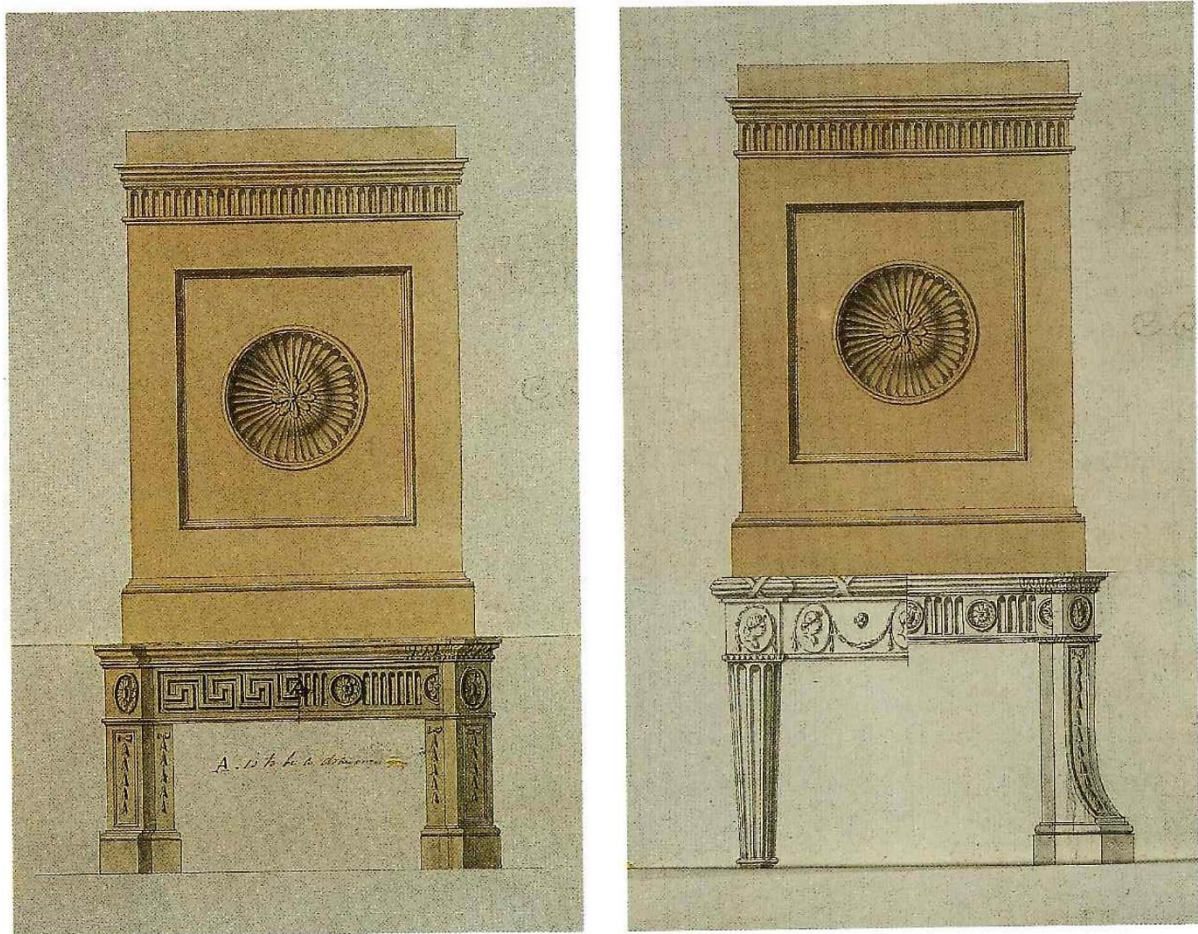


David Allan, *James Tassie* (1735-1799)

The Walters cabinet contains a full run of impressions up to No. 3,824. The first 3,106 correspond to all those listed in the Tassie catalogue of 1775 (which the Library possesses, and which would have been bought for use in conjunction with study of the Armagh gem impressions). Moreover, its first 3,426 items match the red and blue collection in the Archbishop's cabinet. It

perfectly fills its 60 drawers, suggesting that, at the time of Archbishop Robinson's purchase, Tassie may have had enough stock of master impressions to fill a cabinet of that size. It is notable that both the Archbishop's Cabinet and the Walters Cabinet have 60 drawers in three rows, each with an extra double-depth drawer at the bottom. The Tassie display cabinet (i.e., the Walters Cabinet) seems to have provided the basis for the Archbishop's planning of his own library cabinet. But, as we know, he decided to keep six drawers empty for his own purposes, probably buying fewer 'Tassies' than were available to him.

The Walters Cabinet's bare and functional appearance is in considerable contrast to the superb cabinet that Archbishop Robinson gave to his Public Library at, certainly, no small expense and inconvenience. The Archbishop seems to have commissioned his architect, Thomas Cooley, to provide designs for his cabinet furniture; these designs, with alternatives incorporated, have survived and are preserved in the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland.



Thomas Cooley, Designs for Archbishop Robinson's Cabinets, RIAI

Turning to such an architect for such a service would not have been considered odd in the Georgian Period, as the prevailing rules of classical proportion and decoration extended across both buildings or furniture. In fact, James Tassie himself would later engage the fashionable architect James Wyatt to design cabinets, duly constructed by Roach, a London cabinet maker, for those many impressions ordered by Catherine the Great of Russia. One supposes that the Tassie drawers (with their contents fixed in them) destined for Armagh were first delivered to an Irish cabinet maker provided with the Cooley designs, who would then have been able to ensure the case was a perfect fit for the drawers.

Larger, comprehensive Tassie collections are in Edinburgh, at the V&A in London, and at the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. But these date from the later years of the Tassie business, when James, assisted by his nephew William, had made some 16,000 impressions, having used agents at home and abroad to gain access to every original worth copying. This was in response to the order from Catherine the Great for precisely that (hence the collection now in the Hermitage). I have it on good authority that in St Petersburg it was possible, not long ago, to buy a replica of the large Tassie Medusa head in chocolate.

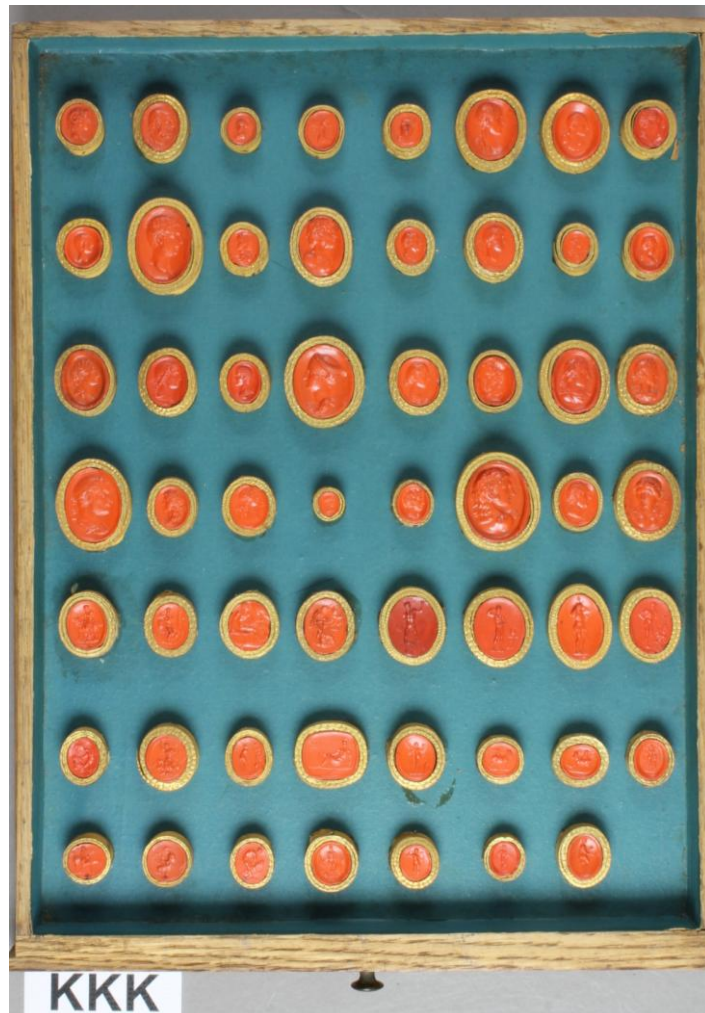


No. 1630, *Medusa Head*, Large Cabinet, Drawer DD. Copied from a cameo, itself copied from a bas-relief belonging to Cardinal Albani).

The Armagh, red and blue, main collection (the unusual two-colour mix being another example of the Archbishop's indulgence), though comprising a 'mere' 3,426 pieces, is not only a rare example of a collection formed from Tassie's entire early stock, but also remains, uniquely for such a purchase, I believe, in the very library for which it was ordered. But that, as has been shown, does not account for all the contents of the cabinet or, more accurately, cabinets. What we have here are several collections; their arrangement suggesting something about the order in which they were acquired; also hinting at the long-term interest in gems of Archbishop Robinson and, possibly, of his brothers.

It is important to understand that the Tassie pieces were not bought 'loose' and later glued into their positions in the drawers. This was all done on the Tassie premises. It appears to have taken some time for the order to be

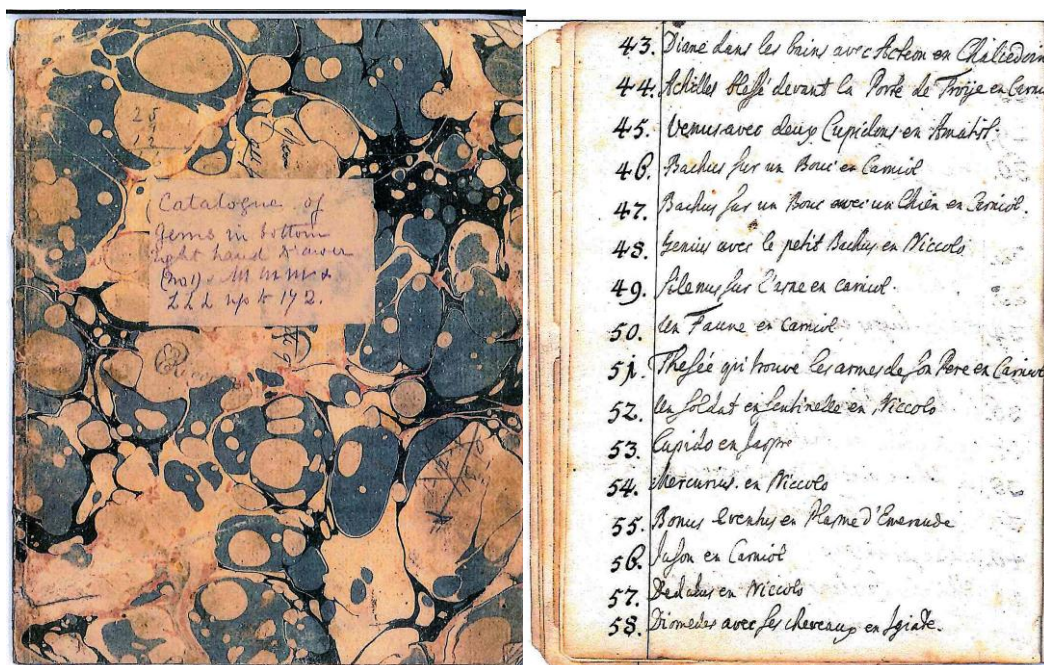
fulfilled, as we can see some variation in the richness of the colour mixed in with the molten sulphur. These impressions are, indeed, made from sulphur, chosen because it preserves the sharp cuts and smooth surfaces of the original, whereas a substance such as gypsum would not. The impressions are held protectively in wound coils of paper, gilded and textured for decorative effect.



Large Cabinet, Drawer KKK, Red Set (sulphurs)

As 60 drawers were ordered but only 54 filled with the Tassie pieces, it seems to me that the Archbishop was reserving space for some gem impressions that he already possessed and wished to give to the Library also. And we have the three drawers, KKK, LLL, and MMM, containing a distinct set of 172 very fine, orange impressions. Interestingly, a catalogue hand-written in French, which remains in the Cabinet, relates to this set and probably came with it. Its knowledgeable writer may have been the vendor who sold it or the agent who supplied it. There were French-speaking art advisers in the British Isles at this time, and we might suspect that rascally professor, Rudolf Erich Raspe to be the compiler, as he certainly wrote catalogues in French for James Tassie (he

was, incidentally, the author of the *Tales of Baron Munchausen*), but for the fact that he did seek refuge in England until 1775. An intriguing possibility that this set came out of France remains to be examined.



Anon. Catalogue of 172 Gem Impressions (Orange Set), hand-written, French.

I have not yet mentioned the Grand Tour, but it would be wrong not to make some reference to that extremely important educational journey which so many gentlemen and aristocrats from Northern Europe made in the eighteenth century. The Grand Tour owed its existence to the legacy of the Renaissance. Rome, the greatest (though ruined) example of classical civilization, was the aiming point, though there were many important stops on the way and on the way back. The enthusiastic Grand Tourist even sometimes overshot and visited Southern Italy and Sicily. Johann Zoffany's celebrated painting that commemorates the enthusiasm for the Tour – of the English in Florence entirely taking over the Tribuna of the Uffizi – is exactly contemporary with the first years of this Library. We do not know whether Richard Robinson undertook a Grand Tour. For a person of his station not once to have ventured across the Channel would have been something of an omission. But we have no record of any travels of his other than to Ireland. If he did not do so, his brothers certainly made up for it. His older brother, Sir Thomas Robinson made a Grand Tour and became absorbed in antiquarian studies, in collecting, and in architecture. His influence on Richard's taste was probably considerable.



Frans van der Mijl, *Sir Thomas Robinson (1703-1777)*: the Archbishop's elder brother, architect and Grand Tourist

Their younger brother Septimus spent even more time on the Continent as a professional soldier serving in the French army. Either could have given Richard, or left him, sets of gem impressions that had been made on the Continent.

Then there is another set, which I refer to as the Vermilion; originally divided between three lower drawers, with removable inner boxes held by studs. The contents of each drawer are separately numbered. This may have been regarded in the early years of the Library as a basic set, serving to facilitate study away from the cabinet. And, of course, with three detachable boxes, the same number of students would have been able to make this kind of study independently at the same time. This III-piece set may also have been owned by Archbishop Robinson (or donated by a friend) before the purchase of the much larger Tassie collection.

To further complicate the story, one of the three boxes of the Vermilion set was ousted from its lower drawer many years ago, maybe as many as two

centuries ago, and has been languishing ever since in the wide bottom drawer of the cabinet. It was displaced to make room for 30, white, Tassie gem impressions. These white impressions are not made of sulphur but of a vitreous enamel formulated by Tassie. They were the deluxe range among James Tassie's offerings. All the whites, whether in the small cabinet or in the lower drawer, are duplicates of the large red and white set of the large cabinet.



Small Cabinet, Drawer L5, containing white gem impressions

How do we explain this? Why should the Archbishop have provided the Library with duplicate gem impressions? The answer, it seems to me, is that the small cabinet and its contents were never intended for the Library. I suggest they were for the Archbishop's own use and enjoyment and were probably kept in the Archbishop's new Thomas Cooley-designed palace not far away. Thomas Cooley, we recall, provided the design for the Archbishop's large cabinet, and probably did likewise for the small cabinet also.

The 'whites' are all relatively large gem impressions; selected for show as much as for study. The small cabinet, presumably, would have been brought to the Library to supplement the large 'public' cabinet sometime after the Archbishop's death in 1794. But what about the 30 'whites' that are in, as it were, the 'wrong' cabinet? Why are they there? Of the several sets the large cabinet contains, these certainly arrived last of all. Four of them are double-

duplicates, matched even by other 'whites' that are in the small cabinet. None of the thirty bear catalogue numbers. For that reason, they are glued in position out of number order; their catalogue numbers apparently discovered afterwards, no doubt by comparison with the red and blue set; then inscribed on the base of the drawer, although two escaped identification and still have no accompanying catalogue numbers. All in all, it was a poor episode of curating. But we are, so to speak, stuck with it.

It is just conceivable that the Archbishop bought these 30 pieces on a later visit to Tassie's shop, believing that all of them would be additions to his collection, and not recognizing that he already possessed four of them. Another possibility is that these once belonged to his brother, Sir Thomas, and came into the Archbishop's possession along with some volumes from his brother's library – which are undoubtedly now here. In either of these hypotheses it is possible that the 30 wandering 'whites' were once in the small cabinet (which I suppose to be the Archbishop's private cabinet) along with the other 'whites'. If so, where? The obvious place is the last spare drawer, R5, which has since had its original base removed and replaced with glass, on which now sit seven odd gems. Was the original base ruined when these whites were removed; their glued holders broken off the base for them to be held individually between finger and thumb, then run along the hundreds of rows of red and blues until a match was found and the number obtained? We will probably never know for sure. What I am sure of, is that these drawers will yield many more secrets in return for our close attention – which, after all, is what the Archbishop's Cabinet was intended for.

Finally, on the matter of secrets, there is a cabinet of James Tassie gem impressions at the University of Göttingen. It has two rows of sixteen drawers, among which are two drawers of double height. They conceal a secret drawer in their interior, only visible after the main drawer has been extracted and turned around. It contains gems bearing erotic images. I do not know whether the Dean had heard about the Göttingen cabinet, but he was most insistent that I should explore every nook and cranny of the Archbishop's Cabinet. Well, I can report that no hidden drawers have been found, and I am, therefore, able to pronounce the Archbishop's Cabinet safe to examine by even those of a delicate disposition.

Tim Wilks