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Cutting Cameos Almost Lost Art

Louis Zoellner, Who Made
Largest Plaque, Uses Rifle to
Test Accuracy of Eyes
and Hands



Louis Zoellner



Right — Largest Cameo Ever Carved.
— Represents Two Years' Work by
Zoellner

Small Ovals Contain Cameos of Wash-
ington (right) and Lincoln (left).

By Natalie Stearns

WHAT do you know about cameos? If you are the average person, you know practically nothing about them. To you they are simply figures, usually busts, superimposed on glass, stone, shell or coral upon material of the same or different kind and color. You probably haven't even the faintest idea as to how these figures, or busts, were made.

Technically speaking, cameos are striated stone, such as agate or onyx or shell, carved so as to show the design in a layer of one color, with another color as background. And they are of two classifications—bas-relief, when the figure is raised; intaglio, when it is cut below the surface. Seals with which letter sealing wax was improved is a good illustration of the latter.

Cameos are to be bought today in the five-and-ten-cent stores, and in the most exclusive jeweler's establishments for fabulous prices. The one bears no relation to the other, being produced in entirely dissimilar ways. The ten-cent kind is a stamped product, punched out like washers by a machine. The other kind is the patient skilled product of one of the most delicate forms of the sculptor's art—and the making of them is fast becoming a lost art.

There was a day when the cameo was most popular as an article of jewelry. That popularity waned toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, and now is practically dead. Ninety percent of the cameos that make their occasional appearance as feminine adornment in this day and age are the manufactured, not the true, the carved cameos. Of the remaining ten percent probably nine is of the shell variety, a soft material which is chiseled.

Your true stone cameo is ground. A foot-pedal lathe drives the grinder, which is a nib of soft, Swedish iron on the end of a horizontal small rod of the same metal. The nib is dressed with diamond dust and oil. This mixture wears away both the tool and the stone as the latter is manipulated against the grinding point or surface by the cameo cutter. It is by this grinding process that the cutter produces bas-relief and intaglio facsimiles of persons and of scenes.

This grinding of a cameo is a most delicate piece of work. The design is first block'd out, then the blank rear surface is ground down to the color of the second layer of the stone. Follows the rounding of the design and the grinding in of the features. For eyes and facial lines a tool pointed as fine as a needle is employed. As the work progresses frequent impressions are taken on

wax to check its accuracy. The grinding of a wrinkle one-hundredth of an inch too deeply is sufficient to destroy the piece!

The true cameo stones come only in black and white and red layers. The black is carbon, the red iron, both fused in the making of the stone by Mother Nature over

eons and eons. They are obtained in Uruguay mainly, prepared for cutting in Germany and thence exported to the cameo cutters the world over, of whom there now are very few.

In Brooklyn is to be found one of the most skillful cameo cutters known to that maribund art. He is Louis Zoellner, seventy-five, of 700 Greene Avenue, a manufacturer of lighting fixtures for the past twenty years; before that a professional cameo carver, and still a cameo maker for his own amusement.

The famous diamond-studded cameo of President Garfield, which for years was on display in the jewelry store window of Dreifers, Manhattan, was a product of his skill. He also made, on order, cameos of President Hayes and Mrs. Hayes, William Cullen Bryant, Henry W. Longfellow, Peter Cooper, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt and Edwin Booth, the actor.

About a year ago Mr. Zoellner completed what is believed to be the largest modern cameo in existence, four inches long, two and one-half inches wide and with one-eighth of an inch as its greatest figure depth.

This largest of cameos is white, on a black background, depicting Cleopatra offering herself to Caesar in a large room, wherein other figures sit at a table in the background. To even the uninitiated it presents a remarkable artistic achievement, giving through its shading a perspective of depth inconceivable when the entire carved surface is remembered to be only an eighth of an inch deep. This perspective is imparted by the layers between the pure white upper and the pure black base of the stone, an area of varying grays. A group of persons carved at this gray depth appear to the eye to be persons seated in the rear of a huge room.

"I consider this my masterpiece," said Mr. Zoellner, displaying his Cleopatra plaque. "It represents two and a half years of effort. Some days I worked not more than half an hour on it, again I worked as many as eight hours in a day. When there are so many and such small, intricate details to be worked out, cameo grinding is a considerable strain on the eye and nerves. Then, too, I had to be extremely careful to be accurate in the different shading levels of the stone to provide the proper perspective. For instance, if I had carved too deeply the table at which the group of men are seated that table would have been a darker gray than the rear wall of the room. The wall would then have appeared to be nearer the foreground than the table. And beyond the wall, to the right, you will notice that there is a sort of alcove or

hallway which disappears in the distance. That distance is the jet black of the stone's base or the lower layer of the stone.

"It is only this making of cameos out of real hard stone that is really difficult. Shell cameos"—he shrugged his shoulders with a slight suggestion of disdain—"there's not so much to them. The shell is soft. You just chisel it away. Not much different than wood carving."

"Those colored glass things they sell in the stores for cameos—they're not so good. They're made with dies, and the models for the dies can be formed from wax or any other plastic material. Then you electroplate the model, and the metal deposited by the electric current on your model makes your mold or die. After that it's just a question of putting glass melted to putty plasticity into the mold, pressing it to shape and letting it cool."

In his little workshop, on the top floor of his home, Mr. Zoellner is at present working on a bas-relief bust of his wife, who died a few weeks ago, and an intaglio mythological scene of a god bringing fruits of the chase to his family. The bust is on a black-and-white cameo stone. The mythological scene is on a moonstone. He has done both bas-relief and intaglio work on every species of precious stone, including diamonds, rubies and amethysts.

"But I much prefer working on true cameo stones to gems," declares Mr. Zoellner. "The gems provide no such opportunity for imparting perspective as does the cameo of its two or more colored strata. In this shading for perspective one can bring out all of the artistic creation possible to the painter and the sculptor at one and the same time. I doubt if any of the hundreds of cameos I've cut ever gave me half the joy I derived from my 'Mari de Medici' bought by Charles Murphy, the Chicago collector. That was a red-and-white cameo and I was able to give the face a lifelike texture by working the stone to a proper shading. It delights me every time I think of the beautiful, lifelike, healthy, pink that I succeeded in putting into the cheeks."

Born in Oldenburg, Germany, in 1852, Mr. Zoellner attended school until he was sixteen. He was interested chiefly in drawing and remodeling, and desired to become an artist, though his father wished him to become a teacher.

Leaving school, he became an apprentice to a cutter of cameos and other precious stones, and continued at this work in various cities of Germany and Belgium and in Paris until 1871, when he emigrated to New York.

"I have never been much interested in anything but cameos," replied Mr. Zoellner to a query regarding hobbies. "I have done some painting and drawing. I do shoot a lot though—target practice. My sons tell me that I could still carry away a medal or two if I would enter some of the rifle and pistol competitions that are held now and then, but my shooting isn't for medals. I shoot because that tells me how true my eye and my hand are. If I can't make what my son calls a nearly perfect score, then I know I'm not good enough that day to do any really delicate cameo work."