

*Hans-Peter Bühler: Antike Gefässe aus Edelsteinen.* Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 1973. 85p., 40 plates. DM 98.-.

With the Hellenistic kingdoms conquered, and the enormous wealth and treasures of the Eastern rulers in Roman hands, Republican Rome underwent a transformation. The ruling classes, already accustomed to Greek civilisation, adopted a new style and a taste for Eastern luxuries. The new situation transformed even wellbred senatorial families into a category properly called "nouveau riches". A typical expression of this was the interest in foreign marbles and coloured building stones, in foreign precious stones to be cut into cameos and gems, and ultimately in exotic minerals for luxury items, such as cups, vessels and decorative pieces. The Roman elite immediately took a strong liking to minerals such as agate, onyx, amethyst, sardonyx and lapis lazuli, as well as to rock crystal already familiar from the Alps and from the Iberic mountains.

People were attracted not only by the colourful combinations of layers, but also by magic properties, said to be contained in the minerals: the wearing of an object made of onyx or sardonyx safeguarded the owner against scorpions and dangerous snakes; an object given to an attractive lady would arouse in her a love of the donor; a supplicant carrying a rock crystal when entering a shrine was certain of success. - No wonder that the precious minerals were so popular according to the Younger Pliny, our main source for the so-called "chalcedons".

Paying special attention to the influences of luxury on life in the early Empire the German student H-P. Bühler has done a great deal of work in this particular field, publishing his results in a doctoral thesis in 1966 ("Antike Gefässe aus Chalcedonen"). Some years ago (1973) the author published an illustrated catalogue "Antike Gefässe aus Edelsteinen" with comments and a condensed presentation of the theme. The book is pleasing to hold and to read, with illustrations of a high quality.

There are only 121 objects listed - carved vessels, cups, plates etc., - with an additional 7 known from various sources but now missing, which must be considered very limited material for serious study. Many of them are fragments only. The inclusion of the more important chalcedon gems and cameos alone would have made the study more substantial, but only vessels are discussed.

Of special interest are the author's comments on trade - and trade routes - together with his account of these attractive materials, mined in the peripheries of an world considerably enlarged by Alexander. The advance on Western India also opened the gates for luxuries of the kind earlier carried by caravans through the deserts but soon to pass along the Periplus-route, from Indian Barygaza to Hellenistic emporia along the Red Sea. Indian onyx was named sardonyx after a mountain ridge, probably in the province of Deccan? Strabon lists "Carthaginian stones" - carbuncles? - mined in the country of the Garamantes, in the middle of the Sahara. Rock crystal was explained as "frozen water" - mentioned by Diodorus - turned into ice not by low temperatures but by "divine fire". Agate was mined in Germania and fashioned into objects by local craftsmen, as shown by archaeological evidence from the Cologne-area.

The author also covers the mysterious "*vasa murrina*", an enigma commented on by learned people, but yet not explained. Roman authors agree upon a Parthian origin, as well as on the immense interest in these "myrrha-scenting" luxuries. No less an aristocrat than Nero was mentioned as a passionate collector. The British Museum houses a goblet of this kind.

The limited number of objects listed indicates an equally limited body of artisans and of exclusive customers: there is no comparison with, for instance, the overwhelming mass of objects from Apulian Greek goldsmiths or Campanian silversmiths, both reflecting the brilliance of the late efflorescence of Hellenistic life. Yet the exclusive field of precious stones, including gems and cameos, had some affinities with everyday handicrafts. Glass manufacture within the Roman provinces in Imperial times no longer stood for luxury, but constituted a trade that supplied the average family. In spite of this, artisans working with glass were able to turn out brilliant things of beauty: vessels and amphoras in an applied two-coloured technique well-known from the famous "Portland vase" (resembling sardonyx), or drinking vessels in the advanced "*vasum diatretum*"-technique (copying cut rock crystal goblets). It is not the exclusive originals but the adaptations in a plastic material which must be considered the true examples of a refined applied art, to be duplicated for numerous customers. Oddly enough the later category - the moulded or blown Roman glass - speaks out more strongly as an expression of pure Hellenistic art. Related, but yet far removed from these capricious luxuries in stone, are, for instance, the two glass amphorae in blue and white from Pompeii (location: "Tomba del vaso di vetro di blu") now in Naples, where the Golden Age of Augustus, mixed with symbols from Alexandrian lyrics, sparkles in joyful beauty - these private comments by a student of art history, sticking to the old ideals of Hellenism, should not be understood as criticism. Bühlers documentation of a little-known subject is well executed and his comments are of value. Again a piece in the immense puzzle, the lost culture of late Antiquity at its height, is put in place by a devoted scholar.

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*Ancient Art.* The Norbert Schimmel Collection. Edited by *Oscar White Muscarella*. Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 1974. 265 items. DM 98.-.

This book, properly an illustrated catalogue of selected objects, introduces a first-rate collection of ancient and classical art recently built up by means of private resources. Today such collections are usually found in the U.S.A., while European (French and British) collections of long standing are reported as dispersed or "non-existent". In spite of current heavy taxation the U.S.A. remains the country where it is possible to accumulate vast wealth, a prerequisite if one wishes to indulge a taste in classical or Near-East antiquities of some quality. No doubt Swiss traders and dealers are important intermediaries in the creation of private collections of this kind, as well as the suppliers of public collections