

FACE VALUE

By Diana Jarrett¹

“I have said that she had no face; but that meant she had a thousand faces” — C.S. Lewis

A recurring theme throughout time and one that we never tire of is discovering a face on jewelry items and carvings. It can be a human face, and often is. But animal faces full of whimsy or wistfulness find their way onto a carved object and has captivated collectors for eons. The human face, whether a mythological character, historical figure or a loved one becomes even more precious as the years tick on.

HERE’S LOOKING AT YOU

People may think of the cameo when they recall seeing a face portrayed on a jewelry item. And they are correct. Still, cameos initially were tableaux with storytelling import. For example, the largest known cameo from antiquity dating to 23AD, the *Grand Camée de France* is a sardonyx Roman story cameo illustrating 24 members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. There are faces on this large carving (31 x 26.5 mm) to be sure, but they are all engaged with one other, not gazing out to the viewer. It is the carved face staring out toward the observer that makes these faces so unforgettable.

The face has provided artisans throughout history with fascinating design elements when creating his or her work. To accomplish this, artists used all manner of carve-able materials, like agate, shell, wood, transparent gemstones, lava stone, jade, coral and more (Fig 1). Faces also appear frequently on vintage painted or enameled pendants and brooches.

Stamford, CT based antique and estate jeweler, Peter Suchy Jewelers has been offering exceptionally fine curated period jewelry for decades. Some of their choice items have artfully crafted faces on them, adding so much to their collectability (Fig. 2). They tell us, “We think their strong draw is because the pieces are usually unique and have an artisan feeling to them.”

THE MATERIAL IS ALSO THE MESSAGE

Materials used in creating carvings of faces may have been carefully selected to create some impact with the piece. For example, one can find ancient carvings of the head of Christ

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rendered in amber. The intensely deep gold coloration enhances the facial expression with a sense of passion, foretelling the agony on the cross and conveys greater emotion accompanying the carving. There are a few such ancient amber carvings of Christ still in existence, mostly in Europe. But New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibits a splendid example. A medallion with the Face of Christ, c.1380 – 1400, origin Poland, is carved from richly honey-colored amber (Fig. 3). The museum says of its piece, "this luminous image seems to echo medieval prayers that praise the Face of Jesus, shining with the semblance of divine splendor." Amber was an important luxury trade item in medieval Europe. According to the Met, "Amber carvers made rosary beads and, occasionally, for princely patrons, statuettes of saints or holy images like this one."

THEN AND NOW

Modern artists still find the carved face to be an irresistible subject matter. Well known carver Gareth Eckley, of *Portrait Cameos* is widely recognized for capturing some of life's most iconic moments in original cameos for his clientele. While his customers come from all walks of life, he is celebrated for his carved gray agate and freshwater pearl brooch depicting Pocahontas which was given to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on her royal visit to Virginia in 2007.

Eckley has carved the faces of beloved children, cherished wives and grandmothers, and even captured mother and child moments after a baby's birth. One very special and private carving commissioned by a client depicts his child born premature, and having lived for just minutes after birth. That custom piece was a tough assignment he says, since he wanted to be sure he got it just right for the grieving family.

Eckley also claims, "I love carving portrait cameos of older people." There is so much character on their faces, he finds. "Their personality really shows in their portrait photos." Eckley explains how he used a special technique to enhance the carving of an elderly grandmother (Fig. 4a, b). "The face and background were given a satin finish, he points out. "I polished her clothing and the pearls. This creates a wonderful contrast that really brings the portrait to life."

THAT ETERNAL SUBJECT MATTER

"Behind every mask there is a face, and behind that a story." — author Marty Rubin. As long as there are imaginative artists looking to convey personal expression through their work, there will be artists carving a face—a famous one, or one known only to its collector, or even that lovable face of a companion animal (Fig. 5). ▼

Figures



Figure 1. Carved lemon quartz moon face pendant with citrine accents; Private Collection.



Figure 2. Stylized vintage carving of face in jade; Courtesy Peter Suchy.



Figure 3. Christ carved in amber, c.1300-1400AD; Courtesy New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 4a, b. Gareth Eckley carves a beloved grandmother cameo from a portrait of her:
Courtesy Portrait Cameos.



Figure 5. Lemon jasper carving depicts a pet chimp; Courtesy Crazy Whiskers Gemstones.