

Matthew Holder

European Works of Art & Sculpture





‘...because she had a ready and inventive wit, she began to carve peach-stones, which she did so well and with such patience that they were most unusual and marvellous to see...for while she lived they regarded her as one of the greatest miracles of nature in our times.’

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) on Properzia de Rossi in his c.1550 publication; ‘The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects’.



Verso

2.4cm



2cm



Recto

An important collection of thirteen peach stones carved to each side with the heads of Roman Emperors and classical scenes.

From the circle of Properzia de Rossi (1490-1530).

Italian, 16th century.

Approximate measurements of each peach stone:

Height - 2.4 cm

Width - 2 cm

Thickness - 1.1 cm

1a



2a



3a



4a



1b



2b



3b



4b



5a



6a



7a



8a



5b



6b



7b



8b



9a



10a



11a



12a



9b



10b



11b



12b



13a



13b



These intricately carved beads with the profile portraits of the Roman Emperors are inspired by the bronze sestertii of ancient Rome. The sestertius was an ancient Roman coin of which the value was one quarter of a denarius. The initials 'S.C' are for Senatus Consulto which attested to the control of the Roman Senate, who had the authority for the designs on bronze coins rather than the silver ones which came under the authority of the Emperor.

With the exception of peach stone number 3a, they faithfully reproduce Roman sesterces from the first two centuries after Christ.

The heads are respectively inscribed:

1a - P. SEPTIMIUS. GETA. CAESAR

2a - IMP. M. DID. IULIAN. AVG

3a - IMP.... M. AVRELIVS. ANTONIVS. AVG. P. P

4a - IMP. CAES... M. OPEL. SEV. MACRINVS. AVG

5a - A. VITELLIVS. GERMAN. IMP. AVG. P. N TR

6a - HADRIANVS AVG. COSIII. P. P

7a - L. SEPT. SEVERVS. AVG. P. IMP

8a - NERO. CLAVD. CAESAR. AVG. GER. IM. TR. P. IMP. P. P.

9a - IMP. CAESAR. NERVAE. TRAIANIO. AVG. GER. DAC. P. M. TRP. COS V. P. P.

10a - TI. CAESAR. AVGVSTI. I. IMPERATOR

11a - COMMODOVS. ANTONINVS. AVG. PIVS. T. P. P

12a - C. CAESAR. AVG. GERMANICVS. PON. M. TR. POT

13a - CAESAR. IMP

The peach stones are conceptually and stylistically related to carvings attributed to the early 16th century, female sculptor Properzia de Rossi (1490 - 1530). Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) records Properzia de Rossi in his book of c.1550, 'The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects', in which she was the only woman in his first edition and one of four women in his second edition of c.1568.

Vasari states that she studied under the Bolognese artist and engraver Marcantonio Raimondi (1480 - 1534) and that she sculpted in miniature, first creating fine works of art carved from apricot, peach and cherry stones. She later progressed to larger sculpture in marble including religious reliefs and portrait busts.

A large pendant of filigree silver with the arms of the Grassi Family can be found in the collection of the Museo Civico Medievale (Bologna), it is set with thirteen carved peach and plum stones by Properzia de Rossi.

The crest commissioned by the Grassi family is a highly important example of Properzia de Rossi's work as a fruit stone carver, as very few artworks can be firmly attributed to this once prolific female sculptor of Renaissance Italy. The thirteen peach and plum stone carvings set within the coat of arms depict saints with their attributes, framed by text revealing their identities. The sculptor of the peach and plum stones is identified as Properzia de Rossi, however the silversmith of the filigree eagle is unknown. The style of carving, composition and font on the Grassi peach and plum stones show remarkable similarities with the peach stones illustrated in this catalogue.

A set of carved peach stones possibly by the same hand is recorded in the collection of Count Domenico Bonamini - Pepoli di Pesaro. The manuscript is in the Prometheus Library in Rome. One of the stones is carved with the bust of 'Clavdivs Caesar Avgvstvs C. Vero' and inscribed with the initials 'S.C', no 5 as listed in an 1877 manuscript. A remarkably similar set of twenty three carved nutshell beads representing sestertii were exhibited by Colnaghi, in their catalogue; **OBJECTS FOR A 'WUNDERKAMMER'**, 10 June to 31 July 1981. P & D Colnaghi & CO LTD, 14 Old Bond Street, London, W1. The artist most likely responded to the commission of a collector of Roman coins who provided them with the models to reproduce. It is not inconceivable that our examples once formed part of the Colnaghi set.

A cherry stone attributed to Properzia de Rossi can be found in the collection of the Museo degli Argenti (Florence). It is carved with one hundred miniature heads and is set within a gold and enamel pendant. A similar pendant exists in the collection of the Grünes Gewölbe (Dresden). Another artwork by Properzia de Rossi is a marble relief of Joseph and Potiphar's wife carved for the Cathedral of San Petronio in Bologna, c.1525.

It is hardly necessary to emphasise the scarcity of comparable examples preserved in public collections or which have passed through the art market. This collection of carvings represent a highly significant discovery, particularly with the continuing reassessment and academic study of the importance of female artists within the canon of art history.



The arms of the Grassi Family, c.1510-30.
Museo Civico Medievale, Bologna

Details of the peach and plum stones on the Grassi coat of arms.





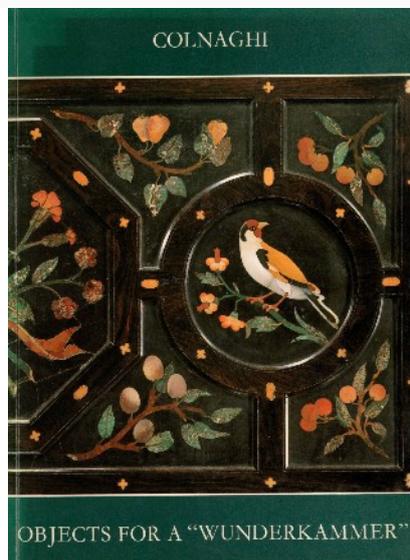
104 A STRING OF TWENTY-THREE BEADS CARVED WITH IMAGES TAKEN FROM ANCIENT ROMAN SESTERTII.
Germany, early XVIth century.

Plumstones.

The designs on this string of beads carved on nutshells (a sort of secular rosary, perhaps the equivalent of “worry beads”) are taken from bronze sestertii of ancient Rome; the initials “S.C.” (“Senatus Consulto”) appearing on most of them show that the designs were bronze coins, the authority for striking which was vested in the Senate, whereas the striking of silver and gold coins was the prerogative of the Emperor.

Dimensions: (Each bead) 2.5 × 2 cm approximately

R. F.



R.F. - Richard Falkiner

















































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First page image;

Properzia de Rossi; 'The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects'.
By Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), circa 1550.

Images of the Grassi Family crest were taken by Matthew Holder

Images of the peach stones are property of Matthew Holder

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