



## GEMMA AUGUSTEA

After a carved double-layered Arabian onyx attributed to Dioscurides or a disciple  
 Rome, Italy; ca. 10-20 AD | *The present cast*: probably Austria; late 19th or early 20th century  
 Brass/Bronze; 225.4 x 190.5 mm

### *Provenance:*

Antiques dealer (Italy)

Modern cast. Dark brown-black patina. Minor loss to the patina due to rubbing along some areas of the relief. Traces of rough filing to the reverse as well as the presence of a former suspension mount along the center-top. Residue present from former tape applied to the upper central portion of the reverse.

The present plaque reproduces one of the most significant surviving masterpieces of classical gem engraving, the *Gemma Augustea* (Fig. 01). Along with the *Tazza Farnese* and the *Great Cameo of France*, the *Gemma Augustea* has been one of the most historically pursued and revered works of its kind throughout history.

The *Gemma Augustea* was the political and cultural product of the Augustan court in classical Rome, believed to have possibly been commissioned by Caesar Augustus (63 BC-14 AD). Its connection with Augustus has resulted not only in its namesake but also its attribution with Dioscurides, Augustus' esteemed gem engraver.

The iconography of the carving is complex and remains the subject of debate, though the common understanding is that the relief portrays scenes from two different events, divided by its upper and lower registers. The lower register portrays a Roman triumph with the erection of a victory trophy while the upper register depicts the unification of the Roman Empire under Augustus whose contemporaneous portrait is shown enthroned, receiving an oak leaf crown.

After a presumed residence in Byzantium, the *Gemma Augustea* is thought to have reached Toulouse, France after the Crusades where it is first inventoried in the treasury of the Church of St.

Sernin in 1246. For a brief period the gem appears in the possession of the Castellani banking family of Florence in 1447. Following a legal dispute with the family the gem was subsequently returned to Toulouse in 1453.

In 1470 the important collector, Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo, 1417-71) made an attempt to purchase the *Gemma Augustea* from the church, offering a large sum and a fully financed bridge for the Garrone River, indicative of the value placed upon it at the time. Later disputes occurred between the church and King Francis I (1494-1547) who was able to gain control of the *Gemma Augustea* in 1533, intended as a gift for Pope Clement VII (Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici, 1478-1534). However, due to issues of timing or perhaps personal interest, the *Gemma Augustea* was not delivered and disappears from the Parisian inventories of Fontainebleau by 1591 after the region was looted during the Huguenot Wars.

The *Gemma Augustea* later appears in the posthumous inventory of the important collector, Rudolf II (15520-1612), apparently acquired for 12,000 ducats in Venice, a center for the antiquities trade. Since Rudolf II's acquisition, the *Gemma Augustea* has remained an important part of the Austrian imperial treasures now forming part of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Inv. ANSA IX a79).





Fig. 01: *Gemma Augustea*, attributed to Dioscurides or a disciple, Rome, Italy, ca. 10-20 AD; Kunsthistorisches Museum (Inv. ANSA IX a79)

The present author has not located any other bronze casts of the *Gemma Augustea*. Its character suggests it to be a late 19th or early 20th century cast, probably taken from a plaster mold of the relief. While such molds would have reasonably been employed for reproductions of this type during the vogue of cameos in the late 19th and early 20th century, it does not explain the lacking ornamental volute featured on the current frame of the *Gemma Augustea*, unless decidedly excised from the mold for casting the present relief. The gilt silver ornamental volute featured on the gem's current frame was added in 1750 while its gold trim setting was added in 1666, reproduced on the present cast. If not intentionally removed from the mold in modern times then the present cast may have been taken from an old plaster cast made between 1666 and 1750. Plaster casts of the *Gemma Augustea* are noted in Florence, made while briefly in possession

of the Castellani family. Later casts were likely made as Peter Paul Rubens, also a collector of classical gems, used a plaster cast for his sketch of the object, ca. 1621. His son, Albert, later wrote a treatise on the *Gemma Augustea* in 1665 and also made an engraving of it.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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