

A HANDFUL OF GEMS.

By EDWARD L. CUTTS.

THE beautiful translucent colours, the durability and the rarity of precious stones have attracted the admiration of men—and especially of women—from the earliest times of Egyptian and Babylonian civilisation. At a very early period the art of engraving them was introduced. In those days every man used a seal; and people who could afford it procured a precious stone engraved in intaglio with some device as his seal. Artists of the highest order took kindly to this miniature sculpture on a precious and indestructible material, and produced not only original designs but also copies of the most famous statues of deities and heroes, and the most popular works of the great sculptors, on a surface the size of a filbert, and with a technical skill hardly inferior to that of the great sculptors whose works they copied. A fine gem, therefore, combines beautiful and precious material, with the highest art, in the smallest compass, and is practically indestructible. At periods of great luxury and refinement there has been a rage for them. Roman Emperors and Renaissance Italian princes made great collections of them; and in modern times national museums have contended for the possession of these exquisite treasures.

The British Museum possesses about 2,000 of them. They are freely open to the curious public. To the few who are capable of appreciating them, the mere cursory inspection of the collection is an epoch in their æsthetic education. The man of taste will do well to become the possessor of the finest examples of them, which he may do at the cost of a few shillings. For let it be understood, that in the case of the intaglios the gem is simply a mould for making casts; and the cast is the finished presentation of the artist's idea. By the by, why does not the British Museum, or the South Kensington Museum—it is more in its line of things—make a collection of casts of all the fine gems from all the collections?

Photography gives the only adequate

representation of the casts, and is capable of making these beautiful works of art known to all the world. Here are a few from the British Museum collection. They are all of the best periods of Greek and Roman art extending from about 400 B.C. to the decline of Roman art; and they are selected as among the finest specimens of their period.

No. 1 is a cornelian, known as the "Woodhouse" gem, because once in the collection of a gentleman of that name. Its date is probably early in the fifth century B.C., and it is one of the finest—perhaps the very finest—example of Greek gem engraving which has come down to us. The subject is a youthful figure, seated, playing upon a harp of archaic triangular shape. It admirably reflects, with a little severity, the style of the famous sculpture of the Parthenon frieze.

No. 2 is an archaic example of a rather large class of subject, on which a lion is represented as attacking cattle or deer.

We get a series of subjects of Greek and Roman mythology. No. 3 is a head of Zeus, noble in conception and of the highest skill of execution. No. 4 is a noble head of Apollo wearing the chlamys; the symbols in front of him are the bow and arrow. No. 5 is identified as a head of Herakles by the symbol of the club introduced behind; but it is probably the portrait of some Greek prince, and might be of Philip of Macedon himself in the character of Hercules. The stone is a large and beautiful blue beryl, and the engraving is worthy of the precious stone. The style of art is the purest Greek, and of the highest excellence. The inscription ΓΝΑΙΟC is of later date, and probably indicates that the gem had belonged to one of the family of the Scipios with whom Gnæus was a frequent prenominal. No. 6 is a head of Esculapius in the best style of Greek art; the dignified expression of the features and the masterly treatment of the hair and beard are



NO. 1.



NO. 2.



NO. 3.



NO. 9.



NO. 4.



NO. 5



NO. 6.



NO. 7.



NO. 12.



NO. 8.



NO. 10.



NO. 11.



NO. 13.

admirable. The gem is a famous one; it belonged to Lorenzo de' Medici, and in later times to Voltaire. There was no portraiture in Greek gems before Alexander the Great. No. 7, Socrates, and No. 8, Plato, are therefore not contemporary, but they are probably of not much later date, and may be copied from

inferior in style and defective in subtle indication of character. It may be a work of later date. It might even be of the time of Augustus, who is known to have used a head of Alexander as a seal. No. 10, a very fine head, with a bandeau, terminating in front with horns, and with the letters ΣΕΑΕ beneath, would seem



NO 14.—CAMEO OF AUGUSTUS.

authentic contemporary monuments. Alexander gave to Pyrgoteles the exclusive right of engraving his portrait. No. 9 is a fine portrait of Alexander as Helios, notable for clearness and vivacity of expression; but compared with the marble head of Alexander in the British Museum, which is admitted to be the best-known portrait of the great conqueror, this is

from these indications to be Seleucus, the general of Alexander, who founded the Syrian monarchy, but that the face does not resemble his coins.

The gems afford a gallery of portraits of the notable persons of the early Roman Empire, of which a few are here given as specimens. No. 11 is a very fine head of Julius Cæsar,

No. 12 of M. J. Brutus, No. 13 of Hadrian.

The carving of designs in relief upon precious stones was practised at a very early date, but did not become general till about the fourth century B.C. Onyx, sardonyx, and nicolo were the stones most used for these cameos, having layers of different colours, which the engraver ingeniously used for different parts of his design.

No. 14 is the famous cameo of Augustus, one of the most remarkable of Roman gems. It is carved in sardonyx of three layers of colour. The subject is Augustus, his bust covered with the Ægis. The face is in pearly white, the hair and

Ægis in shades of drab and brown. Originally the hair was bound with a laurel wreath. At a subsequent period this wreath was turned into a jewelled diadem, possibly to convert the Augustus into a Constantine; at the beginning of the eighteenth century the present cameos and jewels were inserted to replace the originals which were lost.

No. 15 is a head of Medusa in half relief carved in a dark amethyst two-and-a-half inches in diameter. There is nothing to compete with it in splendour of material, grandeur of style, and excellence of workmanship; it was probably intended to ornament the imperial cuirass.



NO. 15.—MEDUSA.