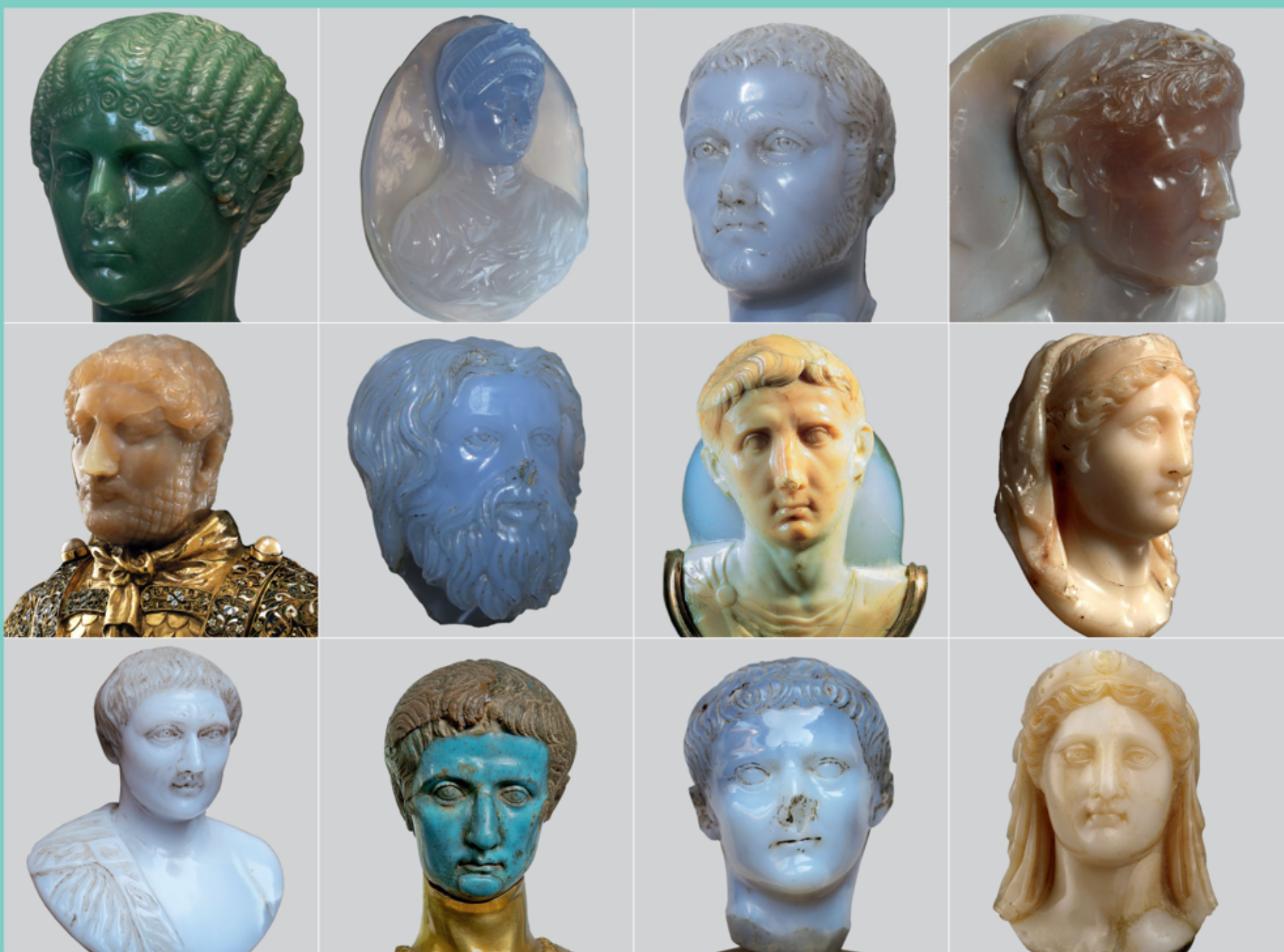


# PRECIOUS PORTRAITS

Dario  
Del Bufalo



Allemandi

DARIO DEL BUFALO

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Small Precious Stone Sculptures  
of Imperial Rome

ENGLISH EDITION INCLUDING ITALIAN TEXTS

UMBERTO ALLEMANDI

DARIO DEL BUFALO

# PRECIOUS PORTRAITS

SMALL PRECIOUS STONE SCULPTURES  
OF IMPERIAL ROME

PICCOLE SCULTURE IN PIETRE PREZIOSE  
DELLA ROMA IMPERIALE

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*I would like to express my warmest thanks to:*

Raniero Gnoli, Daniela Porro, Arianna Pujia, Frieda Tchacos Nussberger, Jonny Tomasso,  
Massimo Listri and all the Public and Private Collections who provided  
pictures and informations about these art masterpieces

*The Author thanks all the institutions, museum and collectors, listed below,  
for their kindness and assistance in realizing this volume*

Aachen, Cathedral, Treasury  
Alexandria, The Graeco-Roman Museum  
Aquilaia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale  
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Geneva, George Ortiz Collection  
Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire  
Geneva, Phoenix Ancient Art  
Gotha, Schloss Friedenstein  
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Istanbul, Archaeological Museum  
Izmir, Archaeological Museum  
Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Rockefeller Archaeological Museum  
Juritzky-Warberg Collection  
Kansas City, The Ferrell Collection  
Köln, Erzbischöfliches Diözesanmuseum  
La Spezia, Museo Civico Amedeo Lia  
Leo Merz Foundation  
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Leeds, G. Tomasso Collection  
Liverpool, National Museum  
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London, Victoria and Albert Museum  
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Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection  
Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum

Merida, Museo Nacional de Arte Romano  
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Rome, Musei Capitolini, Centrale ACEA Montemartini  
Rome, Musei Capitolini, Medagliere  
Rome, Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia  
Rome, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma  
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Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Musée des Antiquités Nationales  
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Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung  
Vienna, Naturhistorisches Museum  
Washington, Dumbarton Oaks  
Washington, Smithsonian Institution  
White-Levy Collection  
Zaječar, National Museum  
Zaragoza, Museo Provincial, Sección de Arqueología

# Preface

**I**n a very recent book, *Murrina Vasa*, Dario Del Bufalo discussed and, in my opinion, finally settled, an old and thorny (indeed centuries-old) issue, i.e. their material: Del Bufalo has shown that it is simply Agate, dyed with caramel.

This new book of his, always concerning hard stones, is dedicated instead to small portraits (mostly heads of emperors, notable personages, deities, etc.) sculpted in ‘tuttotondo’ in Agate, Rock Crystal, Jasper and other stones.

There are hundreds of objects of this kind, mostly dating back to the late Roman Republic, to the Augustan and Julio-Claudian age – although they most certainly were also found in the Hellenistic world – which Dario Del Bufalo has been able to find in various museums and public and private collections.

Of these luxury objects, the author not only discusses the materials and stylistic elements but also their likely function and intended use (sceptres, crowns but also bed posts and other furniture or parade horse decorations, etc.).

This new study by Dario Del Bufalo, in conclusion, is another original and important contribution to a hitherto little-studied ancient sumptuary art.

RANIERO GNOLI

# Foreword

The title *Precious Portraits* means that in this book we have dealt with all that is portrayed in precious stone material and since these stones are rare, hard and costly, the portrait is therefore small.

Being semi-precious stones and Pietradura, we have ruled out Alabaster from the repertoire since this is a marble and a very soft one as well, of easy workability and terrible durability.

There are extremely ancient examples, such as Babylonian, Egyptian or even protohistoric images – such as the *Venus of Willendorf*, 32,000 years old – that bear witness to the ancestral need of man to portray minute images, perhaps because they needed to be ‘portable’ and publicly displayed. These objects created for religious or personal reasons or for political propaganda might be made of stone or other precious materials for the time, such as Ivory, Obsidian, etc.

These idols were produced by almost all civilisations of the world, even without any contacts between these cultures.

Many historians and scholars believe that this type of technique falls under the “sumptuary arts” or associate it directly to glyptic art.

I would simply call it Small Precious Sculpture or Miniature Sculpture, as that’s what it actually is.

In this work we will examine small sculpture especially from the Roman period, with a few Hellenistic or ancient Middle Eastern digressions.

I don’t think that ‘tuttotondo’ Miniature Sculpture can ‘directly’ fall under glyptic art, which etymologically refers to the engraving or carving of semi-precious stones. I also believe that it cannot ‘always’ be considered a sumptuary art, which mostly concerns the use of precious metals to produce luxury objects, whereas Small-sized Precious Sculpture chiefly played an institutional, political or religious role.

Nevertheless, there is some affinity between Small Precious Sculpture and glyptic art, owing to the cameos.

These have a completely different construction technique, as cameos are bas-reliefs (very low) whereas small sculptures are in ‘tuttotondo’ and, only in some cases, they are made in alto relief (very high).

I therefore devised a rule to establish the boundaries between the cameo technique and the Miniature Sculpture technique.

I think the best system might be to consider the Cameo as a ‘very low relief’, a bit like the technique for Numismatic or Medals, while should be considered a work of Small Precious Sculpture also when we examine a ‘very high relief’ for example in a portrait and the face is portrayed with at least half the volume of the face in three dimensions and with the personage’s ears coming out of the background clipeus, when portrayed frontally.

I do not expect to solve the problem so easily but at least I have tried to apply some criteria to this research, nor does this book claim to cover exhaustively such a vast subject. I therefore believe that these premises may at least be a starting point.

DARIO DEL BUFALO

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