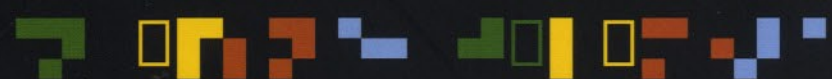
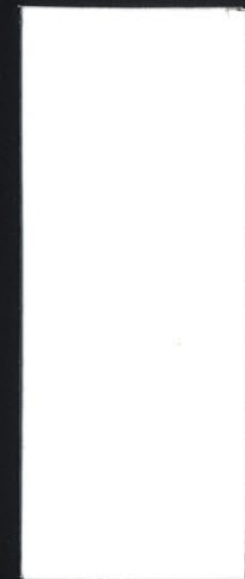




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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART
2011 SPRING · SUMMER · AUTUMN · WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS – COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

DACTYLIOTHEQUES

The restoration of the seven dactylitheques preserved in the Collection of Classical Antiquities (the work of Enikő Csuzi and Eszter Varga) began in 2010; the exhibition presents the first results of this project. In antiquity, the word *dactylitheca*, the Latin expression derived from the Greek words *daktylios* (ring) and *theke* (casket) had two meanings: on the one hand it was used to denote jewellery boxes containing rings, on the other it referred to a collection of rings decorated with engraved precious stones, or – more widely – a collection of engraved stones (gems, intaglios). Roman tradition preserved their memory since the 1st century BC, as dactylitheques acquired by the leading political figures of the time (including Pompeius and Iulius Caesar) were publicly displayed in Rome. In post-antique times the word re-appeared only much later, in 1601, in the title of an album (*Gorlaei Antwerpiani Dactylitheca*) presenting the collection of rings with stones of Abraham Gorlaeus (1549–1608), an Antwerpen-based antiquities collector. The album

was illustrated with engravings, one of which showed, on the collector's table, little chests of drawers, made in the shape of books, and capable of containing smaller gem collections. The tall chest of drawers, which is visible in the background, was used to hold larger collections. Gorlaeus made the two ancient meanings of the word dactylitheque topical again by introducing a third meaning: after this, up until the middle of the 18th century, the word denoted gem collections published in albums illustrated with engravings. One of these was the *Dactylitheca Smithiana* in 1767, presenting the gem collection of Joseph Smith (1682–1770), patron of art, art collector and British consul in Venice. A noteworthy distinction between the two publications lies in their manner of illustration: while in the first album the drawings show rings with stones, the second, created about one and a half centuries later, recorded the gems' impressions. Both books were acquired by the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as a gift from Ferenc Pulszky (1817–1897), an outstanding figure in the culture of 19th century Hungary.

The 18th century saw the rediscovery of antiquity and the birth of archaeology and art history, accompanied by a confidence in the educational value of classic examples. The study of ancient art was believed to improve public taste, and boost the level of culture. Engraved stones again received exceptional attention,

as the representations they bore intactly preserved the "noble simplicity and silent greatness" of ancient classical style, which 18th and 19th century artists endeavoured to imitate, or sometimes even surpass. In order to make the gems preserved in collections throughout Europe accessible, there was need for a reproduction technique which made the perfect and cheap mass production of copies of unique objects possible. Thus, plaster impressions appeared as an alternative for engraving.

In antiquity (just like in later centuries) gems decorated with motifs engraved in the surface of the stone were mainly used as seals. The impression represents the image itself, a mirror-image in relief of the pattern cut into the stone. It is thus much more accurate as a representation of the original than the work of a copyist making a two-dimensional graphic engraving of the sculpted three-dimensional image. It is also naturally the case that an engraving reflects its original at two removes, since it reflects both the hand of the engraver and the artistic taste of the period in which he worked. From the 1770s workshops specialized in plaster impressions were established. These were directed by gem engravers, who tried to acquire model impressions of as many gems as possible in order to meet the growing demand. Aiming at perfection, they often replaced missing items in their collections with copies they themselves made. Thus, a great number of all'antica compositions also reached the market, rivalling their ancient models and hardly differing from the originals, all made by engravers who aspired greater professional success. In order to store impressions made of plaster, sulphur and wax, a practical and elegant, new variant of dactylitheques was created by combining jewellery caskets and albums. The most common type resembles a book, but is in reality a container: impressions framed by cardboard strips were placed on the inside of the covers and/or on the pages opposite the covers. The publisher had his own concept for selecting the impressions, which he organized on the grounds of content and aesthetical reasons, then numbered them, and accompanied the dactylitheque with a booklet containing the most important information about the original gems. The *Descrizioni di dugento gemme antiche* (*Description of two hundred ancient gems*) compiled by Federico Dolce is one of the earliest album-shaped dactylitheques. The four volumes published in 1792 each contained 50 numbered impressions arranged according to style. The volumes are one-paged, that is, only the front cover of the book can be opened. Dolce presented the captions for the representations of the impressions on the backside of the cover, followed by a number referring to the relevant item in the verbose catalogue accompanying the album. The selection was explicitly compiled for the "edification of young people studying ancient artistic styles".



However, the series of dactylitheques published by the Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica, the archaeological institute in Rome, *Impronte gemmarie dell'Istituto* served primarily scientific purposes. From 1831 onwards it was supposed to present the impressions of gems, which belonged to formerly unpublished private collections, or were freshly recovered in excavations. The compilation was supervised by a scientific committee of the greatest scholars of the time. The main criterium for the selection was the ancient origin of the objects. Up until 1868 seven volumes were published altogether, while the catalogues accompanying the volumes appeared in the institute's own publication (*Bullettino dell'Istituto*), one of the most important scholarly periodicals of the time. It has only recently turned out that both these dactylitheques come from the most significant antiquities

collection of 19th century Hungary, the Fejérváry-Pulszky Collection. The five-volume publication containing the gem collection preserved by the Coin and Antiquities Collection of the Imperial Museum in Vienna (*Dactylithek des Wiener k. k. Antikencabinettes*) is an example for dactylitheques presenting museum collections. Impressions arranged in a loose iconographical order in the four-paged volumes bear no numbers, which makes the existence of an accompanying catalogue improbable. Its former owner was a profes-



sor of numismatics at the University of Pest, the antiquities collector Ferenc Kiss (1791–1859). The impression of the most often reproduced ancient gem is to be found around the middle of the second volume, among the series of Gorgo-heads. According to its inscription, the chalcidony intaglio known as the Strozzi Medusa is the work of Solon, a Greek gem engraver active around the middle of the 1st century BC. The gem inspired dozens of ivory, bronze, metal, and alabaster replicas, and, what's more, a number of 19th century engravers are known who made a name for themselves by engraving the exact copy of the original. The *Dactylitheca Smithiana* illustrates the gem on one of its engravings, while the Collection of Classical Antiquities preserves four further plaster impressions and two glass copies. Glass replicas were popular because their colours recalled the radiance of precious stones. Moreover, the plaster impression is a copy of the image engraved on the gem, while the glass replica is a copy of the engraved stone itself. The exhibition displays copies created with three different techniques,



which also presents an occasion for comparing the possibilities and limitations of the different reproduction techniques.

Dactylitheques suddenly lost their popularity at the end of the 19th century. A change in the approach

towards the theory of art at the time resulted in the appreciation of original works of art – at the expense of replicas. Moreover, the development of archaeological methods made it evident that a significant part of ancient gems published in dactylitheques were in fact of modern origin. The rise of photography finally relegated the existence and value of dactylitheques into oblivion for decades to come. Perhaps it is not by chance that today, when methods for three-dimensional image-production are freshly developed, there is again growing interest in the collections of impressions, which represent a former high in reproductional technologies.