

Lost Art Form Lives Again at the Carlos Museum

By *Kelsey Harper* Posted: 09/21/2009

Rain drizzled down on the soggy quad as students trudged past the Carlos Museum on their way to class, totally unaware that behind its doors, a ground-breaking artist was carving gemstones with a drill of ancient design.

All throughout last week, Master Gem Carver Chavdar Chushev gave a series of demonstrations on campus that showcased ancient gem-carving techniques.

A native of Bulgaria, Chushev was trained as an icon painter and fine art conservator, but has carved out a niche for himself in the world of ancient gems.

Within the small community of gem carvers, Chushev has pioneered the study and actual replication of ancient gem-carving techniques. Chushev knows of only one other gem carver in the United States who recreates classical ancient gems; however, his colleague uses exclusively modern tools.

Chushev, through his own research, has built what he believes to be the device that ancient jewelers must have used. His evidence comes from the tombstone of a young Roman gem engraver, whose tombstone depicts the tool of his craft, an early hand-powered drill.

The drill is constructed from a horizontal shaft powered by the movement of a bow, which is threaded with a string that is also wrapped around the shaft. The movement of the bow spins the shaft, which has a metal piece on the tip that acts as a drill. The faster the bow is moved, the faster the shaft spins, and the faster the drill tip spins.

While demonstrating the tool at his lecture, Chushev surprised the audience when he revealed materials used for the drill tip: "A steel file cannot make an impression on this stone, but with a simple wooden toothpick, I could carve easily."

Chushev vigorously rubbed a piece of red jasper with a steel file to show the lack of abrasion. Then, he dipped a toothpick in olive oil and replaced the metal drill tip with the oiled toothpick. Sure enough, the oil began to redden with dust from the yielding stone.

A collective look of confusion appeared on the faces of the audience. Chushev took advantage of this pause to mention casually that the astounding olive oil was mixed with crushed diamond powder. He expressed his hope that the gem-carving community would not disown him for revealing their secrets.

“There is no school for this,” Chushev said. “Everything is passed down; that’s the way it has always been.”

Chushev believes that ancient carvers knew the secret ingredient as well because of simple circumstantial evidence. “We have examples of ancient carved sapphires,” he said. “The only thing that can carve these stones is diamond.”

Chushev also demonstrated that diamonds, while extremely hard, are also extremely brittle, and easy to reduce to powder, which is necessary for carving and polishing. Placing tiny diamonds between two metal plates, Chushev grabbed a hammer and with a few bangs, reduced the rocks to dust.

The rapt audience, shocked from having just observed the pulverization of these rare, glimmering jewels into residue, listened in silence as Chushev spoke about how the process would have been different thousands of years ago.

“Prehistoric man could have used other objects instead of a hammer,” Chushev said, suddenly producing an antler and whacking a large chunk of red jasper to dislodge a roughly amulet-sized fragment.

The necessity of destroying other valuable objects seems to be an inherent part of gem carving. In order to trace an outline of the shape to be carved, a fine silver wire is often used; the rough surface of the stone acts like sandpaper, abrading the wire, which leaves behind a bright silver line for the carver to follow. This technique is important for the sort of detail work that Chushev enjoys most.

“I like doing the fine details of the human anatomy, the nude body, animals — I like the challenge,” he said. Indeed, Chushev has challenged himself in delicacy of detail and minuteness of scale — the smallest gem he has carved is about the size of the “Q” on a quarter.

The visit of this world famous gem-carver to the Carlos Museum is timely considering that the Carlos Museum has recently acquired a wonderfully rich and diverse collection of carved gems from the late Michael Shubin.

During his portion of the lecture, Jasper Gaunt, curator of the Carlos Museum’s Greek and Roman galleries, fondly described Shubin as “a professional squirrel. He squirreled away as many gems as he possibly could.”

While the Shubin collection is not yet on display, the Carlos Museum has a beautiful collection of intaglios (stones carved in relief), including several signet rings and roller stamps, which were used to stamp personal seals onto private and legal documents. The owner would wear the stamp on a necklace, bracelet or ring, so it was always close at hand to press his or her chosen image into a clay seal.

Many beautiful examples of the stone intaglios that produce these seals can be seen currently at the Carlos Museum while it waits for the installment of the Shubin jewels.

In addition to ancient gems, Shubin also collected carved jewels from some modern artists including none other than Chushev himself.

Chushev hopes to expand his clientele base from history nerds with money to mainstream jewelry fans who might appreciate carved gems if only they knew such things existed.

“I think there is a good chance that with the right effort, with publicity, people would get interested,” Chushev said.

Chushev is already discussing the possibility of starting his own line of jewelry: “I’m trying to create a line that I would design personally, incorporating classical design.”

Even for this modern endeavor, Chushev remains loyal to his classical preferences for realistic bodies and beasts. “Contemporary work,” he said rather boldly, “does not excite me.” Chushev hopes to train a select fleet of apprentices to work in the classical style. His ambition to offer engraved stones to the public is an exciting step in the revival process that he has single-handedly initiated.