SEAL SET WITH AN INTAGLIO OF LAOCOON, USED BY THOMAS COLYNS, PRIOR OF TYWARDRETH, CORNWALL, EARLY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

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WHEN Goethe, for the first time in his life, had the opportunity of studying a collection of antique gems (in the Hemsterhuis cabinet), the impression which, at the very outset, forced itself upon his mind was, "that here it was also undeniable that copies of great, important, ancient works, for ever lost to us, are preserved, like so many jewels, within these narrow limits; hardly any branch of art wanted a representative amongst them; in scarcely any class of subjects was a deficiency to be observed." I have elsewhere (Handbook of Engraved Gems, p. 45) adduced several examples that have come under my own observation in the pursuit of the same study, which amply corroborate this opinion of the acutest of German critics; and I have there described gems which are the only things preserving the memory of the, in their day, wonders of the world, the masterpieces of Canachus, Apelles, Lysippus, and Leochares. Gems, to the same extent as coins, have carried down to our times exact ideas of such marvels of art, or monuments of pristine creeds, like celebrated statues of deities, as were from their nature objects of popular *worship* to the communities issuing the coins stamped with their figures; but gems go far beyond this limit, and in this very field of creative art claim an infinitely more extensive dominion. To say nothing of Painting (which has bequeathed little to us by the way of numismatics), the Glyptic art has, from the very beginning, especially delighted in rivalling her elder sister, Sculpture, and in perpetuating, in miniature, those performances of hers that recommended themselves, not by the traditional sanctity only of the object, but by their intrinsic merit and beauty, or by the celebrity of their authors. To the same causes is

it due that engraved gems are almost the sole means enabling us to form a notion of the more essential principles of ancient Painting—its rules of composition and design in its best days—which otherwise would have all but entirely perished, inasmuch as vase-painting, which would otherwise have preserved their remembrance in a yet more complete manner (as our lithographs do the pictures of modern times), was in rapid decadence before historical painting had truly commenced ; whilst, on the other hand, the frescoes of the later ancients, copies of these masterpieces, have long since shared their fate, their scanty, half-obliterated remains, like the Pompeian, being merely sufficient to assure us of the immensity of our loss.

But gems possess a further value of their own. Besides summoning up before us the beauteous spectres of what has passed away for ever, they have the practical advantage of empowering us rightly to understand that which has survived the wreck of ages, though with a maimed and mutilated existence, which too often has suffered as much from the injudicious friendship of modern restorers, as from the hostility of accident, or from old iconoclastic fanaticism.

Of all such glyptic traditions of the original state of memorable works of art, none has hitherto been brought to light so replete with interest to all lovers of art, equally with archæologists, as the little relic forming the subject of the present memoir,—an interest derived from the important service it lends towards the true restoration of, perhaps, the most celebrated and remarkable of all extant remains of ancient sculpture. For the knowledge of this monument, almost as deserving of notice from the circumstances of its preservation, as from its special value in the subject under discussion, I am indebted (as on many former occasions of the like nature) to the kindness of Mr. Albert Way, who lately communicated to me the impression of the private

seal[1] (here figured double original size) of Thomas Colyns, Prior of Tywardreth, from A.D. 1507 to 1539. This signet was set with an antique intaglio (on sard, as its style of cutting seems to indicate), a spirited though minute reproduction of the famous group of the Laocoon. In my own judgment, based upon the long-pursued comparative study of ancient Glyptics, the work of this intaglio exhibits nothing of the style of the first quarter of the Cinque-cento, so easily recognizable in its treatment of complicated designs like this,[2] nor even of the Roman imperial school, but rather possesses every characteristic warranting its ascription to the best period of Greek art in this particular branch, viz., the two centuries commencing with the era of Lysippus and Pyrgoteles. It is necessary thus to premise with the confession that the antique origin of the work is to a certain degree only conjectural, resting as it does upon critical decisions, not upon chronological data that render its authorship (Greek or Roman) a matter beyond all dispute, which would have been the case had the Cornish prior, its last owner, flourished within the preceding century, when gem-engraving yet slumbered, together with the Laocoon, amidst the dust of the perished empire. For the marble group, its prototype, was disinterred as early as 1512 from its burial-place on the Esquiline, by Felix de Fredis, who still "glories in death" in the discovery, says his epitaph in the Ara Celi. Hence there is a *possibility* sufficient to disquiet the faith of those incompetent, from want of special knowledge of the art, to appreciate the evidence borne by the gem itself to its own Hellenic parentage, however sufficient the same may be to connoisseurs. that Colyns, who is known to have had transactions with the Apostolic See under Leo X., *may* have procured for his own delectation a gem-copy from the newly-discovered and far-famed sculpture, done by some clever hand among the innumerable rivals of Valerio Vicentino

[1] Attached to a document now in the possession of Lord Arundell of Wardour. We are here indebted to the researches of our friend Mr. Smirke, whose investigations of documentary evidence and of ancient remains in the Western counties have frequently contributed to the gratification of the Institute. The grant to which the signet of Prior Colyns is appended was brought to light at Wardour Castle by Mr. Smirke. The intaglio of Laocoon is noticed by him in Dr. Oliver's Monasticon, additional Supp., p. 5. See the memoir of Colyns, Monast. Dioc. Exon., p. 35.

[2] Whoever has examined with an experienced eye the miniature groups of the greatest proficient in this line, P. M. da Pescia, the friend of M. Angelo, will at once perceive that our Laocoon displays a totally different *technique* in the mode of its execution.

flourishing there at the time, when "si ne era cresciuto si gran numero che era una meraviglia," as Vasari tells us, that is before the fatal sack of the city in 1528. This uncertainty is increased by the unlucky absence of any date from the document; one prior or shortly subsequent to 1512 would have settled the question in favour of my position; but it will be perceived that Colyns lived and *sealed* for many years after the discovery of the marble. Another consideration must be taken into the account. Before the discovery of the impression which forms the subject of this inquiry, no *antique* representation of the Laocoon group had ever made its appearance. Nothing of the kind is to be found in Winckelmann's Catalogue of the immense and all-comprehensive Stosch collection (confined to antiques); and although Raspe, in his Catalogue of Tassie's casts, does put down eight repetitions of the group in gems, yet, as he gives the post of honour amongst them to that signed by Flavio Sirletti (1700-37), it may safely be concluded that he regarded the rest as modern performances, and of trivial importance.

Having now, as candour required, stated the weightiest objections that occur to me as possible to be brought, with any show of reason, against my own decision in the case, the next step is to produce confirmatory evidence in its favour; and such evidence is most unexpectedly furnished by a single particular in the seal, rendering testimony of the utmost value on my side when it comes to be dispassionately examined in all its bearings upon the question. The intaglio *differs* from the marble group, as we see it *at present* (besides some minor details), in one grand point,—the action of the right hand of the father. He appears on the wax attempting, with his right arm *bent*, to tear away the head of the serpent from his throat, into which it has already fastened its fangs, whilst at the same time he vainly averts his face from its attack. Now in the marble the action is totally different: Laocoon *extends* the same arm at full length, and forces away from him merely a fold of the serpent's body, the head of which appears much lower down. Singularly enough, one of our first living sculptors recently pointed out (to my informant contemplating the group in his company last winter at Rome) this very action of the principal figure, as being not merely unmeaning, but positively detrimental

to the force and expression of the whole design. But the discrepancy is easily explained. This portion of the marble was wanting upon its discovery, and was immediately restored,—by M. Angelo, as the story, of course, goes,—consistently with his own false conception of the original attitude.[3] Nevertheless, a small projection is still visible on the neck of Laocoon, sufficient to have guided a more intelligent restorer to a better understanding of his duty, by suggesting the former adhesion of the serpent's bite in that particular place. For it will be perceived, upon the information of our gem, that the sculptor had, as his better knowledge of nature dictated, made his twin-serpents fasten their teeth on the two most mortal parts—the jugular vein and the region of the heart. Virgil himself beheld the attack made upon the head of the principal victim ; his Laocoon stands—

"Perfusus sanie *vittas* atroque cruore."

Now this very discrepancy demonstrates, in my opinion, that the gem-copy was taken when the marble was still perfect, and therefore before the date of 1512, and the Italian Revival. It is inconceivable that any Cinque-cento gem engraver should have presumed to restore the design in a sense so strongly differing from that sanctioned by the overwhelming authority of the "divine" Florentine ; or again, and what is more to the purpose, that having such audacity he should have exhibited so much superior an intelligence in his conjecture than the greatest of modern artists. This last is a moral argument, and derives its weight from other considerations than those of art criticism, but it appears to me irresistible when backed by the evidence afforded by the technical execution of the intaglio itself, worked out, as the impression, though dulled and wasted by time, unmistakably shows, almost entirely with the diamond point, that grand agent of the best masters in ancient Glyptics, but totally unknown to their emulators of the Cinque-cento school.

To attribute a *Grecian* origin to the copy of a sculpture believed by a large section of the antiquarian world[4] to have been executed in Pliny's own times, certainly demands some explanation on my part. A few remarks therefore, or rather

[3] Most likely being misled by Virgil's expression (Æn. II. 220) :—
"Simul manibus tendit divellere *nodos*."

[4] Headed by Thiersch in his "Epochen der bildenden Kunst."

a contribution of fresh conjectures towards the elucidation of this long disputed question, will probably not be thought out of place as a conclusion to this notice. The soundest mode of approaching the subject is to examine the actual words of Pliny, in which the conflicting opinions discover equally good grounds for the most discordant conclusions. "Quorundam claritati in operibus eximiis obstanti numero artificum, quorum nec unus occupat gloriam, nec plures pariter nominari possunt; sicut in Laocoonte qui est in Titi imperatoris domo, opus omnibus et picturæ et statuariæ artis præferendum. Ex uno lapide eum ac liberos draconumque mirabiles nexus de consilii sententia fecere summi artifices, Hegesander et Polydorus et Athenodorus Rhodii. Similiter Palatinas domos Cæsarum replevere probatissimis signis Craterus cum Pythiodoro, Polydeuces cum Hermolao, Pythiodorus alter cum Artemone, et singulariter Aphrodisius Trallianus." (xxxvi. 5.)

The point in dispute is whether Pliny meant to imply that the three Rhodian partners executed this unrivalled group at the commission of Titus, as those named in the next sentence are beyond all question mentioned as working for the preceding Cæsars, "whose palace they filled with their own highly-approved sculptures;" or whether he merely cites the Laocoon as "then standing in Titus's palace," but the work of artists belonging to a much earlier period, perhaps to the school of Lysippus, to which the majority of critics at present refer them. The latter interpretation of the passage seems to me the true one. Pliny's prime object in quoting the Laocoon was indubitably the same as for quoting the *names* of the then *modern* sculptors in the passage following: to substantiate the assertion with which he starts, "that the copartnership of artists in a work, however meritorious the result, deprives them individually of the credit they deserve." This he shows by examples, taken as the natural mode of arguing in similar cases suggests, from both old and recent experience; adducing the Laocoon as the most conclusive instance in the former class (probably on account of some special predilection of his patron Titus for that piece), and the very praiseworthy modern sculptures decorating the edifices on the Palatine as proving the same unwelcome truth in the case of artists of his own times. It is clear to me that the Laocoon is

adduced for no other reason than as being the most conspicuous example known to the historian of a great sculpture produced by a partnership of artists. The very expression laid hold of to prove its recent execution,—"now standing in Titus's palace,"—has a contrary effect on my judgment, for it sounds more applicable to an old work transferred from another destination, than to one just completed for the place it filled; whilst the "similarly" commencing the next sentence infers a comparison between the Past and the Present. Pliny evidently considered that the highest claim of the Laocoon group to admiration was the cutting of the whole out of a single block, for a little above he has pointed out the same circumstance in the masterpiece of a certain Lysias —an Apollo and Diana standing together in a *quadriga*—a piece so much esteemed by Augustus that he had *selected* it (which proves it an older and not Roman work) to adorn the arch erected by him to the memory of his father, Octavius.

This notice of the group by Lysias, equally elaborate in its details with the Laocoon, may serve to throw light upon the original destination of the latter work—to adorn the pediment of a temple of Apollo—as the very nature of the first-named piece of sculpture assures must have been the case with *it*. The appropriateness of the subject for such a position, though not obvious at first, is however completely established by the explanation Hyginus gives of the cause of the miraculous destruction of Laocoon. He was the priest of Apollo, but had sacrilegiously polluted by incontinence the shrine of the pure god of Light. This tradition also accounts for the choice of the particular ministers of divine vengeance, the serpent being Apollo's most noted attribute.[5] On the other hand, the "*earth-born* dragon" had nothing to do with Neptune, to whom Virgil, compelled by his plot, ascribes its mission, both as being the arch-enemy of Troy, and desirous to punish Laocoon for having profanely struck the *horse*, peculiarly sacred to that god as the actual creator of the animal.[6] The punishment of Laocoon therefore, exhibited in life-like horror above the entrance to the temple of

[5] The Pythian Oracle is commonly expressed on gems by a column entwined with a *serpent*, and supporting a raven, Apollo's own prophetic bird.

[6] Hence the sea-faring Carthaginians, and, after them, the Saxon pirates, took the horse for the national cognizance.

Phœbus, read an awful lesson on the necessity of purity to priests and votaries alike. The choice of marble instead of bronze for the material of so complicated a design as this, which by its nature falls rather within the province of *statuaria* in metal than of *sculptura* in stone, is at once accounted for, if my idea concerning its proper destination be accepted. All intelligent readers of ancient notices of works of art will have perceived that for statues intended to be honoured *by* mortals, or to do honour *to* mortals, in the form of gods or memorial-figures of distinguished men, *metal* was regarded as the only appropriate medium, partly from traditional usage as having been the first to be so employed, partly from its superior costliness. Dædalus and Learchus and their disciples, with their figures in hammer-wrought bronze, preceded by many generations Scyllis and Dipœnus, the Cretan inventors of sculpture in marble.[7] Praxiteles is noted by Pliny as a remarkable exception to the rule, and to have done his best in marble, "marmoris gloria superavit etiam semet." But for *architectural* decoration, necessarily meant to be viewed from a distance, and where the utmost conspicuousness was the greatest recommendation, marble was with good reason preferred to bronze. Its brilliant white,[8] yet further enhanced by the accustomed tinting of the background, rendered all its details distinguishable at the greatest distance from which they possibly could be viewed. No instance occurs to my recollection where the pediment or frieze of a temple is mentioned as decorated with whole figures, or with *rilievi*, in metal. The group of the Laocoon would be with equal propriety chosen to fill the tympanum of a temple of Phœbus as that of Niobe and her children, teaching another moral, to decorate one consecrated to his goddess sister.

Any one with a tincture of ancient art who reads Virgil must often have been struck, and then highly interested, with the scrupulous anxiety the very erudite poet manifests to have good ancient authority for all his descriptions. One often *feels* that he is transferring into his verse almost servile copies of the paintings and sculptures by the great masters of old Greece then accumulated around him in the

[7] Who, migrating to Sicyon, first practised the new art there about Ol. 50, B.C. 650 (Plin. xxxvi. 4).

[8] Its name comes from the same root as μαρμαίρειν "to shine."

palaces of his patrons at Rome. Here and there the pictorial representation has had such overpowering charms for him that he introduces it as an incident somewhat clumsily incorporated with the rest of his story, like the defence and fall of the wooden tower at the taking of Troy. That he had admired some ancient representation of the fate of Laocoon, no one can doubt after reading his truly pictorial description of the scene ; but that he drew his inspiration from the very sculpture we still possess is by no means so certain. There is one notable variation in his account of the mode of attack of the serpents from that adopted by Hegesander and his colleagues : in his verse they make a double coil around the throat and body of the father, and tower aloft over him with their heads and necks :—

> " Bis medium amplexi, bis collo squamea circum
> Colla dati superant capite et cervicibus altis ;"

whereas, in the sculpture, they leave their victim's neck entirely free, and make no attempt at suffocating him in their coils. Again, Virgil makes them *devour* the two boys before they attack their father :—

> " Corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque
> Implicat, et miseros morsu *depascitur* artus."

A child destroyed by a serpent must have been a very favourite subject with the Greek sculptors, to judge from the frequency with which the " Death of Opheltes" is reproduced upon gems ; for it is an article of faith with me that no fine gem-work was without a more celebrated prototype in statuary. The subject was recommended to ancient taste not so much by the importance of the legend it commemorated as by the opportunities it afforded to art in the contrast between the rounded and the attenuated contours of the victim and of the destroyer, and equally for the graceful convolutions into which the coils of the latter could naturally be thrown. Curves and spirals had a special charm for the Grecian eye, as the decoration of the painted vases alone proves to demonstration. Why the Laocoon group should not, in any previously-known example, have been taken for his model by the gem-engraver (a fact containing the sole grave objection against the antiquity of the work before us) admits of satisfactory explanation to those

experienced in ancient Glyptics. Gems of the best period, as a rule, present only a single figure, very rarely do they admit more than two; to inclose the multiplied details of an entire picture within their narrow limits, was reserved for the misplaced and unsuccessful ingenuity of the Cinque-cento school. The ancient engraver knew the capabilities of his art too well to strain after such impossibilities, and never attempted a miniature reduction of a complicated group unless in some special cases where he was induced by the equal importance of every member of the composition as in his oft-repeated copies of the far-famed masterpiece of Eutychides, the τύχη πόλεως of Antioch, in which the City seated on the Orontes, her founder Seleucus, and the attendant Victory all form one inseparable whole. When the story of Niobe for example is represented on a gem, it is sufficiently told by the introduction of no more than the two principal figures, the mother shielding her child; the escape of Æneas from Troy, by himself carrying his father (which is only equivalent to a single figure) and his little son grasping his hand. Unquestionably therefore the reason was a very sufficient one, that so happily induced the old engraver to break through the rule of his art and daringly transfer this very elaborate composition to the gem that the tasteful Prior of Tywardreth was fortunate enough to obtain for the embellishment of his private signet, of which the half-effaced impression has alone transmitted to us the correct idea of one of the most important existing monuments of antiquity.