

# ARCHBISHOP ROBINSON'S COLLECTION OF GEM IMPRESSIONS

## ARMAGH PUBLIC LIBRARY – A REPORT

### NOTES

#### INTRODUCTION

Archbishop Robinson's collection of gem impressions consists of several sets which, though kept together for two centuries or so, retain their individual identities. This essential fact provides a starting point for investigating the formation of the collection and its original purposes. The gem impressions are contained in two cabinets, which may not be immediately apparent to a visitor, as one is placed on top of the other and both are made of a similar type of wood. The larger (lower) cabinet contains a 2-colour set, and smaller 'Orange', 'Vermilion', and 'White' sets. It is possible that the Vermilion Set may itself consist of three distinct purchases. The smaller (upper) cabinet contains another 'White' set and one drawer containing a small number of glass impressions.

#### THE PRINCIPAL SET

##### The 2-colour Set

The principal collection comprised 3,426 items, of which only two are currently missing. 3,106 of these correspond to those listed and numbered in *A catalogue of impressions in sulphur, of antique and modern gems from which pastes are made and sold by J Tassie Compton Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> door from Greek Street, Soho* (London, 1775). There may be no doubt that the supplier of this collection was James Tassie. The individual impressions are numbered according to the catalogue and glued in number order onto the bases of the drawers.

Unusually for an 18<sup>th</sup> century *dactyliotheka*, this is a two-colour collection: each drawer contains a mix of vermilion and blue sulphur impressions. The strength of the colours, particularly of the so-called vermilion, changes through the sequence of drawers, so that it becomes relatively dull (very evidently by drawers MM, NN) then becomes fresher again. This dull appearance may be taken to indicate a need for cleaning but this is not so.

It seems most probable that the Archbishop bought the drawers (with the gem impressions fixed in place) and then ordered the cabinet to be made for them. The collection occupies 54 of the 60 'thin' drawers (i.e., excluding the double-depth drawers at the bottom of each of the three stacks of drawers or the full-width base drawer). It is a reasonably close fit: the principal collection occupies 90% of the drawers, and it may be concluded that the remaining 6 drawers were not taken up by more 2-colour purchases in order to accommodate other objects already in mind. There is a fundamental relationship between this main collection and its cabinet.

Comparison with a contemporary Tassie cabinet in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore which, similarly, contains a full run of impressions (total 3,824) corresponding to the catalogue of 1775, and yet fills all 60 of its drawers with 398 examples more examples than the Robinson 2-colour set shows that Tassie certainly had a sufficient stock of master impressions to fill a cabinet of this size. It is notable that both the Robinson Cabinet and the Tassie shop (Baltimore) cabinet have 60 drawers in three rows, each with an extra double-depth drawer at the bottom. The shop cabinet may have provided the model for the archbishop's thinking about his own library cabinet. It is possible that Archbishop Robinson already possessed one or more of the smaller sets now accommodated in the Armagh cabinet and wished to reserve some drawers for them (and save himself a little money in buying from Tassie); he therefore bought fewer 'Tassies' than were available and which could have filled his cabinet.

## ADDITIONAL SETS

In addition to the installation of the principal collection, other sets were placed in some of the unfilled drawers.

### The Orange Set

The last three 'thin' drawers of the right-side stack (KKK, LLL, MMM) are occupied by 172 orange-coloured impressions. The set is clearly separated from the tail end of the principal collection by the three empty drawers (GGG, HHH, III).

A hand-list, hand-written in French, which is still kept in the cabinet, relates to this set and probably came with it. Curiously, the label on the cover of the catalogue states (in English): 'Catalogue of gems in bottom right hand drawer (no 1) & MMM and LLL up to 172', which, with regard to the bottom right hand drawer, is not now the case – the same colour set now occupying it may, at a glance, have been mistaken for the third drawer of French-listed gems which are actually in KKK.

### The Vermilion Set

Probably at an early date in the existence of the cabinet all three lower drawers were occupied by what is being called provisionally the 'Vermilion Set' (in all three, the impressions are of the same colour and are identically mounted). However, each drawer's contents have their own numbering sequence (1-46; 1-52; 1-35), which suggests that there were once individual hand-lists for each drawer; only one of which survives (see below).

The contents of the left-side and right-side lower drawers sit inside inner boxes that tightly fit the drawer sides and are held in place by a stud at the back. The boxes may be detached and removed from the drawers.

In the case of the middle lower drawer, its box and the part of the 'Vermilion Set' that it contains has been removed (one might say 'ousted') and placed loosely inside the base drawer of the cabinet, with little care shown to it, presumably for many years until now. The box and contents are in urgent need of conservation, as 42 of

the items are no longer glued to the base. A cursory inspection has revealed no serious damage to the impressions, even though some were found to be resting upside down.

A hand-written catalogue in English kept in the cabinet, identifying 53 pieces, relates to this box's contents.

It is curious that this set was not placed in the three empty drawers (GGG, HHH, III) of the main cabinet. It is possible that a further purchase of Tassie impressions was, in the Archbishop's time, not out of the question. It is also possible that this set was regarded as being of poorer quality, and for that reason was consigned to the bottom drawers. The subsequent fate of the inner box of the middle bottom drawer (a further relegation to the base drawer) supports this interpretation.

### The White Set

A group of 30 white enamel Tassie impressions now occupies the central lower drawer. As with the upper cabinet white collection, all are duplicates of specimens in the two-colour collection. In this drawer, all except two are numbered, but unlike the whites that occupy the upper cabinet (see below), they are not arranged in number order, nor are their numbers applied to the sides of the holders. Instead, their numbers are inked on the base of the drawer, which is exposed as the inner box containing part of the Vermilion Set has been removed.

Four of the numbered pieces (1402, 1612, 2071, 2093) have duplicates not only in the principal collection but also in the upper cabinet. This suggests that this group was bought separately from the Upper Cabinet collection, and should not be seen as a somehow-disconnected part of it. It is just conceivable that the Archbishop bought these pieces on a visit to Tassie's shop believing that all were additions to his collection, not recognising the four pieces he already had. Another possibility is that these once belonged to his brother, Sir William Robinson, coming into the

Archbishop's possession after his brother's death, as we know certain volumes now in the Armagh Public Library did.

## UPPER CABINET

The Upper Cabinet comprises 10 'thin' drawers and 2 double-depth drawers arranged in two stacks. White enamel impressions occupy 9 of the 10 'thin' drawers.

They are arranged in number order – the numbers taken from their Principal Collection matches.

The drawers which (unlike those in the Main Cabinet) are unmarked, were on inspection found to be in the wrong order. The incorrect positions have been written in pen, fairly recently, on the top edges of the drawers.

Old Position > Corrected Position:

Left 1 > Left 1

Left 2 > Left 2

Left 3 > Left 4

Left 4 > Right 2

Left 5 > Left 5

Right 1 > Right 3

Right 2 > Right 1

Right 3 > Right 4

Right 4 > Left 3

Right 5 > Right 5

N.B., The interior colour (green / blue) of the drawers in the corrected sequence is now: G, G, G, G, B, B, B, G, G, G.

R4 (corrected) contains pieces with the highest numbers. These occupy just two rows after which the set comes to an end. The remaining space in the drawer is occupied by casts of two medals, and though unrelated to the preceding set, being also white in colour must have been deemed not incompatible and useful in providing a kind of visual coda at the termination of the Tassie set.

Drawer R5 has a glass bottom on which are placed seven assorted gems or glass replicas. These have not been examined closely in this assessment.

#### Provisional Interpretation – the status of the ‘Whites’

The Whites of the Upper Cabinet represent less than 7% of the Principal Collection and were probably selected as particularly striking examples from the available Tassie range. It is noticeable that none of the smaller items found in the more comprehensive, two-colour collection are to be found among them. Though all are duplicates of items in the larger collection, they are not impressions taken from those actual pieces, but would likewise have been obtained from Tassie.

What was the need for the Upper Cabinet collection? As there seems to be little point in keeping a duplicate set in the same place, the intention was surely to acquire a cabinet collection for another location. One explanation would be that the Upper Cabinet was destined for somewhere other than the Library (the Archbishop’s Palace in Armagh being the obvious place), that it was there for some time, and then (after Archbishop Robinson’s death?) was brought to join the larger collection, when it was placed on top of the Main Cabinet. Whereas the Main Cabinet was conceived from the outset as a study collection to be kept in the Library, it seems likely that the Upper Cabinet, containing its smaller ‘deluxe’ collection of more expensive white enamel impressions, was intended for recreational use and aesthetic pleasure.

The holders of the 30 white impressions in the Main Cabinet do not bear catalogue numbers. These are written on the drawer base, which means that when they were acquired, they were not individually identifiable other than by recognition. At some point, someone took on the task of numbering the pieces. The easiest method would have been to hold each piece between fore-finger and thumb and move it over the rows of the two-colour collection until a match was found. Two pieces remain unnumbered, presumably having defeated attempts to match them.

Clearly, the white set was the last to enter the main cabinet. As to the matter of where to put it within the collection, the solution arrived at is interesting and somewhat odd. Though there was (and still is) ample room for it in the three empty drawers (GGG, HHH, III), it was decided to extract the inner box of the central lower drawer (containing its own glued-in set) in order to make free the drawer itself. The white set was then fixed into the drawer and the catalogue numbers inscribed on its base rather than on sides of the gem holders. This may have been done because it would have been very difficult to read anything inscribed on the sides of the holders in this double-depth drawer.

It is possible, though far from being probable, that before being found a home in the main cabinet, the 30-piece white set had occupied drawer R5 in the upper cabinet, being removed in order to carry out the numbering exercise. On their removal, the drawer bottom would have been left disfigured by glue rings. A glass base, on which the assortment of glassy gems now sit, has replaced the original drawer bottom.

Some or all of the smaller collections of gem impressions detailed above, like some of the books in the Library, may have been inherited by Archbishop Robinson from his brother, Sir William, 2<sup>nd</sup> bt, (d. 1785).

## INVENTORY

### Main Cabinet

LEFT SIDE (from top)

Two-colour Tassie collection (vermilion and blue)

Numbered according to the Tassie 1775 catalogue

A	1-64
B	65-128
C	129-185
D	186-235
E	236-304
F	305-356
G	357-418
H	419-480
I	481-543
K	544-604
L	605-672
M	673-722
N	723-779
O	780-836
P	837-899
Q	900-963
R	964-1026
S	1027-1090
T	1091-1149
V	1150-1207

Left-side, bottom drawer, unlabelled:

Single-colour set, vermilion

1-46 (No. 28 is missing, leaving a space and a glue mark)

CENTRE (from top)

Two-colour collection continued

W	1208-1273
X	1274-1338
Y	1339-1400
[Z]	1401-1455 (drawer unlabeled but pen-marked as 'Z')
AA	1436-1513 (No. 1508 missing)
BB	1514-1572
CC	1573-1627
DD	1628-1680
EE	1681-1739
FF	1740-1800
GG	1801-1859
HH	1860-1910
II	1911-1967
KK	1968-2037
LL	2038-2096
MM	2097-2160
NN	2161-2221
OO	2222-2283
PP	2284-2349
QQ	2350-2407

Centre, bottom drawer, unlabelled:

30 white enamel Tassie impressions; numbered according to the Tassie 1775

catalogue; not in order, but as:

830, 791, 1763, 1737, 1146

887, 1258, 420, 2071, 1324

208, 1402, 2093, 1612, 415

[no number], 1337, 201, 212, 312

1370, 724, 1502, 743, 1431

2302, 1159, 1080, 2015, [no number]

N.B., this set has ousted a set of 52 numbered vermilion-colour impressions, which remain in the inner open box that is supposed to fit closely into the drawer (as the boxes in the bottom drawers to the left and right still do). This box is now kept in the base drawer of the cabinet. Many of the holders of these impressions have broken loose from their original glued positions. The numbering of the white set has been written on the base of the drawer and not on the sides of the holders, as in all the other drawers.

These correspond to a list of 53 impressions. Matching the glue marks on the box base to the broken-off pieces will establish whether No. 46 is either a 'ghost' in the list or is missing.

RIGHT SIDE (from top)

Two-colour collection continued

RR 2408-2478

SS 2479-2555

TT 2256-2628

VV 2629-2708

XX 2792-2834 \*

WW 2709-2771 \*

YY 2835-2893

ZZ 2894-2956

AAA 2957-3056

BBB 3057-3136

CCC 3137-3209

DDD 3210-3284

EEE 3285-3362

FFF 3363-3426

GGG unused  
HHH unused  
III unused  
KKK 1-55  
LLL 117-172\*  
MMM56-116\*

\* - These drawers have been given each other's labels and as a consequence are inserted in the wrong order.

N.B., Drawers KKK, LLL, MMM contain a separate set of impressions (orange), presumably from a source other than Tassie. The manuscript catalogue in French, written in the exercise book with the marbled cover, relates to this set.

Right-side bottom drawer, unlabelled:

Single-colour set, vermilion  
1-35.

### Upper Cabinet

Left 1:

White duplicates (total: 26)

5, 7, 13, 87, 123, 137,  
138, 142, 155, 168, 198,  
202, 214, 216, 219,  
221, 247, unnumbered\*, 316, 321, 325,  
326, 328, 329, 332, 333.

(\*should be numbered 306)

Left 2:

White duplicates (total: 27)

337, 338, 339, 340, 349, 360,  
377, 383, 385, 388, 394,  
411, 427, 436, 446, 448, 469,  
480, 496, 511, 542, 546,  
553, 554, 557, 559, 563.

Left 3:

White duplicates (total 27)

580, 582, 605, 609, 620, 623, 652, 655, 656, 659, 681, 683,  
697, 699, 717, 718, 719, 720, 723, 729, 736,  
741, 778, 789, 792, 816, 821.

Left 4:

White duplicates (total 30)

834, 835, 841, 842, 843, 853,  
857, 893, 961, 979, 985, 1003,  
1053, 1057, 1076, 1083, 1088, 1094,  
1100, 1102, 1114, 1139, 1140.

Left 5:

White duplicates (total 30)

1141, 1145, 1151, 1161, 1162, 1170,  
1235, 1244, 1259, 1328, 1331, 1348, 1350,  
1368, 1370, 1383, 1402, 1405, 1407,  
1421, 1430, 1436, 1445, 1465,  
1505, 1510, 1515, 1520, 1521, 1528.

Left 6 (double-depth bottom drawer):

Empty boxes and padding for medals moved elsewhere.

Right 1:

White duplicates (total 21)

1554, 1553, 1573, 1574, 1593,  
1606, 1612, 1630, 1631, 1638, 1640, 1651,  
1672, 1684, 1688, 1695, 1716, 1722, 1735, 1778, 1815.

Right 2: (all heads)

White duplicates (total 26)

1818, 1855, 1858, 1863, 1873,  
1902, 1908, 1913, 1918,  
1980, 1997, 2001, 2012, 2054, 2069,  
2071, 2075, 2093, 2125, 2143,  
2144, 2154, 2158, 2174, 2175, 2188.

Right 3:

White duplicates (total 32)

2190, 2192, 2199, 2201, 2204, 2209,  
2216, 2249, 2263, 2269, 2287, 2317,  
2328, 2389, 2395, 2437, 2438, 2444, 2450, 2480,  
2482, 2523, 2577, 2508, 2626, 2747,  
2748, 2753, 2773, 2853, 2877, 3003.

Right 4:

White duplicates (total 11)

3038, 3066, 3139, 3163, 3172,  
3241, 3244, 3255, 3365, 3395, 3584.

Also two casts of medals (white)

Right 5:

Glass-bottomed drawer containing 7 assorted gems

Right 6 (double-depth bottom drawer)

Empty except for catalogues.

TOTALS:

Two-colour collection: **3425** (+ one missing)

Orange collection (associated with the handwritten French list): **172**

Vermilion collection: **132** (+ one missing)

White collection (main cabinet): **30**

White collection (upper cabinet): **230**

**Total: 3989**

T.W.

02/08/2016