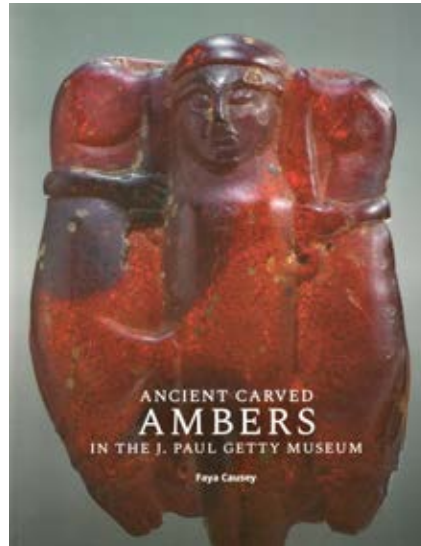


Jewellery Studies

Book Reviews



Ancient Carved Ambers in the J. Paul Getty Museum ***Faya Causey, 2019***

with technical analysis by Jeff Maish, Herant Khanjian and Michael R. Schilling

Reviewed by Paweł Gołyźniak

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Ancient Carved Ambers in the J. Paul Getty Museum

*Faya Causey (2019); with technical analysis by
Jeff Maish, Herant Khanjian and Michael R. Schilling*

Paperback, 8 1/2 x 11 inches, 306 pages, 124 colour illustrations, 10 charts.
Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019. ISBN 978-1-60606-634-8 £68

The catalogue is available for [free online](#) and in multiple formats for download, including PDF, MOBI/Kindle, and EPUB.

The J. Paul Getty Museum is by far one of the best museums in the world in regard to publishing their collections in a traditional printed way but even more importantly also online. The new version of the catalogue of pre-Roman carved ambers housed by the Getty Museum (first edition was published in 2012 only online) entitled *Ancient Carved Ambers in the J. Paul Getty Museum* by Faya Causey is an exemplary publication. As with the other catalogues from the J. Paul Getty Museum, this one has been produced to very high standards of both scholarship and presentation of the objects discussed, including the layout of the book and especially wonderful colour images. What makes it exceptional is the fact that the book goes far beyond being a regular *catalogue raisonnée*. The collection catalogue consists of fifty-seven figured works, all of pre-Roman date of the period between the seventh and fourth centuries BC, and one exception that turned out to be a modern imitation/forgery (no. 57). This modern imitation/forgery is an interesting case showing the complexity of the collection and illustrating the value of the research: indeed similar objects (as pointed out in the text) can be found within other public and private cabinets. Another addition to the corpus, however, not included to the main catalogue, is the *Head of Medusa* (acc. no. 71.AO.355) being from the Roman period (1st–2nd century AD), illustrated on p. 2, fig. 1, which was donated to the museum by its founder Mr. Getty. The formation of the whole collection started from this exceptional piece, but it afterwards turned towards objects of the pre-Roman era.

The book is divided into two parts: a long introduction and a catalogue, supplemented by a valuable, technical essay on the analysis of ambers, as well as acknowledgments, a rich bibliography and finally the author profiles.

Introduction

The introduction consists of two sections, although they are not formally distinguished. The first is a general study of amber carvings and their significance in antiquity, with much basic information about the nature of amber as a raw material

and information from ancient literary sources. The second is a chronological sequence of the use of amber in antiquity from the Bronze Age to pre-Roman Italy (c. 4th century BC), followed by two sub-chapters about the techniques and production process of ancient amber carvings.

The structure reflects the fact that the reader gets two (if not three) books in one: an overall but very detailed study of ancient carved ambers from the pre-Roman era, as well as a profound analysis of the fifty-seven exceptional pieces making the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum. The author must be applauded for such a solution which makes the otherwise rather narrow specialisation approachable and interesting to a wider audience of archaeologists and ancient art historians. The range of subjects encompassed within the long introduction is wide. The texts are all well-researched and attractively written, which should be appreciated by the readers. No one ought to feel discouraged by this in every way scientific volume. Causey delivers huge amounts of information but very clearly and with many references that expand our knowledge, not only about the objects themselves but also about the periods and civilizations they were circulating in.

The author starts by contextualisation the ambers as jewellery pieces (pp. 4-7) which served multiple functions: allegiance signals to another person or a community, talismans warding off evil and protecting against danger, valuable items confirming the high social status of the wearer and so on. Indeed, the value of ambers like any other jewellery pieces stems from the precious and rare material they are made of, aesthetic quality, workmanship invested by their makers and finally the perception of those who use them in relation to their community.

Another dimension to which the carved ambers relate is magic and belief in their extraordinary properties due to their nature and iconography (pp. 8-12). The author offers a valuable discussion on the perception of amber by ancient people and for that she primarily uses available literary resources. It is interesting to note that the location of the main sources of amber, far away from the Mediterranean world, generated mythical concepts of its power and properties resulting in perhaps the not so straightforward association of amber with



Fig. 1.

Ship with figures pendant, Etruscan, 600–575 B.C. Amber, L: 12 cm, W: 3.5 cm, D: 1 cm.

Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 76.AO.76. Gift of Gordon McLendon. Causey 2019, fig. 6, cat. no. 7.

funeral practices (Fig. 1). This is, indeed, well-documented by the archaeological findings in Italy from the past seventy years or so. It is true that Pliny the Elder is our first major source of information about amber, as he is for gemstones and related materials; however, as he himself states, he clearly based his treatise on earlier literature. Causey often mentions that amber and its various properties were appreciated for thousands of years, as reflected for example in the works of Homer. One can agree with the author that carved ambers, like many other jewellery items, represented in emblematic form powers such as deities as early as the third millennium BC, as related in the ancient literature.

Pliny is of course a readable and rich source of information, presenting a wide spectrum of beliefs and contexts of amber usage. The discussion in the catalogue section by Causey of the multiple possible functions of amber products makes us aware of the complexity of the thinking of ancient people about them and of the wide spectrum of our own interpretations today. This is why parallel material and archaeological data about similar products had to be collected, in order to understand and interpret these pieces from the collection. Similar to engraved gems, intaglios and cameos (p. 10), ancient carved ambers could be used for multiple purposes at the same time. They could serve as protective amulets, for personal adornment and to demonstrate allegiance to a specific

social class or community, all in one.¹ Another complex issue is the production of carved ambers in antiquity, which according to the author may have been performed by many different crafts people, not all specialising only in carving ambers. Again, like with engraved gems, which are generally speaking believed to have been cut by highly specialised gem engravers, there is a belief that some of the craftsmen could have been coin die makers or goldsmiths, even though the archaeological evidence is not adequate to support these claims.² In any case, the author rightly makes suggestions, taking the view that with an enigmatic material such as amber, no potential explanation for their production and usage should be either exaggerated or denied.

The next sections of the introduction discuss the sources of amber known in antiquity and today: its properties, colour and optical characteristics (pp. 13–36). There are still unsolved mysteries relating to amber, starting with the confusing nomenclature used in both ancient and modern times for the richest deposits located

1 On that matter with reference to engraved gems, see: Gołyźniak, P. 2020. *Engraved gems and Propaganda in the Roman Republic and under Augustus*. Oxford: Archaeopress, pp. 33–38.

2 Zwielerlein-Diehl, E. 2007. *Antike Gemmen und ihr Nachleben*. Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 78–80. Regarding the pre-Roman period and the issue of potential carving of ambers/gems and working in precious metals by the same person, the author of the review shares the opinion of Hansson who sees no evidence to support such a view, see: Hansson, U.R. 2005. *A globolo Gems. Late Etrusco-Italic Scarab Intaglios*. Göteborg: Göteborg University, p. 117.

on the western, south and eastern Baltic Sea coasts. Introduction of some basic facts about how amber is formed, how it reacts to heat and sun etc. is welcomed and helps in understanding the objects discussed in the catalogue, especially their state of preservation (Fig. 2). Pliny the Elder and his encyclopaedic *Natural History* is a mine of information about amber in antiquity, especially its origins and names, but the author has collected evidence of writings about amber from a variety of sources including the works of Herodotus, Apollonius of Rhodes and Ovid. This evidence illustrates the belief of ancient people in amber as a product of water and sun, due to the circumstances of its usual find-places, on the shore or in rivers.

Next, there is a short sub-chapter about amber and forgery (pp. 37-38). This is a very interesting and highly informative account not simply about modern forgeries of ancient artefacts (imitations have included materials such as Bakelite, nitrocellulose, polystyrene, and plant resins), but describing and explaining the phenomenon of the production of fake ambers in antiquity. Fabrication of ambers started as early as ca. 2000 BC, but it is fascinating to observe, on the basis of Pliny the Elder's texts, how the ancients were able to manipulate true amber, for instance, amalgamating small pieces into larger ones. Still, I find this fragment of the book rather misplaced. It interrupts a natural (at least to my mind) path of discussion of the basic properties and usage of amber in antiquity and it would have fitted much better later, as the close to the whole introduction, after the section (page 60 to 90) where the author presents the usage of amber in a chronological order.

After this brief break, we come back to the issues related to transport of amber in antiquity and there is a good account of what literary sources say about its usage in ancient times (pp. 40-46). The reader finds surprising how much of the transport was done by Nature rather than trade which in the case of the famous Baltic amber is evidenced in the literary sources to occur only in the first century AD. There is a well-known passage in Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* (XXXVII.11) about a Roman *equites* commissioned to procure large quantities of amber for a gladiatorial display presented by Nero: his mission was successful. Tacitus's description of *Germania*, written around 98 AD, relates that the tribe of Esties living on the south-east coast of the Baltic Sea were trading amber with the Romans (45:7-16). Some scholars claim that the exceptionally long and detailed description of the Esties by Tacitus indicates an already established trade but certainly it would not have been possible if some Roman expeditions for amber to the Polish and Lithuanian seacoast, like the one described by Pliny, had not previously taken place.³

The most important use of amber in antiquity by far was its application in medicine, in the figurative form of carved amulets. Many of the examples in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum are testified to have been used as amulets of various sorts. The *Head of Medusa* (acc. no. 71.AO.355)(Fig. 3) in the



Fig. 2.
Head of a female divinity or sphinx pendant, Etruscan, 550–525 B.C.
Amber, H: 3.2 cm, W: 2.6 cm, D (face): 1.2 cm, D (back): 0.5 cm,
D (joined): 1.7 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 76.AO.85.1 and 76.AO.86.
Gift of Gordon McLendon.
Causey 2019, fig. 18, cat. no. 10.



Fig. 3.
Head of Medusa, Roman, 1st–2nd century A.D.
Amber, H: 5.8 cm, W: 5.8 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 71.AO.355.
Causey 2019, fig. 1.

³ See, for example: Nowakowski, W. 1992. Barbarzyńcy nad wschodnim Bałtykiem: konfrontacja tekstu „Germanii” Tacyta i danych archeologicznych. *Studia i Materiały Archeologiczne* 9, pp. 92-93 and 96-98; Kolendo, J. 2009. Ziemia u południowo-wschodnich wybrzeży Bałtyku w źródłach antycznych. *Pruthenia* IV, p. 24.

Getty collection was certainly used as an apotropaic application or amulet (*phalera*) like its numerous peers cut in chalcedony from the first to third century AD (Fig. 4).⁴ It is true that no matter what other function each of the carved ambers from the collection may have performed, their amuletic character is evidenced by the arguments presented by the author. This long section (pp. 47-59) is full of useful information. On the one hand, it explores ambers as archaeological objects, apparently very dear to their owners since all of the relatively few securely excavated and well documented amber pendants from pre-Roman contexts were from burials (p. 52). It is interesting that they are often depicted on Etruscan wall paintings, giving us a direct context for their use. This sub-chapter offers many useful comments on the history of medicine and ancient customs and beliefs involving amber.

The second part of the introduction is organised in a chronological sequence starting from the Bronze Age and finishing in pre-Roman Italy ca. fourth century BC (pp. 60-90). Each sub-chapter contains a highly informative account of the usage of amber for the production of a variety of objects from this and other collections; however, there are some common grounds regardless of the period. Overall, one concludes that amber was always a

luxury material associated with the elite. Furthermore, it was often used for production of amulets, mostly depicting female deities and animals or other related subjects. Finally, amber objects were primarily used in funerary contexts regardless of cultural group and time. There is the surprising appearance of a large number of amber carvings in the Mycenaean culture, mostly recovered from graves, as well as in Egypt in the New Kingdom period (1550-1295 BC) of which the most spectacular are two (supposedly) heart scarabs found in the tomb of Tutankhamen (pp. 60-61). Regarding the early Iron Age and the Orientalising Period, an interesting observation is that amber carvings are much rarer than before but still, they are usually found in exceptionally rich burials, this time mostly in Italy. Interestingly, in Greece worked amber was often buried in foundation and votive deposits in sanctuaries. There is a noticeable expansion of amber carvings in Italy in the seventh century BC, but now most of the representations are associated with fertility and childbirth. The most remarkable find from the period is the one from Latin Satricum (Tomb VI), a burial of a high-ranking woman, dated ca. 650-640 BC and containing more than five hundred amber objects (pp. 62-66). As to the Archaic period, amber use and availability dropped significantly and the carvings are much smaller than in the previous period. Between the sixth and fourth century amber regained its importance as a luxury item, best attested by the appearance of large format works, up to 25cm. There is a considerable change in iconography, although, as the author says, protective and regenerative subjects still dominated. The sixth century BC offered some of the best figural compositions cut in amber and a few examples are now in the Getty Museum, like the *Divinity Holding Hares* group (no. 4) and *Ship with Figures* pendant (no. 7). In the fifth century BC in Italy there was a considerable development of workshops producing hundreds of carved ambers in the traditions mixing Etruscan, Italic and Greek elements. Some general trends are observable, like the link between amber and rituals, elite status and the concept of salvation. As a result, Dionysus dominates the iconography of many products, including ambers and engraved gems. Similarly, Greek heroes became popular subjects, related to the aspect of self-advertisement. Finally, in the fourth century there is still considerable production of amber carvings, but it slowly dies out towards the end of the century. Between ca. 330 BC and the early first century BC there were only a few burials with amber objects. Amber became abundant in Italy only in the Roman Imperial period as a result of the revival in long-distance trade. Overall, this section of the book is full of valuable information and references to archaeological findings and objects not only from the Getty collection. It is a very well-written summary supported by informative notes and bibliographical links that can be a starting point to any more profound research on the subject of ancient amber carvings from a specific period.

Of particular interest is the sub-chapter entitled 'The Working of Amber: Ancient Evidence and Modern Analysis' (pp. 78-86). The analysis of the technical path – skills required for carving ambers, preparation of the raw material and finally carving, are explained in detail. It is noteworthy that despite little technological advancement over time, the author spots some changes in approach to carving ambers, for instance, between the artisans working in the Orientalising and pre-Roman periods. An in-depth



Fig. 4.
Head of Medusa, Roman, late 2nd-early 3rd century A.D.
Sardonyx, H: 2.9 cm, W: 2.4 cm, D: 1.3 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 83.AN.256.8.
Bequest of Eli Djeddah. Spier 1992, no. 446.

4 Gołyźniak, P. 2017. *Ancient Engraved Gems in the National Museum in Krakow*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, no. 724 (with a long list of parallels). Henig, M. and Molesworth H. 2018. *The Complete Content Cameos*. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 183-192, nos. 192-204.

analysis of individual products allows individual workshops to be distinguished, although, the conclusions are obviously not as precise as one would wish. The laudable observation follows that very similar processes were employed for production of minor arts products like ivories or engraved gems. Indeed, the same toolkit could be used for all those categories of ancient artefacts, which makes it very difficult to prove whether there were artists and craftsmen specialising only in carving ambers. This seems to be certain for exceptional pieces; however, regular products could be worked by gem engravers and even coin die makers. While technical aspects are very well covered, perhaps a paragraph would be welcomed on the mobility of ancient amber carvers. The interchangeable influences of Greek, Phoenician, Etruscan, Roman and Italic traditions might result from travelling artists like those from Ionia to Etruria in the sixth century BC. This is clearly reflected in the case of engraved gems. Their significant influence on the forms, techniques and styles are noticeable on Etruscan scarabs cut at the time and later.⁵ This aspect is only partially dealt with in the next sub-chapter about the production of ancient figured ambers and mostly from the perspective of potential transportation of the objects with their owners.

Catalogue

The catalogue section is organised according to subject-matter and chronology. Several sections like those entitled '*Orientalising Group*', '*Human Heads*', '*Lion's Heads*', '*Ram's Heads*' have very useful introductory texts discussing general trends and observations, making it easier for the reader to delve into the individual records in the catalogue. These are expertly written with an impressive range of references, not only to similar amber carvings from other collections and archaeological finds, but also other categories of artefacts like ivories or engraved gems as well as literature on the subject and beyond.

As specified in the introduction (p. 2), the ambers were acquired by their donors on the international art market. The loss of archaeological or even historical context is, indeed, immeasurable since none of the presented objects has provenance reaching further back than 1970s (most of the pieces came from the collection of Gordon McLendon). This is a perennial problem with ancient carved ambers from other public collections as well because unlike, for instance, engraved gems, they were not hot collectibles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and due to their limited number they simply passed by among other antiquities. The majority of carved ambers come from unauthorised archaeological activities (p. 87), however, this is very well tackled by Causey who applies an impressive toolkit to gather evidence about potential or possible origins of the discussed pieces. The best illustration of that is the *Orientalizing Group* of the first six specimens, depicting female and animal figurines (pp. 92-93, nos. 1-6)(Figs. 5-6). Causey convincingly argues that these quite early Etruscan carvings (dated to the first half or perhaps second quarter of the sixth century BC) must have come from an extraordinary



Fig. 5.
Female holding a child (Kourotrophos)
with bird pendant, Etruscan, 600–550 B.C.
Amber, H: 8.3 cm, W: 5 cm, D: 5 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 77.AO.85.
Gift of Gordon McLendon.
Causey 2019, fig. 53, cat. no. 2.



Fig. 6.
Addorsed females pendant, Etruscan, 600–550 B.C.
Amber, H: 4.0 cm, W: 10.2 cm, D: 1.3 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 77.AO.81.1.
Gift of Gordon McLendon.
Causey 2019, fig. 5 cat. no. 3.

5 Zwiwerlein-Diehl, E. 2007. *Antike Gemmen und ihr Nachleben*.
Berlin-New York: Walther de Gruyter, p. 81.



Fig. 7.
Satyr head in profile pendant, Etruscan, 525–480 B.C.
Amber, H: 6.5 cm, W: 6.8 cm, D: 3.5 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 83.AO.202.1.
Gift of Vasek Polak.
Causey 2019, cat. no. 12.

burial, or one should rather say burials from the same necropolis, located somewhere in northern central Etruria and that they once belonged to one or more powerful persons and served them as amulet-ornaments or as insignia (pp. 92-93). The analysis of each individual object within this group, and of others, is remarkably rich in discussion of the specimens themselves. For each item, there is a condition report as well as extremely detailed description and finally discussion including numerous references to parallels not only in terms of other ancient carved ambers but votive bronzes, reliefs, ivories, gold ornaments, faïence or shell carvings, among others. Each element of the carving is deeply analysed and commented on, which proves the exceptional scholarship of the author. The catalogued objects were put to long and painstaking study that extends well beyond the category of ancient carved ambers. Moreover, one finds intriguing parallels not only to other objects of ancient arts and crafts but also to the interpretations and ideas concerned. We still do not know enough about the ancient carved ambers manufactured in Etruria and surrounding areas and such distant cross-analogies as pre-Columbian gold objects put into graves (p. 93, note 4) seem odd at first glance, but they illustrate the ideas of the author very well, enriching the range of analysis and making the book of interest to various audiences.

For a regular reader who is not specialised in the subject, this might be a bit overwhelming, however, after the lecture of the introduction, one simply desires to learn more about individual objects and many of them are unique, as Causey convincingly proves. This is certainly the case for the '*Orientalizing Group*' consisting of the most ancient objects within the collection,

mostly figural objects dated to the first half of the sixth century BC (nos. 1-6). They were all used as pendants, most likely carved by migrating Greek artists originally from Ionia, and used in a funerary context. This has parallels to engraved gems: early Etruscan scarabs were also cut in the beginning by Greek artists setting up new workshops in Etruria. No. 2 (Fig. 5) is without parallels and so is no. 3 (Fig. 6), even proving difficult to parallel in Etruscan art overall. Likewise, no. 4 presenting a divinity holding hares, no. 5 featuring a lion and a swan and no. 6 carved with paired lions, have no close parallels in any media. Causey is probably right that these six objects may have belonged to a single deposit and due to their closeness in terms of technique and style, produced in a workshop operating in northern Italy, probably Volterra or Chiusi. Another exceptional object is no. 7 depicting a ship with figures. It also has no direct analogies, however, Causey makes every effort to contextualise it. There are two rare *korai* (nos. 8-9), one of them only fragmentary (the head). The next group is more numerous but still quite diversified (nos. 10-26), labelled '*human heads*'. They are not identified as heads of their owners, commissioners or mourners, but represent a variety of beings including deities, fantastic creatures and daemons. Again, many pieces, like nos. 10-12 (Fig. 7) and 14-15, have no direct parallels in form and style known from other collections and archaeological finds, which makes them unique and valuable for a better understanding of the production and use of pre-Roman carved ambers in general. Regarding animals and creatures, there are six full figure objects (nos. 27-32) among which no. 27 (Fig. 8) is particularly interesting due to the unusual form and its secondary use from the lid of a small round pyxis to pendant. It must be highlighted that, even in the case of more common types like the lion pendant (no. 31), Causey discusses the object in its wider context, relative to its peers and other products of relevant minor arts, so that



Fig. 8.
Roundel: Animal, Etruscan, 700–600 B.C.
Amber, H: 1.6 cm, W: 4.4 cm.
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 82.AO.161.2.
Gift of Faya Frel.
Causey 2019, cat. no. 27.



Fig. 9.

Addorsed Lions' Heads with Boar in Relief plaque, Etruscan, 500–480 B.C. Amber, H: 3.6 cm, W: 8.2 cm, D: 1.2 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 77.A0.83. Gift of Gordon McLendon. Causey 2019, cat. no. 38.

one gets a full picture and many references to similar objects, encouraging further research. This is one of the many advantages of her catalogue entries, making the book a very useful study tool, especially for those who are new to ancient amber carvings of pre-Roman date. The book is a mine of information. Further groups of animals are the popular lion's heads (nos. 33-36), boars (no. 37), and addorsed lions' heads with boar in relief (no. 38)(Fig. 9). The most numerous are rams' heads (nos. 39-53). A bovine head (no. 54), in my opinion a bull's not horse's head (no. 55)(Fig. 10) – the nose, shape of the head, ears and voluminous skin on the neck point to that. An asinine head in profile (no. 56) and a modern forgery close the catalogue part of the book (no. 57).



Fig. 10.

Bovine head in profile pendant, Etruscan, 500–400 B.C. Amber, H: 3.7 cm, W: 3.6 cm, D: 1.85 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, acc. no.: 77.A0.81.6. Gift of Gordon McLendon. Causey 2019, cat. no. 55.

Scientific investigation of ambers

At the end of the book there is a technical essay, a sort of appendix supporting the research of the author. The main aim of the scientific investigation of carved ambers from the Getty Museum collection was to check whether the objects are made of Baltic amber or not. Another goal was to check if there had been some treatment of the ambers with oil or other organic materials and if this could interfere with the identification process. Ultimately, all specimens from the collection have been identified as Baltic amber and interestingly, some were identified as having been in burial-like conditions for a long period of time, which supports the claim of Causey that amber pendants were put into graves with the deceased.

Conclusions

Objects of the so-called minor arts, such as ancient amber carvings or engraved gems, are often overlooked by visitors to museums due to their small size. However, they are powerful and meaningful objects holding as much artistic virtuosity as sculptures or reliefs, as this book proves. The author should be congratulated on the work done to not only describe but most importantly interpret and contextualise the J. Paul Getty Museum's collection. Her very useful introduction, combined with the online edition of the book makes it approachable and of wide impact: the exceptionally good photographs, which can be zoomed in considerably in the online version, supplement the extraordinary texts so that the reader receives a perfect product. This publication is an example for other institutions which hold similar objects to follow. The pieces are given a chance to shine in their full glory and, as Causey's book demonstrates, there are still many discoveries to be made.