



Hmmm...little chisels, some shells, some wood things. What's this all about?

Torre del Greco—the source of miniature art

Did you ever go through your Nonna's jewelry box and discover a cameo among all the jewels nestled in the velvet lining? Did you hold it in your hand? Looked closely and seen and felt the finely-carved lines with your finger? If so, you cradled a miniature work of art. Cameos have an exquisite classic beauty that has endured across generations. Where do these little art pieces come from?

Torre del Greco is at the southwestern foot of Mount Vesuvius, near Naples. It's a popular bathing resort, but the city (more of a commune) is also known for its craftsmanship in carving coral and cameos. The locals are sometimes called "Corallini" because of the once plentiful coral in the nearby sea and because the city has been a major producer of coral jewelry and cameo brooches since the seventeenth century.

The cameo is a small relief carving of a face, figure or scene. In Italian, the word itself means to engrave. According to legend, a cameo will bring health and good fortune.

The art of cameo making can trace its roots back to 3rd century BC Greece. Eventually, the tedious and painstaking technique of carving away to create a face or figure was brought to Naples and now, it's the center of this ancient art.

What are the more common cameos produced in the Naples area and how are they created?

Shells were the material of choice 2,000 years ago. Pieces were typically crafted from mussel and cowry shells and they usually had a gray background with a white face or figure. The concave center of the shell had to be thick enough to withstand the carving process.

Seashells make an ideal material for cameos because of their beautiful semi-transparent layers of different colors or tones. Today, many shells are still imported from Africa and the Caribbean, as certain species have become prized for their coloration.

The most common shell species used in cameo production today are *Haliotissardonica* (try to pronounce that one!), valued for its reddish-brown color and *Cassis rufa*, which features a pale pink outer layer and a darker, more reddish inner layer. Then there is the *Cassis cornuta*, a large shell with a whitish outer layer and orange inner layer and *Strombus gigas*, or queen conch, with its beautiful pink inner layer.



The beautiful Queen Conch pink shell.



Cassis cornuta, a large shell with a whitish outer layer and orange inner layer



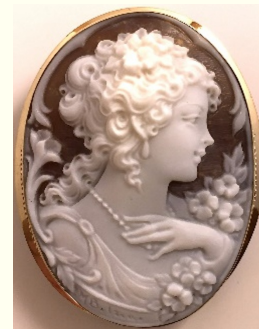
The Sardonyx Shell - Reserved for the best carvings by the most talented carvers. This one will cost \$1500.

To make a cameo from a shell, it must be left to dry for at least a year. Next, the

“scoppatura” is done—the external whitish layer is sanded off with a diamond wheel to get to the translucent pink, reddish, or brown layers beneath. Next, the image is sketched in pencil on the transparent, light layer underneath. Once the outer shape of the cameo is cut, it is stuck with wax to a wooden spindle, making it easier for the artist to turn the small object while carving. The cameo-maker then grinds the edges of the piece down to the darkest layer, which serves as the contrast for the image that emerges from the top. Details of the figure are then engraved with a bulino—a metal scraping tool. As the artist scrapes away the white surface, the colored layer begins to emerge. Once the design is complete, the cameo is polished with oil and pumice, then washed and dried.

Here's a video that takes you thru all the [steps](#).

Cameos can take a few hours or a few days to complete, depending on the intricacy of the design. The first and second ones below are samples of pretty intricate carvings. The third (the woman's portrait) was done by a master carver and sold for over \$2,000. The back was signed by the artist.



Cameos can be killers according to one legend. Pope Paul II was so fond of cameos that some historians speculate the number of cameo rings he wore contributed to his death. It's said that he wore many on his fingers and they “kept his hands so cold that he caught the chill that meant his death.”



*And this proves you can
commission anything for a
cameo!*

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