

A Grand Tour carnelian intaglio set in its original gold ring. Laureate portrait of a Roman emperor, after Antonine–Severan models.

Intaglio 14 × 15 mm;

Original gold ring (bezel 14k, hoop 12k) – ring size EU 57 (US 8 / UK P½); gross weight 5.44 g.

Grand Tour, early 18th century (intaglio and ring), after Roman imperial portraits of the Antonine and Severan periods (2nd – early 3rd century A.D.).

A gold ring with closed oval bezel and moulded rim, on a plain hoop widening at the shoulders, set with a carnelian intaglio engraved with the laureate portrait of a Roman emperor. Stone and ring were made as one: the mount is the original.

Bearded male head in profile to the left. The laurel wreath is bound at the nape with a bow, its two long ribbons falling loose behind the neck. Hair and beard are worked in thick, deeply drilled curls; the eye is large and deep-set under a strong brow. The neck ends in a curved truncation, pointed at the front. The carnelian is of a vivid, saturated red; held against the light, it kindles like fire.

Historical context – Grand Tour glyptic

The head is an emperor's, yet it resists a single name. Its features move between the Antonines and the Severans: the full beard, the drilled curls, the deep-set eye. In the early 18th century, travellers to Rome and Florence ordered such heads in hardstone, to be worn as seals or gathered in cabinets; engravers — in Rome, the generation of Flavio Sirleti and the Costanzi — worked from coins, marble busts and the printed repertories of antique gems. Here the engraver gathered these models into carnelian, following no single coin.

Iconography and symbolism

From Hadrian onwards the emperors wore the beard of the Greek philosophers, and above it the laurel

of triumph. The two claims sit uneasily on a single head, and Marcus Aurelius knew it: "Take care not to be made into a Caesar, not to be dyed in the purple" (Meditations VI, 30). Septimius Severus later declared himself the son of Marcus and had his portraits cut to the Antonine pattern: the face one dynasty gave to power, the next borrowed so that its rule might seem inherited. The intaglio keeps the type rather than the man — power wearing the features of wisdom.