

Lessons from Spartacus, The Gem Carving

When gem carver Christopher Dobranski decided to honour his cat, Spartacus, with a gem carving after her death, he didn't realise that he would learn lessons about patience, technique and respecting his own creative process.

While growing up in Edmonton, Canada, I developed an interest in wood carving, which eventually led me to stone carving. In 2011, I was invited to participate in the first World Jade Symposium with gem carvers from around the world. I had never carved hard stone before, but I won first place for my piece, Dreamspeaker. Encouraged, I decided to move to Idar-Oberstein, Germany, to train under master gem carver Alfred Zimmermann.

In 2015, I moved to the village of Niederwoerresbach, just outside of Idar-Oberstein, with my best friend: my cat, Spartacus. Unfortunately, Spartacus contracted feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and she died on 16 March 2018. Her death hit me very hard, and Alfred was also deeply upset by her passing. I decided that I would honour her by carving her with the skills I'd learned.

The process began by selecting the stones that most closely resembled her colouring. As a Himalayan Persian, Spartacus was a grey-white cat, and thus quartz was my best option. She had wonderful blue eyes, and we tried many stones that simply could not match the colour. Finally, I purchased two indicolite tourmalines that, with palladium, achieved the touch of life and the sparkle that was always present in Spartacus's eyes. Precise plotting for the quartz took some time, and the actual carving went on for months, until the holiday season of 2018.

After a Christmas fair, my teacher Alfred had a major stroke and lost the ability to carve. I finished Spartacus and took the piece to show him in hospital, where he told me that this was the greatest cat carving he had ever seen. Later that night, I realised I had carved Spartacus looking over her shoulder at me, as if to tell me it was alright to go on and she would always be with me.

The Spartacus carving was the result of over 600 hours of work, during which I defined my technique of contrasting high polish with matt details. The method I used for her eyes also became a signature of my work. I believe the eyes are just as important as the correct proportions to any animal carving. The eyes bring vitality to my pieces, transforming them from cold stone to a piece that is as close to living as possible.

Working on the Spartacus carving showed me how to hone my technique, allowing me the space and time to create and producing the highest-quality work regardless of the amount of time needed. There is nothing fast about my process, but every carving since Spartacus has improved in terms of technique and difficulty. I have continued to carve animals. I love how the final carving of an animal, so warm and expressive with character, brings smiles to people's faces. I realise that I not only crafted the carving, but I played a role in the person's joy. I want to believe that everyone has that experience when they encounter my work. When I look at Spartacus and my other carvings I still think 'Wow... I carved that'.

In her carved form, Spartacus has travelled the world to be admired by others. She is currently on display at the Deutsches Edelsteinmuseum in Idar-Oberstein. She was loved by many people in life, and now she is widely loved again. This carving is one of my most profound works, professionally and emotionally, as she was the doorway to what I am known for today. ■



This gem carving, called Spartacus, was cut by Christopher Dobranski in honour of his beloved cat of the same name. The body of the 2475 g carving (10.00 x 10.12 X 19.00 cm) uses a single crystal of quartz from Minas Gerais, Brazil; the eyes are made from 2 g of indicolite tourmaline with palladium from Afghanistan. Photos by Daniel Hofmann.