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CREATING THE PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

The Watcher is carved from natural Brazilian citrine (365.20 g) from Minas Gerais. The eyes are crafted from Madeira citrine and gold while the beak, legs and claws are 18K yellow gold. The Watcher stands on a base of Brazilian quartz with snow-quartz inclusions.

Gem carver Christopher Dobranski explains the inspiration and process behind his recent collection, based on his love for an endangered species of owls.

The idea for the owl carvings came from a species of owls, called burrowing owls, that live in Canada, North America and South America. Their Latin name, *Athene cunicularia*, is derived from Athena (the Greek goddess of wisdom) and Cunicularia, which means miner or burrower. These birds, which are an endangered species, are social animals that live in the burrows created by rabbits and ground squirrels, in order to provide security for their family units.

Burrowing owls are very close to my heart; I have researched them, and I am familiar with their behaviour. Whether watching them in person or via video, it became obvious that each bird has comical, individual traits that give them their own temperament.

A group of owls is called a *parliament*, providing the name of my collection. I wanted to produce a series that represented what I knew and what I was capable of producing, with similar materials that belonged together as in a family. I also wanted to show my ability as a carver and artist, that I could produce more carvings of equal calibre and that I am not a 'one-hit wonder'. This series took five years to design and complete in assorted types of high-quality quartz, including citrine and smoky quartz, from various parts of the world. The series was presented to the public for the first time at Idar-Oberstein's Deutsche Edelsteinmuseum in August 2023.

All the owls have their own personalities and have been carved and finished to the highest quality of work that I could produce. It was the start of a wonderful project.

The first owl to be carved was the Little Professor (in German, *der Kleine Professor*). This piece was made from a single crystal of light smoky quartz, from the mountains of Switzerland. During the development and carving of the Little Professor, I was training under master carver Alfred Zimmermann. Using the knowledge I acquired from working with Alfred

Four of the five carvings in the Parliament of Owls series by Christopher Dobranski (from left): the Little Professor, the Commandant, the Artist and the Watcher.

and my own technique, the carving transformed into a wonderful wise owl with a clear disposition.

I used Madeira citrine, gold and acrylic to make the eyes in the style I am known for. This brought the spark of life to him. When crafting the legs, claws and base, made from 18K gold, I ensured that he stood perfectly on his feet so that he did not require a base for mounting. He was now finished and on his own.

The Little Professor was not only the first of this collection to come to fruition, but it was also the way I found my personal style of carving that people recognise today. It was also the last object that I had finished in the workshop of Alfred Zimmermann before he fell ill.

During this period the designs for the other members of the Parliament in the works. When I started the Commandant (*der Kommandant*), I felt I had no restraints on my technique; in fact, I wanted to push my process to the limit to see what I could do and how much detail the stone could hold. The Commandant was to be a test of my carving. I wanted to portray a marching soldier, one who was focused on a purpose. To make it possible I had to portray motion in an inanimate object.

The first part of the process on this carving was to consult with my best friend, goldsmith Volkmar Juchem. I needed more than just gold pieces stuck to the carving, I needed the gold to be a continuation of the entire carving. All parts – eyes, legs, beak – all had to accent one another so that when looking at the owl from top to bottom, the viewer saw one complete object.

The completed Commandant is composed of a rich champagne smoky quartz from the Minas Gerais region of Brazil. The beak and legs are made from 18K yellow gold, carved as one piece with the stone. The eyes, comprising Madeira citrine and gold, made him come alive. In the base, which was created from a piece of Brazilian quartz, with snow-quartz inclusions, I carved individual footprints inlaid with 24K gold to demonstrate the Commandant marching with purpose. The base was polished, fused with a mirror to bring light into the object and then framed by silver and 18K white gold with palladium. It is supported by 18K yellow gold feet.

As my designing progressed, I thought that every parliament should have someone to make sure the group was in order. So came the Watcher (*der Hingucker*). Made from citrine mined from Minas Gerais, I cut the details deeper into the stone to make her feathers look windblown. This gave her a distinct personality; she was serious, elegant and strong, and under her watchful eyes all goes as it should with the other owls. I used Madeira citrine and yellow gold for her eyes to match the other owls; her beak, legs and claws were also crafted from 18K yellow gold. She was also perched on a base of Brazilian quartz with snow-quartz inclusions.

Now that I had a teacher, a commander and an observer, I thought about what my Parliament was lacking. →

> This series took five years to design and complete in assorted types of high-quality quartz from various parts of the world.

The material for the Commandant, a champagne smoky quartz (502.45 g) is from Minas Gerais, Brazil. Like the other owls in this series, the eyes are made from Madeira citrine, and details such as the beak and legs, are worked in 18K yellow gold. The base of the carving uses quartz from Minas Gerais (558 g), and incorporates 18K yellow gold and sterling silver in its design. The owl's footprints are made with 24K yellow gold inlay.

Christopher Dobranski looks at the Artist (above) as a self-portrait. The owl's head position (shown in close-up below) shows how Mr Dobranski considers the world from all points of view. The owl is carved from a Brazilian champagne smoky quartz (~680 g), with Madeira citrine used for the eyes. Details in the eyes as well as the beak and legs/claws are crafted in 18K yellow gold. The base is Brazilian quartz crystal (~1,185 g), with 18K white gold with palladium at the peak and the feet of the base.

I felt that the group needed an Artist, or *Künstler*. I decided to do a self-portrait in owl form. This carving would show how I look at the world from every angle.

At this point I was very comfortable with reading, plotting and carving the stone. I watched as my hands worked effortlessly to transform the specimen into the next member of the Parliament.

The Artist was cut from another champagne smoky quartz from Minas Gerais, Brazil. Perched high on the 'cliff' of a Brazilian quartz – itself topped by a a peak of 18K white gold mixed with pallladium – der Künstler stands on a base on 18K white gold feet with palladium. As with the other owls, his eyes are made from Madeira citrine with gold; the beak, legs and claws are all carved from 18K yellow gold. He balances on one leg with his head turned around, looking at the world from all points of view, a metaphor for the way I look at things and analyse them. When I finished the Artist, I could see myself in the carving.

As the Parliament progressed, my confidence in the high-detail carving of gem material became apparent. Originally, I planned to have only four owls in this series. But while working on the owls the COVID-19 pandemic began, and many orders were cancelled, bringing much of my work to a standstill. I had started working on a fifth owl at this point, and I was too stubborn to put him down. I had to finish.

This fifth owl of this series, the Philosopher (*der Philosoph*), is my most, is my most ambitious — and perhaps my best — carving to date. While all the owls I carved used the finest smoky quartz and citrine specimens I could find, the Philosopher was to be made from high-quality optical quartz from Madagascar. Alfred had gifted me a piece of this very white, very clean material left over from polar bears we had carved years before. I knew exactly the personality of the owl that was to be carved from this material. A sage, deep in thought while balancing on one leg like a Shaolin monk.

The COVID-19 lockdown was a strange time. I walked to my workshop every day without seeing a soul or

The Little Professor was the first of the owl carvings to be completed by Christopher Dobranski, who created the body of the bird from a light smoky quartz (424.12 g) from Switzerland. Madeira citrine and 18K yellow gold were used for the eyes; 18K yellow gold was also used for the beak, legs and claws.

car on the street. I worked alone all day with no interruptions, and total concentration. This allowed me to fully focus and immerse myself in the Philosopher.

I pushed myself to the breaking point, experimenting with and developing new techiques in order to bring this owl to fruition. During the process I coordinated with my goldsmith and friend, Volkmar Juchem, on how to go about working to make his job easier and have the gold be the perfect fit for the carving. We threw ideas at each other as the Philosopher took shape.

I designed and cut the base, of black Siberian obsidian, with my colleague and onetime teacher, Juergen Christmann. With Volkmar's assistance, we designed a mirror from 18K white gold with palladium to project light upwards and through the owl. It was also the only way to see my initials carved on the underside of the owl.

When he was assembled and I was able to look at my work, both individually and as a group, I realised what I had accomplished with the Philosopher, and the collection as a whole. This is, as of this writing, my best technical and artistic work in gem cutting.

To see all five together, the complete Parliament of Owls collection, is very impressive. I still have to shake my head when I realise that I created these beauties. From start to finish, the process was a work of love and dedication. ■

All photos by Daniel Hoffmann unless otherwise indicated

> This fifth owl of the series, the Philosopher, is my most ambitious – and perhaps my best – carving to date.

The last of the owls to be created, the Philosopher (left) is composed of Madagascar white optical quartz (671 g) for the body; Madeira citrine for the eyes; and 18K yellow gold for the eyes, beak, legs and feet. The base comprises 386 g of black Siberian obsidian and a mirror designed with 18K white gold with palladium. The feathers of the Philosopher are shown in detail on the right.