

BOOK REVIEWS

DREHER MASTERWORKS AT THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCE



By Gloria Staebler and Terry C. Wallace Jr., Jeffrey A. Scovil, photographer

Houston Museum of Natural Science, 227 pp, color illus.
Hardcover, Retail Price \$160

Reviewed by Eric J. Hoffman

In the challenging field of gem carving the Dreheres reign supreme. The father, Gerd, and the son, Patrick, continue generations of Dreher supremacy in the historic gem carving town of Idar-Oberstein. The Houston Museum of Natural Science is hosting (until May 29, 2023) a massive showing of the Dreheres' finest carvings. Those of us unable to see them in person will be more than satisfied with this huge catalog of the exhibition. This is a "coffee table book" and your coffee table

better be big! But it takes a big book to show Dreher carvings in their proper detail.

Dreher gem carvings invariably feature animals from nature, usually in agate but often in other gemstones. Their carvings are famous for capturing the “personality” of the animal and are characterized by a sense of aliveness and motion. There is extreme attention to detail. The Drehers’ ability to “see” the color changes within a rough stone, and feature them in the design, is legendary.



Dreher Mouse

The artistry of these masterpiece carvings is impossible to describe in words, and barely possible in photographs. Photographing any type of carved stone is difficult and is made all the more so by the microscopic details in the Dreher's carvings. Photographer Jeffrey A. Scovil has done a masterful job with the larger-than-life photographs. Several of them bleed across two pages of this large book, capturing every wart on the toads, every hair of a mouse's fur, and every gill on a mushroom. A couple of the photographs illustrate the stages of a work in progress. There is even pictured a carving abandoned half-way through, when the stone cracked during heat treatment.



Dreher Starfish

Most of the pieces illustrated—among the most amazing in the book—are by the late Gerd Dreher (d. 2018). Gerd had the advantage not only of incredible skill and decades of practice,

but also the introduction of tiny diamond-sintered tools in the late '70s that allowed finer detail. A few carvings are by his father and mentor, Paul, and some others by his son (now director of Dreher Carvings), Patrick. You will soon be able to distinguish who carved what, without looking at the captions.

But the reader should resist the temptation to jump to the photographs and skip the text. The carefully researched and well written text provides a complete history of the Dreher family back to medieval times as well as what amounts to a mini-history of Europe from an aesthetic point of view. Dreher's contemporaries are mentioned, including Fabergé, Cartier, and Wörffel. In fact, many of Fabergé's gemstone animals were secretly crafted not in Russia but in Idar-Oberstein, many by the Dreher family. There is also a detailed description of the tools and processes of gemstone carving (p. 83) and profiles of a few of the lucky collectors.

This beautifully produced book will be enjoyed by all who have even the slightest interest in gemstone carvings. A brief video of the exhibition can be seen at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF6YnxsXPWw>.

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