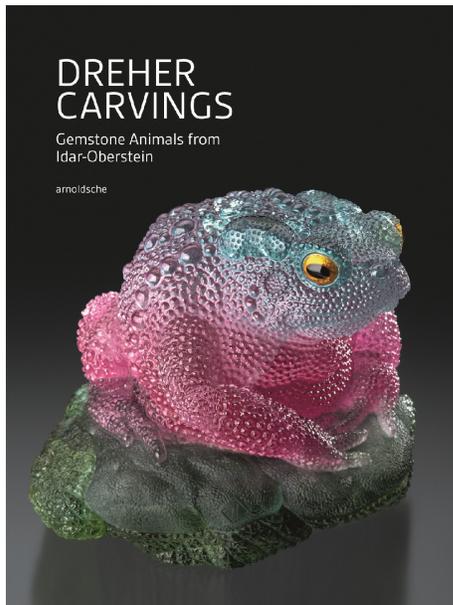


BOOK REVIEW



Dreher Carvings: Gemstone Animals from Idar-Oberstein

Wilhelm Lindemann, Will Larson, *et al.* Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publr, 2017. 239 + (1) pp, color illus. Hardbound, color illus d.j., 11H x 9 inches. \$85.

Lapidary is among the most difficult of the arts to master. To “release” a creation from within a block of hard, tough gemstone requires extraordinary imagination, concentration, and skill. The small town of Idar-Oberstein in Germany has been a center for gemstone carving since at least the 1400s, initially thanks to its abundant water power. And in Idar the Dreher family has been perfecting their carving skills for at least five generations. (Their family carving history likely goes back much further, but all records before 1620 were lost during the Thirty Years’ War.) The current practitioners consist of Gerd Dreher, the father, and his son Patrick. This book is a tribute to their extraordinary skill and artistry.



Gerd Drejer, Crawling Toad, Indian jasper, L 140 mm, 1988

The Dreher's specialty has been small animal forms carved usually from quartz minerals but also from harder stones up to and including ruby-in-zoisite (hardness 9). In fact, between 1890 and 1914 many of the well known House of Fabergé gemstone animals were actually carved by earlier Dreher's or by other Idar lapidaries, to Carl Fabergé's plaster models.

For this book 16 different authors contributed chapters or homages (some translated from German) and nine photographers produced the wonderful pictures. The story of Idar-Oberstein is well covered, as well as the history of the Dreher family. One chapter explains the process of creating a gemstone carving, even including step-by-step pictures of an obsidian hippopotamus taking shape. Although one is unlikely to take up lapidary based on this chapter alone, it certainly fosters a healthy appreciation for the difficult work involved. There's even a chapter on what it takes to photograph these little treasures.



Gerd Dreher, Snail, natural Brazilian agate, L 136 mm, 2003. Photo: Weldon, Robert.
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The main part of the book is “Wildlife in Gemstones,” 143 pages of full size color plates of Dreher creations, including a few extreme close-ups. The carvings themselves are breathtaking. Just when you think you’ve seen the best you turn the page and there’s another even more spectacular. The subjects range throughout the animal kingdom, from elephants down to snails, plus a few flowers. But a surprising number are ultra-realistic toads, which quickly became this reviewer’s favorites. In the 1970s tiny diamond sintered tools came into use and this allowed the Dreheres to detail the fur on a mouse or the hundreds of warts on a toad, each of which must be cut and polished almost as if it was a small cabochon. And before they even start carving the Dreheres carefully consider the spots and layers of color within the raw stone, so as to bring appropriate colors to the proper parts of each little sculpture.

For a wonderful look at the beauty that can be extracted from gemstones-- provided you have the skill of Gerd and Patrick Dreher-- this handsomely produced book cannot be beat.



Gerd Dreher, Communicating Pair of Chimpanzees, black-brown natural Brazilian agate, male: H 90 mm, female: H 71 mm, 2007. Photo: Weldon, Robert. © GIA



Gerd and Patrick Dreher at their studio. Photo: Dreher archives.



Patrick Dreher, Mouse on Geode, natural agate, H 112 mm, 2015



*Gerd Dreher, Mouse on a Mushroom, smoky quartz, L 124 mm
1997. Photo: Weldon, Robert. © GIA. Courtesy of Leslie
Hindman Auctioneers*