

Distinguishing Between Real & Fake Cameos



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Cameos have been worn by both men and women as beloved adornments for over 2000 years. The most popular “real” cameos are considered to be those carved out of shell.

Shell cameos are typically portrait cameos displaying the profile of a woman. Earlier cameos typically depict Roman or Greek gods and goddesses.

The next page shows four portrait cameos, all carved from shell. This ebook will focus on showing you how to distinguish between real shell cameos and their plastic imposters.

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Real shell cameos, circa 1870-1970

Depending on the skill of the carver, shell cameos can also depict elaborate scenes with animals, people and landscape elements. The next slide shows a cameo with a mythological scene of a winged goddess and her horses.

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Real shell cameo, circa 1900

Before we delve into the characteristics of a real shell cameo, Let's discuss cameos made from materials other than shell. Real cameos can also be carved from hard stones like agate, carnelian, and onyx. In fact, expertly carved hard stone cameos are much more valuable than their shell counterparts.

In addition, there are many other natural materials that cameos can be made from. These include gemstones, ivory, lava, coral, jet, and mother- of-pearl. The following two slides display cameos made of the natural materials mother-of-pearl and sardonyx.

Take a close look at their distinct characteristics. When you come across a genuine cameo in the future, be aware that it could be made from a natural material other than shell.

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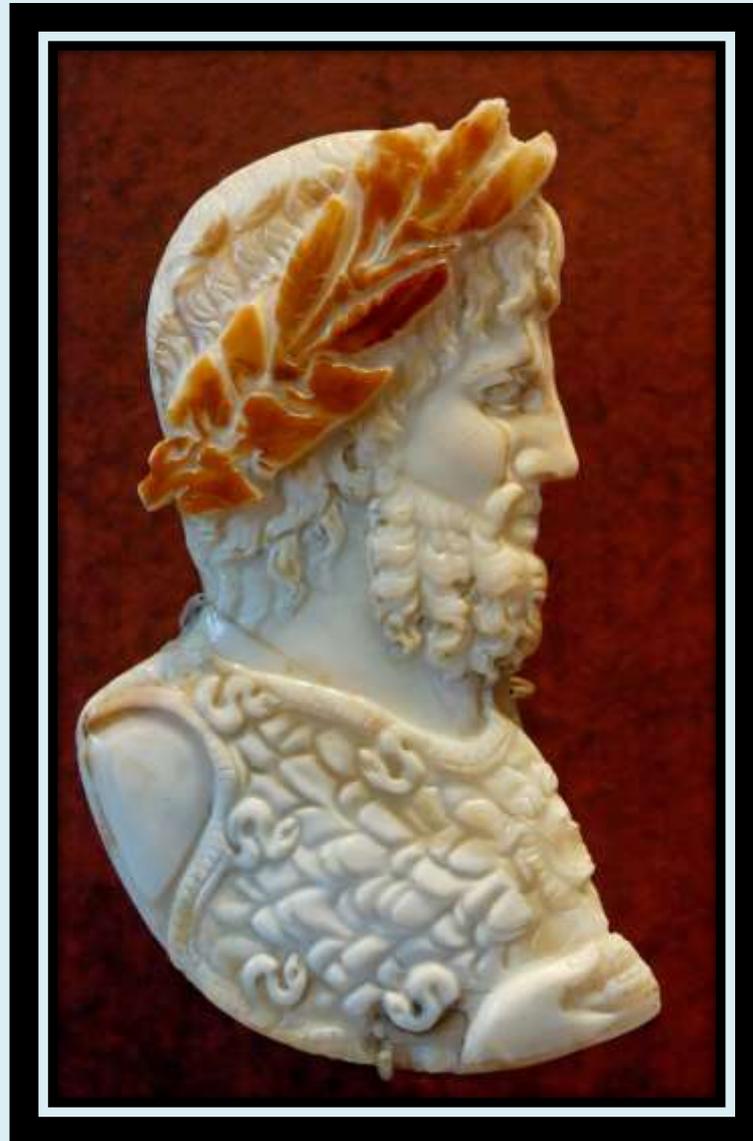


Mother-of-pearl (MOP) cameos, circa 1890-1910

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**Antique sardonyx hard stone
cameo of Jupiter**

**The Louvre Museum
Paris, France**



Many people don't realize that vintage costume jewelry "fake" cameos, which are made out of manmade materials like glass, plastics (nowadays hard resins) and ceramics, can command prices that compete with those of "real" or natural cameos.

Also, there are some Bakelite plastic cameos from the 1930s and 1940s that are currently commanding higher prices than expertly carved shell cameos! In addition, many "fake" cameos are combinations of two or more materials, such as molded celluloid (an early plastic) glued onto glass or stone.

The following three pages display examples of glass, ceramic and celluloid cameos. Take a close look at their distinct characteristics. When you come across a vintage cameo made from manmade materials in the future, be aware that it could command a high price. Such cameos will demand a bit of research on your part. It all depends on the maker, scarcity, and desirability of the plastic cameo to the costume jewelry collector.

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Glass cameo, circa 1960

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Wedgwood ceramic cameo, circa 1975

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Celluloid (early plastic) cameo, circa 1910

The following page shows two vintage plastic cameos. It's easy to tell that the cameo with a black background is plastic. But I included it because its portrait of the pony-tailed girl is a very popular theme in plastic cameos, both vintage and modern.

The second plastic cameo looks deceptively like a shell cameo with its deep orange background and unfamiliar portrait. So how do we know that it is a “fake” shell cameo?

We will look for and try to verify certain characteristics of shell cameos. First, however, we will take a short side trip on the next slide and learn what an intaglio is and how it differs from a cameo.

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Plastic cameos, circa 1965

Intaglios vs Cameos

When you view cameos from the side, they rise above the surface of the object they are carved into. (In reality, material was carved away around the cameo portrait or scene to create it as a protruding component with height.)

However, intaglios are cameos that are carved into an object's surface and protrude inwards, not outwards. Intaglios have three dimensions like cameos but along with length and width, they have depth, not height. That is, if you look at an intaglio from the side, you won't see the carved component because it lies below the surface. Think of intaglios as beautiful, carved craters. You can see this effect in the pair of intaglio earrings on the next page.

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- **Secondary lesson #1: The difference between intaglios and cameos**



Glass intaglio earrings, designer Hobe

Now we will get back to the lesson at hand: Distinguishing between real and fake shell cameos. How do we tell if a cameo is really made of shell and not plastic or resin?

The best shell cameos have come mainly from Italy. They are still carved by families of expert carvers and their apprentices who have been carving cameos there for hundreds of years. (Most hard stone cameos are made by expert carvers in Germany.)

When I first started explaining the differences between real and fake shell cameos, I would mention that they typically have backgrounds with a matte, or dull look. The next slide shows an assortment of such cameos. Indeed, you will come across many real shell cameos with matte backgrounds.

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Real shell cameos with matte (dull) backgrounds

However, I have revised my original tutorial because you will also come across real shell cameos from time to time with highly polished backgrounds. These backgrounds appear shiny like plastic or resin can.

The next page shows two such cameos. Indeed, you will come across real shell cameos with both matte and shiny backgrounds. Therefore, that criterion is not helpful to us in distinguishing between real and fake shell cameos.

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Real shell cameos with polished, shiny backgrounds

The **first useful criterion** that we can use to distinguish a real shell cameo is that **shell cameos typically have concave (curved) backs**. Think about the natural shape of most shells. They are curved. When cameos are carved out of shells, they also are curved.

Often, the curve is slight, but it is still observable if you look closely. Think of the curve of a potato chip. You are looking for a similar characteristic. The next page shows a real shell cameo and its concave back.

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Shell cameos are normally concave on back



The **second useful criterion** that we can use to distinguish a real shell cameo is that **shell cameos are translucent**, like porcelain. That is, when held up to a light source, outlines of shapes on one side of cameos can be seen through to the other side.

The next two pages demonstrate the translucent characteristic of real shell cameos.

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Shell cameos are translucent when held up in lamp light

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Shell cameos are translucent when held up in a sunny window

While translucency is certainly a helpful characteristic of shell cameos, it cannot be used on its own to verify the authenticity of a shell cameo because many plastic and resin cameos are also somewhat translucent.

That brings us to the **third useful criterion** that we can use to distinguish a real shell cameo from a fake cameo: **Real shell cameos have evident carving marks in their backgrounds caused by the knives used to create them.** These carving marks are most easily seen by observing a cameo through a jeweler's loupe which has 10X (ten times normal) magnification.

A typical loupe is shown on the next page.

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Typical 10X jeweler's loupe



What do these carving marks look like on a real shell cameo? We will observe them with a 10x jeweler's loupe. First, however, we will take a short side trip and learn how to use this indispensable tool:

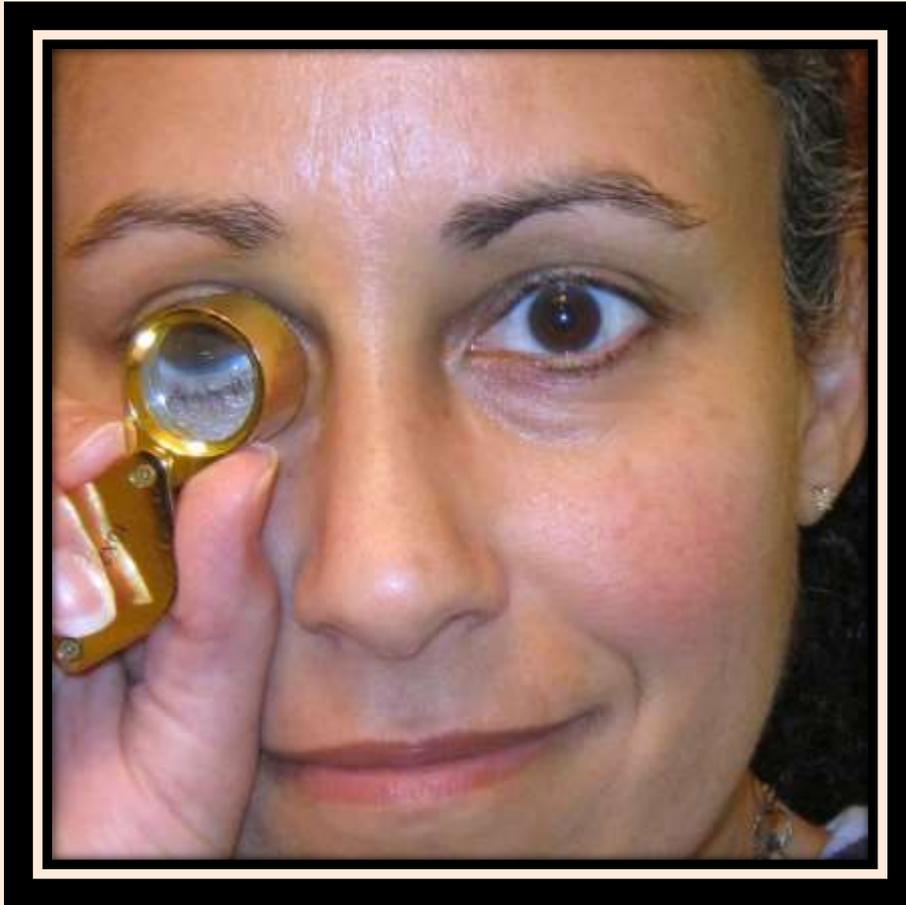
How to Use a Jeweler's Loupe:

The correct way to use a jeweler's loupe is to hold it close to your eye in one hand. You should be able to see through it comfortably without squinting. Adjust its proximity to your eye until you meet these criteria. This technique is demonstrated on the next page.

Next, with your free hand, bring the cameo to be observed under magnification towards the loupe and your eye until it is in focus. Now, you know the proper way to use this indispensable tool! You cannot properly verify whether or not a shell cameo is real or fake without one. They can be purchased for under \$10 online if you are thrifty.

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- **Secondary Lesson #2: How to use a jeweler's loupe**

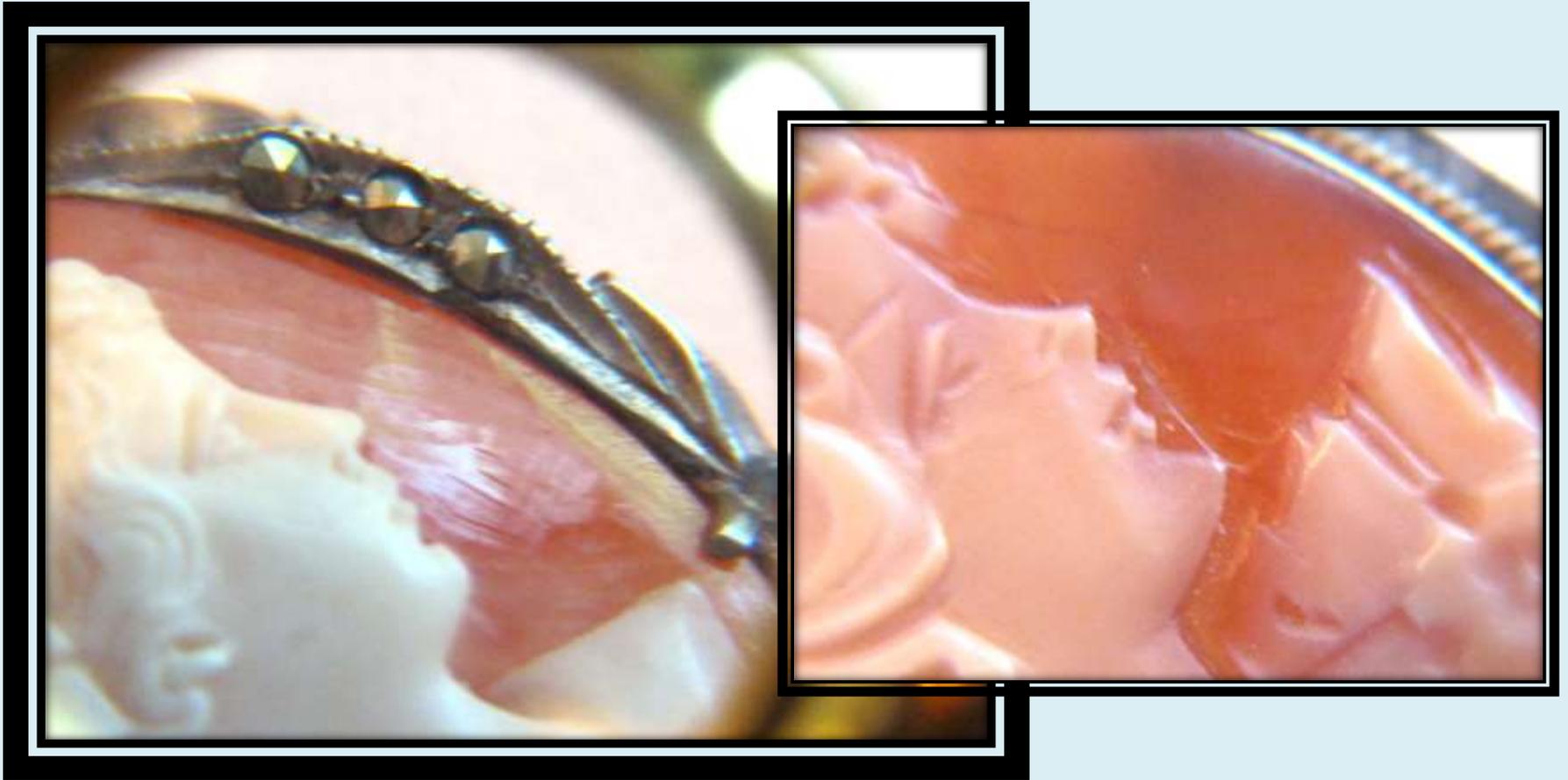


**Hold the loupe
close to your eye
and move the
cameo towards it**

Now we will get back to the lesson at hand: observing carving marks left by the carver's knife under magnification.

The next page shows views through a 10x jeweler's loupe of carving marks on two shell cameos. Unless a plastic or resin cameo was deliberately created to deceive you, you will not find such marks on them.

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Shell cameos seen under a 10X loupe revealing carving marks

Now, let's recap the three criteria we have learned.

These techniques should always be used together when you are determining if a shell cameo is real or fake.

The following page summarizes these three criteria as used to verify a real shell cameo.

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Real shell cameos demonstrate translucency, knife marks and concave backs

In addition to verifying concavity, translucency and the inclusion of carving marks, people rely on other methods for determining whether a shell cameo is real or fake.

Some people can tell by touching a cameo to their wrist, chin, or tooth (I don't recommend this) if it is shell (gives a cold sensation) as opposed to plastic (gives a warm sensation). I am not sensitive enough to rely on this method. Also, many cameos are too small to "feel" them accurately.

There is also an old "test" in which a needle is used to supposedly determine whether or not a shell cameo is real or fake. You should never use this test, as will be explained on the next slide.

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- **Secondary lesson #3: Never use the hot needle “test”!**



Pricking a
cameo with a
hot needle is a
bad idea!

The old needle “test” involves heating the tip of a sewing needle with a match or lighter and then pricking the cameo with it. As the next page emphasizes, **please don't ever try this on any cameo!**

In theory, a needle would go through any plastic easily, but not shell (or hard stone). This destructive test is just not a good indicator.

First, if the cameo is old and made of a soft plastic, you will damage it by leaving a permanent hole in it that any collector would not appreciate. Second, many modern resin cameos are so hard that a needle won't pass through them anyway, so this test can't distinguish between them and real shell cameos!

Back to the lesson:

So it seems that it is as simple as verifying concavity, translucency and the inclusion of carving marks if we are to distinguish between real shell and fake cameos. If only it were that simple.

The trouble comes about when a modern resin cameo which is molded to appear intricately carved and can look just like a shell cameo is passed off as “real”. Then, there is a legitimate issue with the “fake” because it has been offered as “real” and often at the same price that a real shell cameo would command.

The best way to avoid falling for such deception is to study and learn to recognize the designs of vintage and modern resin cameos. Surprisingly, there aren't an overwhelming amount of different designs out there.

The next two pages show screen shots of wholesale websites that offer resin cameos for sale. Study sites like these to become familiar with resin cameo designs.

Pay close attention to resin cameos that look deceptively real and try to memorize their designs so that you are not deceived down the line!

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The collage consists of four screenshots from different online marketplaces:

- Top-left:** A search result for "Vintage Plastic Cameo Mixed Colors" on a website. The product image shows a collection of colorful, round resin cameos.
- Top-right:** A search results page for "Cameo Girl in a Ponytail" on Jet and Carnelian. Two items are listed: "#A237 Cameo Girl in a Ponytail Ivory on Jet 40x30mm (1)" and "#A238 Cameo Girl in a Ponytail Ivory on Carnelian 40x30mm (1)", both priced at \$1.25.
- Bottom-left:** Two product listings for "Plastic Cameo CM144". The first is "Plastic Cameo, Edwardian Lady, Oval, 40x30, IVORY ON CORNELIAN". The second is "Plastic Cameo, Edwardian Lady, Oval, 40x30, IVORY ON DARK CORNELIAN".
- Bottom-right:** A product listing on All4express for "Promotion-11 35mm Europe resin flower, resin cabochon beads, resin pendants, resin cameo, resin craft 100pcs". The price is listed as "US \$ 26.99 / lot".

Typical resin (plastic) cameos for sale on various wholesale sites

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The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying search results for 'plastic cameo' on AliExpress. The page features a left sidebar with navigation categories like 'Jewelry & Watch', 'Phones & Telecommunications', and 'Home & Garden'. The main content area shows three product listings. The second listing, 'Free Shipping~! 18*25mm Lovely Europe Flat back resin cameo ,resin cabochon', is highlighted with a large red arrow pointing to its image. The browser's address bar shows 'http://www.aliexpress.com/wholesale/wholesale...', and the taskbar at the bottom includes icons for Windows, Internet Explorer, and other applications. The system clock in the bottom right corner indicates the time is 7:36 PM on 4/27/2012.

143 Results for plastic cameo

View [icon] [icon] Number of Orders [dropdown] Sort by Best Match [dropdown]

Assurance Plus Seller Online

Free shipping 18*25mm blue resin cameo of fair lady bust, resin cabochon
Material: resin
Shape: oval
Size: 18*25mm
Color: blue...
Orders (7)
Shine He's store--MORE PRODUCTS WILL COME SOON! Online
Related Categories: Beads
Related Wholesale Products: princess cameo, resin cameo, cabochon
US \$0.33 / piece
Free Shipping
Min. Order: 60 pieces
+Add to Wish List

Free Shipping~! 18*25mm Lovely Europe Flat back resin cameo ,resin cabochon
Free Shipping~! 18*25mm Lovely Europe Flat back resin cameo ,resin cabochon,vintage plastic
Yiwu QQ Jewelry Accessories Factory Offline
Related Categories: Crafts
Related Wholesale Products: resin flower cameo, resin flower pendants, resin flower
US \$0.16 / piece
Free Shipping
Min. Order: 100 pieces
+Add to Wish List

Free Shipping~! 30mm bow resin cameo mixed color,resin cabochon,vintage plastic,100pcs/lot
Free Shipping~! 30mm bow resin cameo mixed color,resin cabochon,vintage plastic,100pcs/lot...
ZhongLi Jewelry Accessories Factory Online
Related Wholesale Products: resin cameo, resin flower, resin decoration
US \$0.20 / piece
Free Shipping
Min. Order: 100 pieces
+Add to Wish List

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7:36 PM
4/27/2012

Beware: This resin (plastic) cameo looks deceptively real!

The best advice I can give you is to review many photos of cameos for sale online and inspect many real cameos of the material and time period you desire to purchase.

Also, always make sure you visit a reputable dealer! In time, you will be much better equipped to judge whether or not a cameo is real or “fake”.

Summary: What have we learned?



Real Cameo



Plastic Cameo

So what have we learned? How does one properly distinguish between a real shell cameo and a plastic or resin imposter?

Listed on the next four pages is a checklist of the techniques and tips I have covered in this ebook.

CHECKLIST Page 1 of 4

1. Turn the cameo over and inspect the back. Real shell cameos have concave (curved) backs. Think of the shape of a conch shell from which they are generally carved from the outside to the inside. Those shells are all concave (curved).
2. Shell cameos have a wonderful translucent quality, like porcelain, when held up in a strong light or sunlight. From the back you will see the entire silhouette of the design. (Some plastic cameos may be thin enough to see through like this, so don't rely on this as your only test.)

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3. Always inspect the cameo you are going to purchase under a jeweler's 10X loupe, regardless of the material. Look for tool carving marks in real shell cameos.
4. Some people can tell by touching a cameo to their wrist, chin, or tooth (I don't recommend this) if it is shell or stone (gives a cold sensation)as opposed to plastic (gives a warm sensation). I am not sensitive enough to rely on this method. Also, many cameos are too small to "feel" them accurately.

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5. Because fake cameos that have been glued together layer by layer may contain real and fake materials combined, they may be extremely hard to detect. If the cameo you are considering is suspect, and/or the asking price is very high, you should consider having a jeweler in your area examine the piece for authenticity.
6. The best advice I can give you is to review many photos of cameos for sale online and inspect many real cameos of the material and time period you desire to purchase. (Make sure you visit a reputable dealer!) In time, you will be much better equipped to judge whether or not a cameo is “real” or “fake”.

Final Note:

Please don't try the old test of poking a cameo with a hot needle. This destructive test is **just not a good indicator.**

First, if the cameo is old and made of a soft plastic, you will damage it by leaving a permanent hole in it that any collector would not appreciate.

Second, many modern resin cameos are so hard that a needle won't pass through them anyway, so this test can't distinguish between them and real shell cameos!

About The Author



Danielle Olivia Tefft is a GIA (Gemological Institute of America) accredited jewelry professional. She showcases her passion and knowledge for antique and vintage jewelry in the [Found in the Jewelry Box](#) blog.

She has also been the proprietor of [Treasure Box Antiques](#), an online antique and vintage jewelry lover's shop since 2008. Originally on Ruby Lane, the shop now resides on Etsy.

A collection of her jewelry identification courses in PDF format are available for sale at: www.danielleoliviatefftwrites.com