



# Short Notice

## The Faulty Feet of an Emerald Parrot

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**P**apagei, aus zwei Smaragden gebildet. Eigenthum Pedro II, Königs von Portugal.' This was how Baron Gustav Adolph Julius von Lieven (1852-1903), senior curator of the Hermitage in St Petersburg, described an extraordinary jewel in his decorative art collection in 1901. After the Second World War, by way of the collection of Dr Fritz Mannheimer (1890-1939), the jewel entered the Rijksmuseum's collection (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Von Lieven's description is the first historical reference to this jewel (known so far) and is interesting for several different reasons. In the first place because of the supposed provenance. Evidently the parrot once belonged to King Peter II of Portugal (1648-1706) and at some point ended up in the Russian imperial collection. The mention of emerald, the green variant of the mineral beryl, raises questions about the source and identification of this precious mineral. The Spanish and Portuguese colonization of South America and the discovery of the Colombian emerald mines made this once rare green gem a global commodity from the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> But the most remarkable thing about this jewel is the working of two raw emerald crystals to create a brightly coloured tropical bird that was as exotic as emerald itself in late Renaissance Europe: a parrot.

< Fig. 1  
*Jewel in the Shape of a Parrot, Portugal (?)*, late sixteenth-early seventeenth century with late eighteenth-century additions. Gold, silver, diamond, emerald, h. 90 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-17053.

Although parrots are not unknown in western art history, they are very scarce as a subject for historical jewels. Such examples as exist are usually Spanish, shaped as gold pendants decorated with gemstones and enamel, and generally date from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> Sculptural creations in emerald like the Rijksmuseum parrot are highly unusual. The only comparable object is the small emerald parrot (fig. 3) from the Cheap-side Hoard, the famous buried treasure discovered in London with more than four hundred extraordinary jewels from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> As a jewel, the Rijksmuseum parrot is unique, and as fanatical bird-watchers we focus on the parrot itself in this Short Notice.<sup>5</sup> How unusual was a parrot around 1600? On what sources could the makers of this jewel have based their design? Could they have had a living bird or a stuffed specimen as a model? Did they try to depict a specific variety of parrot and can we identify it?

### Parrots as a Novelty in Europe

The combination of emerald and parrot is no coincidence: it is the colour of the stone that makes this bird identifiable as a parrot. Parrots have been associated with the colour green in Europe since Classical Antiquity. The first parrots to reach Europe before the



*Fig. 2*  
 Parrot Pendant,  
 Spain or Spanish  
 colonies, c. 1550-1600.  
 Gold, enamel, pearl,  
 emerald, 77 x 33 mm.  
 Madrid, Museo  
 Arqueológico  
 Nacional,  
 inv. no. 52365.  
 Photo: Raúl  
 Fernández Ruiz



*Fig. 3*  
 Parrot Cameo,  
 Spain, Portugal or  
 Spanish colonies (?),  
 late sixteenth-early  
 seventeenth century.  
 Emerald, 16 x 8 x 7 mm.  
 London, Museum  
 of London, inv. no.  
 A14273.



*Fig. 4*  
 Parrot Mosaic,  
 Pergamon (Turkey),  
 c. 200-150 BC.  
 Natural coloured  
 stone, coloured clay  
 cones, 170 x 303 cm.  
 Staatliche Museen  
 zu Berlin, Antiken-  
 sammlung, inv. no.  
 Mos. 71.

Age of Exploration came from India. Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) brought with him to the west a bright green parakeet from the Indus Valley. The species was eventually named after him – the Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*).<sup>6</sup> It is this bird, together with the green Ring-Necked Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) and related types, that was known to the Greeks and Romans as the *psittacus* and long determined the image of the parrot in the west (fig. 4).<sup>7</sup> After the fall of the Roman Empire, the parrot disappeared from the stage in Europe for a long time. In the late Middle Ages a few Asian parrots and even Indonesian cockatoos found their way to menageries and aviaries at European courts, but they were exceptions.<sup>8</sup> In this period, the physical absence of the

parrot lent it an almost magical status and it became an important symbol in Christianity. As a symbol of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary through the word of God, Asian Parakeets often played a central role in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century art.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of the New World and the expansion of trading networks in the East and West opened a new chapter in the relationship between the parrot and Europeans. The Spanish and Portuguese explorers came back from South America and West Africa with both live birds and preserved (embalmed) skins on board, the latter with feathers and usually without feet.<sup>10</sup> While the first examples were exclusively for royalty and popes, various parrot species soon became

part of the trade in luxury goods and available for anyone with enough money or the right contacts.<sup>11</sup> During their stay in Antwerp in the summer of 1520, for instance, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and his wife Agnes (1475-1539) received from their friend and the secretary of the Portuguese trading post there, Rodrigo Fernandes de Almada (c. 1465/70-1546/48), no fewer than three parrots. One of them came from the city of Malacca in Malaysia, which was in the hands of the Portuguese between 1511 and 1641.<sup>12</sup> However, this was by no means Dürer's first encounter with parrots, for around 1502 he was one of the first artists to draw an individual study of a parrot (fig. 5). The drawing is of one of the Asian parakeet species and the bird's stance and the look in its eye suggest that it was drawn from life.<sup>13</sup>

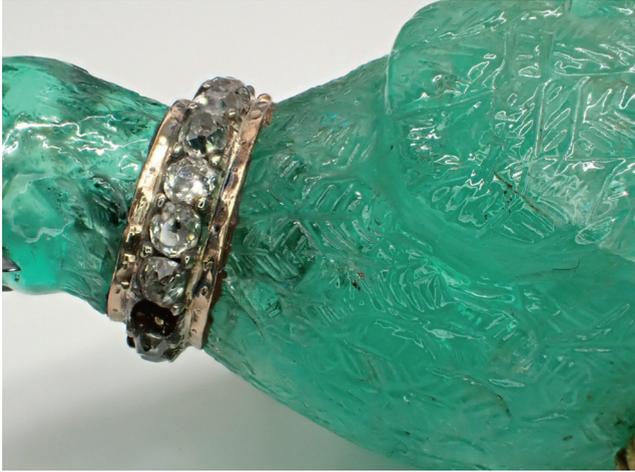
In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, parrots acquired various allegorical meanings in painting, printmaking and drawing and became a familiar motif.<sup>14</sup> In the same period the first scientific illustrations and descriptions of different parrots began to appear.<sup>15</sup> The makers of the emerald parrot would have had many sources to call on, regardless of whether they had a live bird to hand.

### What Makes a Parrot?

The Rijksmuseum parrot is composed of two pieces of emerald, hand-carved and polished by a lapidarist. Unlike diamond, ruby and sapphire, emerald is a relatively soft material (7.5-8.0 on the Mohs hardness scale), which makes it ideal for carving details. The plumage on the body is schematically rendered, but the difference between the covert

*Fig. 5*  
ALBRECHT DÜRER,  
Parrot, c. 1502.  
Pen, grey-black ink,  
watercolour on  
yellowed white paper,  
193 x 213 mm.  
Milan, Biblioteca  
Ambrosiana,  
inv. no. F. 264 inf. 12.





feathers and the wings is evident (fig. 6). The detailing of the head is more refined; the eyes and the strong, short curved bill characteristic of parrots are clear (fig. 7). Parrots have a soft, fleshy typically bare patch above the bill – the cere – through which the nostrils open. In the jewel it is quite pronounced and round. In ornithology, it is usually possible to identify the genus and species and whether the individual is a male or a female from the shape, colour and presence or absence of feathers on the cere.<sup>16</sup> Here, though, there is no specific detailing. It can also be determined from further analysis of the bird that depicting a specific sort was probably not a priority. The relationship between the head and the body, for instance, is not very true to nature; perhaps the gemstone carver wanted to preserve as much of the raw emerald crystal of the body as possible because of the costliness of the material.

Emerald is not the only precious stone used in this jewel. The parrot's body and head are connected by a gold collar set with diamonds; the upper sides of the tail feathers are also decorated with diamonds (fig. 8). Red coloured foil has been placed under some of the diamonds, so that they look quite different. Although the foil has

*Fig. 6*  
Carving of the  
coverts, detail of  
*Parrot Jewel* (fig. 1).

*Fig. 7*  
Collar connecting  
head and body, detail  
of *Parrot Jewel* (fig. 1).

*Fig. 8*  
Tail feathers with  
diamonds over red  
coloured foil, detail  
of *Parrot Jewel* (fig. 1).  
Photos: Suzanne  
van Leeuwen

Fig. 9

ANSELMUS BOËTIUS  
DE BOODT and  
ELIAS VERHULST,  
*Blue-Fronted Amazon*  
(*Amazona aestiva*)  
and *Grey Parrot*  
(*Psittacus erithacus*),  
c. 1596-1610.  
Pen and brown ink,  
watercolour and body-  
colour, heightened  
with white (with later  
additions in graphite  
and watercolour),  
194 x 173 mm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
RP-T-BR-2017-1-4-41.



been affected by a combination of time and (chemical) treatments in the past, the effect can still be seen. The setter of the diamonds tried to create a variegated pattern in the colours of the parrot's tail feathers. However, red tail feathers are found in many parrot species (fig. 9) so this characteristic is of no help in an identification. The fact that the diamonds were coloured in this way does, though, give an indication of the dating of this part of the jewel. Coloured foils for diamonds came into fashion in European decorative art from around 1760, for example on snuffboxes.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of other colours and further details means that it has not proved

possible to identify the bird more accurately at genus level other than as a parrot (*Psittacoidea*).<sup>18</sup> Here only a general rendition of a parrot has been attempted. What is more, this parrot has a 'defect' that is not remotely true to life.

### Curious Bird Feet

All *psittacine* birds have *zygodactyl* feet, which means that they have the toes on each foot arranged in pairs (fig. 10).<sup>19</sup> Two toes in front and two behind provide maximum grip for clinging to a branch and climbing, and for holding food and lifting it to the bill. However, when we look at

Fig. 10  
Zygodactylic and  
anisodactylic toe  
arrangements in birds.  
Adapted from Baron  
Georges Cuvier,  
*Tableau élémentaire  
de l'histoire naturelle  
des animaux*,  
Paris 1797-98.  
Paris, Bibliothèque  
nationale de France,  
8-5-12696 PL.VII, details.

the gold and green enamelled feet and toes of the emerald parrot, we see something different (fig. 11). The toes are *anisodactyl* (uneven), grouped with three toes pointing forward and one back, as is the case in most birds (see fig. 10). It is clear from this that the goldsmith who made the feet did not have a live parrot, a prepared skin (complete with feet), a good description or a true-to-life drawing or print to work from, and so based them

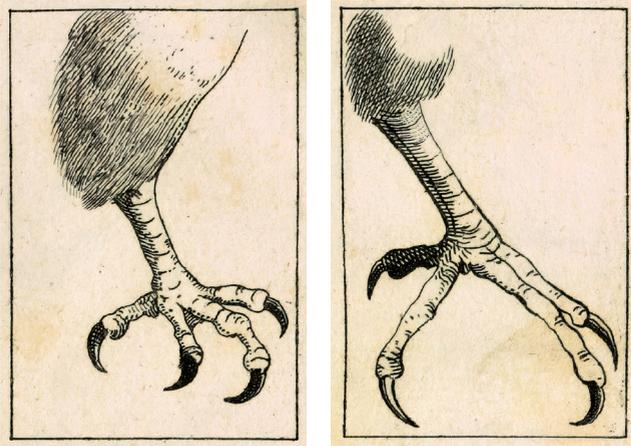


Fig. 11  
Claws with green  
enamel and gilding,  
detail of *Parrot Jewel*  
(fig. 1).  
Photo: Suzanne  
van Leeuwen



on the birds' feet with which he was familiar. Artists quite often made this mistake in the second half of the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth. The famous bird album *Avium Vivae Icones* by the Flemish engraver Adriaen Collaert (c. 1560-1618), for instance, includes a print of two parrots that have yet to be identified (fig. 12).<sup>20</sup> The parrot eating a cherry is clearly shown with three toes pointing forwards.<sup>21</sup>

While the parrot's gold toes may not be anatomically accurate, they are important in dating the jewel and determining its possible function. The colour, treatment and enamelling of the gold suggest very strongly that this element was made much earlier than the tail, collar and even the twig in the parrot's mouth. As we have established, the red-coloured diamonds are a typical late eighteenth-century style device. The diamonds in the collar and the twig are of the same type of early brilliant cut as the diamonds in the tail, and it would seem likely that these elements date from the same period – around 1760-80.



The green enamelled gold feet are much more in line with the style of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century pendants like the *Parrot Pendant* (fig. 2). The period-limited exclusiveness of emerald and the parrot makes it more than likely that the basis of the jewel was made in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. In the course of the eighteenth century, it was altered to suit the taste of the time, possibly as a result of its journey from Portugal to Russia.<sup>22</sup>

The feet also give rise to questions as to whether or not this jewel was originally designed to be worn as jewellery. The three-dimensional shape in combination with the width of the body make it unlikely that the jewel hung on a chain as a pendant or was worn on the clothes. The fine gold chain, attached to the collar and the tail, is probably a later addition that made it possible to display the jewel. The way the feet and toes were modelled suggests that the parrot was attached to something else, possibly balancing on a branch as part of a larger ensemble.

However, the lack of any comparable objects or jewels makes it very hard to substantiate this theory.

Regrettably, it has not proved possible to further identify the emerald parrot in the Rijksmuseum. Although we recognize a parrot in the shape and colour of the emerald, the working is too generic to allow any conclusions to be drawn. We can, however, determine the singularity of this jewel as in it two exotic luxury 'products' – the parrot and the emerald – come together. It is interesting that they share a similar fate, for at the moment the European market became flooded with luxury goods at the end of the sixteenth century, the status of this bird and this precious stone changed – the exceptional became ordinary. Yet the combination of the two around 1600 created a unique object. This was recognized in the late eighteenth century, when the little figure was altered and diamonds on red coloured foil were added. Now we, too, come to the conclusion that this parrot jewel has virtually no parallels and would be special in any period.

Fig. 12  
ADRIAEN COLLAERT,  
*Psitaci* [sic] *duplex*  
*genus*, c. 1575-1600.  
Engraving,  
132 x 188 mm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
RP-P-2013-1-53-5.

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- 1 In the period from 1920 to 1939 Fritz Mannheimer, a Jewish-German banker and collector, brought together in Amsterdam a large collection of European decorative art spanning the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Of the forty-two jewels in his collection, ten came from the Hermitage in St Petersburg. Between 1928 and 1933 the Russian state sold more than 24,000 objects from noble, ecclesiastical and museum holdings that had been nationalized as a result of the Revolution in 1917. See for example Elena Solomakha, 'The Herm, Gosmuzeifond, and Antikvariat', in Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (eds.), *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*, Washington 2009, p. 111-35; Suzanne van Leeuwen, Joosje van Bennekom and Sara Creange, 'Genuine, Fake, Restored or Pastiche? Two Renaissance Jewels in the Rijksmuseum Collection', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 62 (2014), no. 3, pp. 270-87.
  - 2 See Kris E. Lane, *The Colour of Paradise: The Emerald in the Age of Gunpowder Empires*, New Haven/London 2010.
  - 3 See for example *Pendant*, Spain, c. 1600-50, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 337-1870; *Parrot*, Spain (?) and France, c. 1500-1600 with nineteenth-century additions, London, British Museum, inv. no. WB. 165; *Pendant with a Parrot*, Germany (?), late sixteenth century, St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 9-2941; and *Parrot Pendant*, Southern Germany, c. 1560-70, Pforzheim Jewellery Museum, inv. no. 2010/26. See Priscilla E. Muller, *Jewels in Spain 1500-1800*, New York 1972, pp. 76-79 and Anna G. Somers Cocks (ed.), *Princely Magnificence: Court Jewels of the Renaissance, 1500-1630*, exh. cat. London (Victoria and Albert Museum) 1980, pp. 82-83, 113-14.
  - 4 A small hole has been drilled into the back of this cut emerald for setting. See Hazel Forsyth, *The Cheapside Hoard: London's Lost Jewels*, London 2013, pp. 134-37. The Cheapside Hoard is thought to have been a jeweller's working stock, and is named after the street where it was found, once the commercial centre for the manufacture of luxuries. The hoard consists of Elizabethan and Jacobean jewellery.
  - 5 The Portuguese-Russian provenance, the making and the material aspects of this jewel are part of a separate study, which will be published later.
  - 6 The *Psittaciformes* order is divided into four families, two of which, Parrots of the Old World (*Psittaculidae*) and Parrots of the New World (*Psittacidae*), are usually combined into one superfamily: the 'true' parrots (*Psittacoidea*). The other two families are the Cockatoos (*Cacatuidae*) and the New Zealand Parrots (*Strigopidae*); these differ so much from the 'true parrots' that they can be ruled out here. See Joseph Michael Forshaw, *Parrots of the World: An Identification Guide*, Princeton 2006, p. 7.
  - 7 See Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World's Most Talkative Bird*, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 2-3 and Richard Verdi, *The Parrot in Art: From Dürer to Elizabeth Butterworth*, exh. cat. Birmingham (Barber Institute of Fine Arts) 2007, pp. 12-15. There are no known references to the African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) and the grey, green and yellow Senegal Parrot (*Poicephalus senegalus*) from Roman times despite the trade contacts in Africa. See Boehrer 2004, p. 3.
  - 8 See Erwin Stresemann, *Ornithology from Aristotle to the Present*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1975, p. 25; Boehrer 2004 (note 7), p. 23; Verdi 2007 (note 7), pp. 13-14. King Charles IV of France (1294-1328), for instance, owned a large Alexandrine Parakeet. Frederick II (1194-1250), Holy Roman Emperor, was given a White Cockatoo by the Sultan of Babylon; this bird is pictured four times in the Vatican copy of the scientific treatise on falconry that Frederick wrote. See *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*, c. 1250-1300, Rome, Vatican Library, inv. no. Pal.lat1071. In 1496 Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) painted a greater Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo on his *Madonna della Vittoria* (Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. 369). See Heather Dalton, 'A Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo in Fifteenth-Century Mantua: Rethinking Symbols of Sanctity and Patterns of Trade', *Renaissance Studies* 28 (2014), no. 5, pp. 676-94 and Heather Dalton et al., 'Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's Australasian Cockatoo: Symbol of Detente between East and West and Evidence of the Ayyubids' Global Reach', *Parergon* 35 (2018), no. 1, pp. 35-61.
  - 9 See Emil Reznicek, 'De reconstructie van "t' Altaer van S. Lucas" van Maerten van Heemskerck', *Oud Holland* 70 (1955), no. 4,

- pp. 233-46, esp. pp. 238-42; and Sigrid and Lothar Dittrich, *Lexicon der Tiersymbole: Tiere als Sinnbilder in der Malerei des 14.-17. Jahrhunderts*, Petersberg 2004, pp. 322-23. We find one of the earliest examples of this new role in Jan van Eyck, *Madonna with Canon Joris van de Paele*, 1436, oil on panel, 122.1 x 157.8 cm, Bruges, Groeningemuseum, inv. no. 0.161.
- 10 See Stresemann 1975 (note 8), pp. 25-26 and Verdi 2007 (note 7), p. 40. One of the earliest historical descriptions of preparing bird skins is in Pierre Belon, *L'Histoire de la Nature des Oyseaux*, Paris 1555, p. 8.
  - 11 Boehrer 2004 (note 7), pp. 55-56.
  - 12 Albrecht Dürer, *Reis naar de Nederlanden* (translated by Anne Pries), Meppel 2008, pp. 28, 35, 38 and 103.
  - 13 Verdi 2007 (note 7), p. 40. In 2018 the Print Room acquired an unusual playing card with nine Ring-Necked Parakeets dating from around 1499-1510. The lively way the birds are depicted and the different poses make it likely that Master PW of Cologne worked from live examples. See Erik Hinterding in 'Acquisitions from the F.G. Waller-Fonds', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* (2019), pp. 344-45.
  - 14 See Dittrich and Dittrich 2004 (note 9), pp. 322-34.
  - 15 Early scientific sources in which parrots are described are Conrad Gessner, *Historiae Animalium, Liber 111 De Avium Natura*, Zürich 1555, and Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae*, Bologna 1599-1603.
  - 16 See for example Forshaw 2006 (note 6).
  - 17 One of the snuffboxes belonging to Frederick William of Prussia (1744-1797) in the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is a good example: *Snuffbox*, Berlin, c. 1765, chrysoptase, gold, diamonds on foil, 10 x 7.8 x 5 cm, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. LOAN:GILBERT.412-2008. See also Joanna Whalley, 'Faded Glory: Gemstone Simulants and Enhancements', *Studies in Conservation* 57, 2012, Issue suppl. 24th Biennial IIC Congress (The Decorative: Conservation and applied arts), pp. 313-21; and Joanna Whalley, 'Diamonds and Coloured Gems: The Fate of Foils', in Alice Minter, *Masterpieces in Miniature: Highlights from the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection*, cat. London (Victoria and Albert Museum) 2021, pp. 105-09.
  - 18 This non-specific identification is based on conversations with Dr René Dekker, senior ornithology scientist at Naturalis in Leiden. See also note 6.
  - 19 Boehrer 2004 (note 7), p. 2; Forshaw 2006 (note 6), p. 6; Verdi 2007 (note 7), p. 40.
  - 20 This may be the African Grey Parrot, which the Portuguese began to import from West Africa at the beginning of the sixteenth century. See Stresemann 1975 (note 8), p. 25.
  - 21 There are several murals from Roman times which feature parrots (or other birds) eating cherries. See for example *Wall-Painting, Pompeii*, Roman before 79 AD, painted plaster, 11.5 x 24 cm, London, British Museum, inv. no. 1867.0508.1359.
  - 22 The late eighteenth-century alterations are an important starting point for the provenance research into the relocation of the jewel from Portugal to Russia.