



The value of gems, the weight of commissions: research paths between *connoisseurship*, archaeometric analysis, and the social history of devotional goldsmithing

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This paper proposes an interdisciplinary reading conducted on a selected nucleus of *ex voto* jewelry belonging to the collection of the Diocesan Museum of Caltagirone and on two precious liturgical furnishings from the Museum of Sacred Art of San Nicolò in Militello. The initial art-historical investigation conducted on the artifacts, made use of Raman spectroscopy, with the aim of characterizing the nature of the gems used in devotional goldsmith production between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as on older production from the 16th and 18th centuries.

The work is part of the broader context of art-historical studies on Sicilian goldsmithing, comparing stylistic outcomes with compositional data obtained in situ, without the need for sampling. Raman investigations have made it possible to distinguish, with a high degree of precision, natural gems from leaded glass and colored pastes, often employed in middle-class and popular votive contexts. In some cases, the coherence between the scientific results and the typological and stylistic characteristics of the artifacts confirmed the regional origin and domestic devotional destination of the jewelry examined; in others, especially in the case of the liturgical chalice and the monumental monstrance, the use of natural precious and semiprecious gems revealed the adoption of a more refined ornamental language, consistent with middle- and upper-class ecclesiastical commissions.

These results demonstrate how gemmological diagnostics can contribute decisively to the understanding of the social, economic and cultural dynamics that governed the production and circulation of sacred objects in Sicily in the modern and contemporary ages.

The comparison of precious materials and imitations allows not only for the recognition of the intrinsic value of artifacts, but also for the return of a more complete and scientifically based picture of social stratification and devotional practices. From an ethical and transparent perspective of the gemological market, these studies offer fundamental tools for the proper attribution, preservation and enhancement of sacred material heritage.



Fig.1 Messina silversmith, *Chalice*, silver, ruby, zircon. Messina production. Late 18th century (1793). From the church Madonna della Catena currently on display at the Museum of Sacred Art of San Nicolò - Militello in Val di Catania.



Fig.2 Sicilian goldsmith, *Brooch*, gold, garnet, enamel. Late 19th century early 20th century. From the church of San Francesco all'Immacolata currently on display at the Diocesan Museum-Caltagirone.



Fig.3 Sicilian goldsmith, *quindicino ring*, gold, emerald. Late 18th century. From the church of San Francesco all'Immacolata currently on display at the Diocesan Museum-Caltagirone.

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