

Books

Victoria and Albert Museum. Medieval Ivory Carvings: Early Christian to Romanesque. By Paul Williamson. 480 pp. incl. 450 col. ills. (V. & A. Publishing, London, 2010), £85. ISBN 978-1-85177-612-2.

Reviewed by JOHN LOWDEN

THIS MASSIVE TOME, which is to be followed by a volume by the same author on the Gothic ivories at the Victoria and Albert Museum, sets new standards for a catalogue of medieval ivories. It is an exemplary demonstration of the effectiveness of the scholar-curator, the unrivalled expert on the material in his or her custody, able to spend decades in focused research, who then makes the fruits of this learning available to a wide public, both by publication and by well-informed display of the collection. Every item here is reproduced in colour, many in multiple views and with superb enlarged details: never before have the Museum's ivories looked so good.

Paul Williamson, the curator in question, begins by surveying the growth of the V. & A.'s collection. All the objects in the catalogue were acquired before his appointment to the Museum in 1979 (the most 'recent', cat. no.101, accession no.A.40-2000, was in fact bequeathed to the Museum in 1940). What treasures they are: the Symmachi panel, the Veroli Casket, the Byzantine Last Judgment, the Andrews Diptych, the Lorsch Gospels cover, the Basilewsky Situla, the Anglo-Saxon Christ on a reliquary cross, the 'Eltenberg reliquary' (here convincingly reidentified as a tabernacle, produced in Cologne), the St Nicholas crozier head (here equally cogently attributed to a French rather than an English workshop), the Spanish whalebone Adoration of the Magi – objects that justifiably appear in any survey of the highlights of medieval art. But if the author's predecessors were heroic as builders of the V. & A. collection, they were, with the exception of the redoubtable Margaret Longhurst, selective rather than systematic in publishing their findings. Indeed one item, a fragment of a late antique pyxis (no.8), acquired in 1942, is published here for the first time. Nos.115-20, catalogued as 'Copies and fakes', provide an interesting epilogue.

The catalogue adopts a traditional form. Each object is treated individually within a broadly chronological and geographical framework: from Late Antique via Byzantine, Early Medieval c.800-1000 and Anglo-Saxon, to Romanesque, the latter subdivided into German, French and Flemish, Italian, Spanish and English ('Italo-Byzantine' is suppressed). Romanesque Gaming Pieces are gathered together and treated as a separate subcategory. An appendix provides Radiocarbon dating information on ten ivories, although the results of tests on further ivories are also recorded in

the individual entries (e.g. nos.9 and 10). The history of each object's acquisition is treated in detail, and where appropriate at length, and broadly speaking the scope of each entry is variable: the discussion of the narwhal tusk (no.96), for example, is a veritable short monograph.

It is interesting to note that the prices paid 150 years ago correspond to what is still, broadly speaking, the scholarly judgment on the importance of these items. Single late antique diptych leaves (nos.3 and 5), like the later Veroli casket (no.15), cost £420 each, while the intact consular diptych of Orestes cost £620 (two wings, but less finely carved than no.5). The Carolingian Lorsch Gospels panel eclipsed them at a cost of £588 (one 'diptych' wing, but larger than a consular example). (All were bought from John Webb between 1865 and 1871.) By far the most expensive item in the catalogue, however, was the gilded and enamelled metalwork 'Eltenberg reliquary', which was bought in 1861 in Paris in the Soltykoff sale for £2,142.

Of particular relevance for the study of the ivories in this catalogue is the varying accessibility over time of the raw materials – from the vast quantities of elephant ivory in circulation in late antiquity, to its near total disappearance (except, perhaps, in the form of oliphants) and the resultant re-use of previously carved plaques in the West from the Carolingian period onwards, or the substitution for elephant ivory of walrus ivory, and in some cases bone, especially in the Romanesque period. In late antiquity, carvers were able to produce ivory plaques wider than the limits imposed by the diameter of an African elephant tusk (maximum about 15.5 cm.), by assembling several rectangular plaques, partly rebated and partly jointed with mortises and tenons (as imitated in the design but not the construction of the 'five-part' Lorsch Gospels cover; no.41, which measures 37 by 26.3 cm.). Although a walrus tusk measured only 6.5 cm. (max.) in diameter, medieval craftsmen, seemingly in Cologne, demonstrated that it was possible to utilise three lengths of curving tusk, laid side by side, to produce a rectangle roughly 21 by 20 cm. including frame (no.72; Fig.46), which could then be repeated and assembled as, perhaps, an altar frontal. The latter technique was close to that used centuries later in the Embriachi workshops of Venice.

Late antique ivory diptychs were as a rule carved on plaques so thick that they could be reversed and recarved in later centuries when fresh supplies of elephant ivory were not available. They might even be recycled twice, planing off the relief on the front surface before carving it, as well as using the back (no.35 already re-used, was re-used again as no.48; the same is true of no.36, re-used as no.46). It is therefore surprising that the catalogue does not supply systematically the measurement of the depth of the ivories. With the aid of such measurements it would be easy to see, for example, that whereas the back of the Andrews diptych (no.39) appears to be late antique – indeed it is late antique – the thinness of the plaques and the necessarily shallow relief on the front show that the craftsman was



46. *The Ascension of Christ*. Cologne, c.1150-60. Walrus ivory, 21 by 19.9 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

recycling a late antique diptych that had been split vertically in two.

This catalogue presents the reader with abundant information, closely argued discussion and a wealth of ideas. Indeed, the author offers new evidence and cogent deductions on virtually every object that is mentioned. The volume is, in sum, not simply a catalogue of ivories but a fundamental contribution to the history of medieval art.

Some notes on individual catalogue entries follow:

- no.5: Description of the sceptre appears to have been overlooked.
- no.6: Why is the inscription in the genitive case? Is the crudely incised monogram to be read ORESTES V[ir]? The V is conspicuous, but is 'vir' plausible? Does the differing degree of craquelure on the two panels suggest that the object was displayed on an altar, perhaps in secondary use as a pair of bookcovers?
- no.13: The deeply undercut flowers resemble the 'Blütenblattstil' of manuscript illumination and cloisonné enamel of c.950 onwards.
- no.14: Assembled from 'paper thin', i.e. recycled ivory?
- no.15: The duplicates of the Veroli casket still raise questions; see also nos.16 and 18 below. Are the panels of recycled material? Note how top and front are both assembled from ivory plaques 15.5 cm. and 13.7 cm. long. Odd that all four front and back panels are assembled from two pieces, given they are not very large.
- no.16: The thinness and condition of this panel resembles the casket in Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid (see no.15), not the condition of Veroli. But Carbon 14 dating (95% probability of date in range 769-981) is consistent with the art-historical date of this object; a pity there is no Carbon 14 date for Veroli.
- no.18: The condition of the ivory plaque on the top of this casket is consistent with no.16 and the Madrid casket, but not with Veroli (no.15).
- no.24: Described as 'very thin', i.e. recycled ivory?
- no.25: Naming of Theotokos (MHP ΘV) and Child (IC XC) by inscriptions incised on figures seems most unusual.
- no.28: Recycled late antique diptych wing? How thick?
- no.29: Worn as an enkolpion?
- no.30: Recycled late antique plaque? Thickness?
- no.33: 'Paper thin', i.e. recycled ivory?
- nos.35/48: Twice recycled late antique plaque?
- nos.36/46a: Twice recycled late antique plaque?
- nos.37/46b: Twice recycled late antique plaque?
- no.44: How thin? Recycled ivory?
- no.47: (Two plaques) 'Extraordinarily thin'; recycled ivory?

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no.54: Carbon 14 dating (663–774) suggests plaque was recycled? Christ in Majesty.
 no.80: Carbon 14 dating (668–778) suggests plaque was possibly recycled. Described as ‘extremely thin’. Christ in Majesty; strange coincidence with no.54.
 no.90: Carbon 14 dating (886–1012) is puzzling, as is appearance of ivory and attribution to Central Italy about 1200–30(?).

Monumenti d’avorio. I dossali degli Embriachi e i loro committenti. By Michele Tomasi. 442 pp. incl. 77 b. & w. ills. (Edizioni della Normale, Pisa, 2010), €30. ISBN 978–88–7642–326–0.

Reviewed by GLYN DAVIES

IN 1822, ON his way from Milan to see his close friend Lord Byron in Pisa, John Cam Hobhouse visited the Certosa of Pavia and noted a ‘curiously carved hippopotamus tooth ivory sculpture, representing some scripture history’.¹ The sculpture in question was the Certosa’s huge triptych altarpiece, carved from bone, not hippopotamus tooth, which has long been the most famous production of the Embriachi workshop. This bone-carving shop was under the control of the merchant-entrepreneur and diplomat Baldassare Ubriachi (or Embriachi), and was active in the last years of the fourteenth century in Florence and later Venice. Although the Certosa’s altarpiece has long been celebrated, the other surviving Embriachi altarpieces have figured rather less prominently in scholarly discussions. Michele Tomasi’s much anticipated new book is an attempt to take Embriachi altarpieces out of the confines of ivory studies and into the wider art-historical debates surrounding the role of altarpieces, international exports and patronage in late medieval culture.

Given that the Certosa altarpiece features prominently in the literature, this book concentrates on the other surviving altarpieces in Paris, New York, Lyon and London. It has a clear and lucid structure, divided into four chapters that discuss the critical history and provenance of the surviving works; the evidence for the Embriachi *bottega* itself; the role of the patron; and the typology, manner of production and style of the works. This is followed by a valuable catalogue of the corpus of Embriachi altarpieces and a substantial *précis* of the text in French. The black-and-white illustrations, despite the book’s small size, are for the most part admirably clear.

Appropriately sensitive to the role played by the afterlife of the object, Tomasi begins by tracing the post-medieval fortunes of the Embriachi altarpieces. Students of the history of collecting will find much interesting material here. To Tomasi’s research can be added a further note on the history of the triptych now at the Metropolitan Museum, which by 1912 was in the hands of J. Pierpont Morgan. Tomasi is unsure of the date Morgan acquired the triptych, but the papers of Morgan’s son Jack show that it was bought from the Italian diplomat and gambler Costanzo

Cagnola in the summer of 1912 in Paris, with the art dealer Ercole Canessa acting as intermediary.²

The section on Baldassare and his workshop is probably the best in the book, summing up the most recent ideas, some already published by Tomasi himself, but adding new and perceptive observations, as well as offering new documents (presented in an appendix). These include a humorous sonnet of advice on love to Baldassare by the Florentine poet Alberto degli Albizi, which Tomasi uses to explore Baldassare’s place in the literary culture of Florence. Importantly, he cogently argues for a ‘long’ dating of the workshop, placing it first of all in Florence, perhaps as early as the 1370s, and operating until 1416 or even beyond. The evidence of portable Embriachi triptychs with paintings datable to the 1420s on the outsides of the shutters provides further support for these conclusions.

Although carefully argued, the section setting the altarpieces into the wider context of high patronage in late fourteenth-century France is rather less successful. For example, Tomasi intricately explores the significance of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist to Jean, duc de Berry, and Jeanne de Boulogne, patrons of the Louvre altarpiece. It may be objected that the Baptist is prominent on a number of the other large-scale altarpieces, as well as on portable Embriachi triptychs, and indeed the pairing of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist was a commonplace on Italian painted altarpieces of the period.³ Therefore, the emphasis on the life of the Baptist need not reflect Jean de Berry’s detailed requirements. More interesting is the fruitful observation that the arrangement of the apsidal glass in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris may have been the ultimate source for that of the Louvre altarpiece, allowing Tomasi to insert it into a wider narrative of the Valois emulation of their saintly predecessor, Louis IX.

The final chapter addresses the format and style of the altarpieces. Here, Tomasi rightly stresses the overwhelmingly Florentine character of the shop’s productions, comparing the best work of the *bottega*, under its *capomaestro*, Andrea di Jacopo, to the sculpture of Andrea Pisano, the silver altars in Pistoia and Florence, and above all to the Orcagna workshop. For Tomasi, the Embriachi altarpieces are a barometer of what were regarded as the most canonical compositions in Florence. The book concludes with a skilful summary of the shop’s working methods and speculations on its internal organisation. *Monumenti d’Avorio* becomes at a stroke the standard reference work for Embriachi carvings as a whole, and its impact will be felt for many years.

¹ P. Cochran, ed.: *The Diary of John Cam Hobhouse*, available online at: www.petercochran.wordpress.com/hobhouses-diary/, entries for 1822, p.91.

² New York, Morgan Library, J.P. Morgan Jr Papers, box 205, file 340. I am grateful to Flaminia Gennari Santori for providing me with this reference and for giving her permission to publish it.

³ H. van Os: *Sienese Altarpieces 1215–1460: form, content, function*, Groningen 1988–90, I, pp.45 and 66; and II, pp.151 and 156.

Il Collezionismo d’arte a Venezia. Dalle origini al Cinquecento. Edited by Michel Hochmann, Rosella Lauber and Stefania Mason. 424 pp. incl. 57 col. + numerous b. & w. ills. (Marsilio Editori with the Fondazione di Venezia, Venice, 2008), €35. ISBN 978–88–317–97146.

Reviewed by NICHOLAS PENNY

THIS IS THE first volume in a new series, *Il Collezionismo d’arte a Venezia*, under the editorship of Stefania Mason. It consists of ten essays which cover many of the chief aspects of this subject, together with a few minor ones. These are carefully co-ordinated so that there are no awkward overlaps or obvious omissions. Even when the authors have already published much on their topics (as, for example, Irene Favaretto has on antiques or Michel Hochmann on the Grimani), there is no stale repetition. These essays are followed by forty-three entries on individual collectors, arranged alphabetically, in smaller type and intended more for reference than continuous reading. There is also an appendix of important wills and inventories which have never been previously published.

Wills and inventories are referred to on almost every page. We can almost believe we hear the voices of the old bed-ridden patricians and we easily imagine ourselves rummaging in their chests, but it is exceptionally rare for us to envisage the rooms. Appropriately, however, the publication of this book coincided with the opening of Palazzo Grimani near S. Maria Formosa after more than a decade of restoration and we can now visit several of the most daring and original architectural interiors created in sixteenth-century Italy. The architecture only makes sense when it is realised that it was devised to provide niches, corbels and pedestals for a collection of ancient marble sculpture. Other rooms in the palace are conceived as large inside-out equivalents of the ebony cabinet encrusted with precious stones which was perhaps the most prized item possessed by the family in the later decades of the century. A further reminder of how central the study of collecting is for an understanding of Venetian art in general is provided by Palazzo Grimani’s highly ornate vaults in which frescos are mingled with stucco reliefs based on the ancient gems then in the family collection.

Extracts from the wills and inventories of collectors were first presented to a large public by the ardent antiquary Pompeo Molmenti in his *La Storia di Venezia nella vita privata* over a century ago. Such documents have, over the last thirty years, been more systematically investigated and analysed by social historians concerned to trace the origins of consumerism in ‘early modern’ Europe, resolutely demonstrating their clinical prowess by classing even the most spectacular or glamorous works of art as specimens of ‘material culture’. This approach is reflected here by Isabella Cec-