

MEDIEVAL IVORIES FROM THE THOMSON COLLECTION ON VIEW IN LONDON

A selection of around 45 of the finest medieval ivories from the Thomson collection will go on display in The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, London, from **10 January to 9 March 2008**. These works will form part of the new displays of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, Canada, which is in the final phase of a major rebuilding programme led by the architect Frank Gehry. One highlight of the AGO's transformation will be the unveiling of the magnificent collection formed by the late Kenneth Thomson, Lord Thomson of Fleet and Northbridge (1923-2006). The Thomson collection comprises Canadian paintings, First Nations objects, European works of art including Peter Paul Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents* (currently on loan to the National Gallery in London) and outstanding medieval works of art.

The Thomson collection contains examples of the highest quality of most types of medieval ivory carving, both secular and religious. These include large statuettes of the Virgin and Child intended to stand on altars in chapels, small versions for private use in the home and folding tablets or diptychs with scenes from the life of Christ carved in relief. Alongside these are beautiful small carved writing tablets, boxes and caskets, combs, hair parters, mirror cases with scenes of romantic encounters between elegant young men and women, and a rare set of carving and serving knives with fabulous beasts decorating the ivory handles. A series of grisly *memento mori* beads, designed to remind us of our own mortality, show heads on one side and worm-eaten skulls on the other (fig 1a-c). The display will also include the magnificent Dormeuil Diptych of the Passion of Christ, Paris, c.1350-75, which was last exhibited in 1913, and was acquired by the Thomson collection in November 2007 (fig.2). This work appears to be the largest Passion diptych recorded, measuring 24.7 by 31.4 cm when open. It is thought to have been made in the Parisian workshop of the Passion diptychs, which was responsible for some of the finest ivory carvings of the 14th century.

Visitors to The Courtauld Gallery will also have the opportunity to see the astonishing Nativity and Last Judgement diptych (fig.3) which until recently had been dismissed as a forgery. Carbon-14 dating has established that the ivory from which the object was carved dated from the 12th or 13th century. As a result of these findings, scholars, who had previously considered the carving 'too good to be medieval', have had to think again. Visitors will be able to make up their own minds when they see the exquisitely carved figures rising from their tombs.

Among the highlights of the secular ivories on display is a delicately carved and richly narrative 15th-century ivory comb, decorated with a four-wheeled carriage drawn by a horse and a mule, which is transporting two couples to the mythical fountain of youth (fig. 4). To the left, the rejuvenated couples are depicted frolicking in the waters, the ladies nude save for their elaborate hairstyles. Such exceptional and detailed carving is a testament to the skills of medieval craftsmen as ivory, which was usually sourced from African elephants, is one of the hardest and most resistant materials to carve.

Another wonderful piece is the small folding ivory tabernacle which would have been used for personal devotion while travelling (fig.5). Working with a block of ivory taken from the very centre of the tusk, the sculptor cut away most of the material so as to form a standing Virgin and Child under a canopy supported on slender columns. He then sliced thin panels off the sides and front of the block and carved them with scenes from Christ's life in low relief. The hinged panels serve as small doors to both protect the carved surfaces when closed and act as wings of a miniature altarpiece when open.

A catalogue of the medieval ivories and works of art in the Thomson collection, co-authored by Professor John Lowden, of the Courtauld Institute of Art, and John Cherry, formerly of the British Museum, will be published to coincide with the reopening of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Notes to Editors:

Ken Thomson, who built the media business his father started into one of the largest family fortunes in the world, was no mere trophy gatherer. It is not too much to say that he made sense of the world through art. A matter of passionate commitment no less than of wide-ranging cultural curiosity, his journey as a collector began in 1953 during a visit to Bournemouth in England and continued to the end of his life. In 2002 he announced his decision to exhibit his collections at the AGO and made significant contributions towards the expansion, refurbishment and operation of the museum. In the transformed AGO there will be three suites of galleries located on three floors devoted to the Thomson collection: European works of art which include the precious 12th century Malmesbury chasse, the companion to the Thomas Becket casket now in the Victoria and Albert Museum; Canadian paintings, Inuit and First Nations objects; and historic European ship models. The Thomson Canadian galleries will give access to a stunning sculpture promenade running the whole length of the building behind Gehry's signature curved wood and glass façade.

Location: The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
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Opening hours: Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm

Admission: Included in admission to permanent collection:
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00; free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm
Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged

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