

John Lowden, *Medieval and Later Ivories in the Courtauld Gallery, Complete Catalogue*, London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2013

In late 2013, The Courtauld Gallery published a book on Thomas Gambier Parry's collection of ivories that has been a part of the gallery since 1966. *Medieval and Later Ivories in the Courtauld Gallery* presents for the first time in a scholarly catalogue twenty-eight works in ivory from approximately 1100–1700. The book is divided into two parts: introductory essays and catalogue. The texts are mostly written by John Lowden, professor at The Courtauld Institute.

The importance of the collection lies not only in its individual works but also in the relatively well-preserved collection as a whole, representing an interesting example of the personal taste of a nineteenth-century English collector. Thomas Gambier Parry (1816–1888) is mostly known as an important collector of Italian Trecento and Quattrocento paintings, but he also collected other “curiosities”, including ivories. Research on Thomas Gambier Parry and the history of his collection includes, most notably, the special, March 1967 issue of *The Burlington Magazine*, published on the occasion of The Courtauld Institute's acquisition of Parry's bequest¹.

The catalogue includes a chapter, written by Alexandra Gerstein, on the figure of Parry and the development of his collection now in The Courtauld Institute. Gerstein describes Parry as an active man intensely focused on knowledge of art. Parry's collecting skills become more apparent as art historians gradually process his collection. His group of ivories contains pieces that can be stylistically connected with the production of important ivory-carving workshops.

In 1967, Julian Gardner wrote the first art historical reflection on several ivories from Parry's collection and published it in the above-mentioned issue of *The Burlington Magazine*². In the same year, fifteen ivory pieces were presented in *The Gambier-Parry Collection: Provisional Catalogue*³. Although most of the ivory carvings have been on display since 1967 – when Parry's collection became part of The Courtauld Gallery –, they have not raised a significant response.

One of the main reasons for publishing the catalogue was therefore to give both the general and expert public access to the individual ivories, as Lowden explains in his introduction to the book. The entries read well and some of the introductory sub-chapters give a comprehensive outline of the whole field, describing the technical properties of the material and the ways in which it was acquired and traded. The essays also mention very briefly the history of the use of ivory, its classification into periods, and the material's attainability in Europe. Some themes, however, are entirely absent (e.g. the exclusiveness of the material and its specific clientele; ivory's portability and the way motifs and artistic patterns spread as a result; the small scale and its influence on the appearance of the work of art, and the centers of ivory production). Understandably, the scope of the book is limited, focused on presenting the collection without trying to cover all themes. It is, however, unclear why the introduction emphasizes some themes while omitting others.

As ivory sculptures could be easily moved, one can assume that they helped spread compositional patterns and contributed to their application in other art media⁴. In this respect, the sub-chapter titled *Gothic Ivories and the Movement of Ideas* is particularly intriguing. Lowden points to strong affinities within the ivory medium. The question of the mutual resemblance of medieval artworks, often over time and great distances, has traditionally attracted the attention of art historians in connection with, for example, the so-called Beautiful Style⁵, fifteenth-century Dutch painting⁶, or the development of print⁷. Ivory carving is another example of this artistic approach. Lowden draws attention to minute alterations in what are otherwise almost exact repetitions and asks whether the artist wanted to demonstrate his individual approach and independence from workshop drawings.

- 1 Editorial, *The Burlington Magazine*, 768 (1967), pp. 111–112; Anthony Blunt, “The History of Thomas Gambier Parry's Collection”, *ibidem*, pp. 112–171; In 1993, The Courtauld Gallery organized an exhibition called *Thomas Gambier Parry as Artist and Collector*, accompanied by a catalogue of the same title.
- 2 Julian Garder, “The Ivories in Gambier-Parry Collection”, *The Burlington Magazine*, 768 (1967), pp. 139–144.
- 3 Anthony Blunt, *The Gambier-Parry Collection: Provisional Catalogue*, London 1967, pp. 47.
- 4 For example Paul Williamson, “Symbiosis across Scale: Gothic Ivories and Sculpture in Stone and Wood in the Thirteenth Century”, in *Images in Ivory, Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, Peter Barnet ed, Detroit 1997, pp. 39–45, sp. p. 45.
- 5 For example Kaliopy Chamonikola, cat. n. 117, in *Charles IV - Emperor by the grace of God: culture and art in the reign of the last of the Luxembourgs 1347–1437*, catalogue of the exhibition (Prague, Prague Castle 2006), Bamberg 2006.



This may be true to a certain extent, however, the small changes rather seem to result from practices of combining typical of medieval artist/craftsman, who would combine well-tried and fixed elements – both in composition and in the details – into a new whole. The need to create something new was not so strong, and the quality of the work was measured by its different aspects, such as intelligibility, correctness, functionality, and correspondence with “fashion”. The question of “originality” or the lack thereof is of course also connected with the actual functioning of individual workshops: if innovation were not so important on the larger scale, the workshop would have had no reason to abandon its tried and true patterns.

The phenomenon of the mutual interconnection of ivory carving and cathedral sculpture is illustrated in the example of the Passion Diptych (cat. n. 14, around 1350–1370). Lowden focuses on the iconographic motif of a page leading horses in a scene of the Adoration of the Magi. He finds a possible pre-figuration in the Chartres Cathedral in the fragment of the choir screen (around 1240) and later in Parisian illuminators’ workshops of the first half of the fourteenth century, which may have kept the motif alive and passed it on to Parisian ivory carvers. This possibility seems very likely. One may add, however, that the roots of this motif are older, as the horse heads on the edge of the scene, which enrich the composition with the allusion to the three magi’s journey, another narrative element, can be found on enamels from the end of the twelfth century⁸. It is interesting to note that altarpieces from the so-called group of the Great Passion Diptychs, which includes cat. n. 14, were precious, popular, and frequently “imitated,” with the result that the motifs from these altars recur on other ivories that are assumed to be of, for example, German or English provenance. Comparing ivory carvings with other kinds of sculpture, such as the cathedral sculpture, may help determine their approximate date of origin.

The catalogue section presents the results of art historical research on each of the twenty-eight artworks. Three ivories, which rightly deserve their own entries, have been missing since 1982. Out of respect to the collection as a whole, Lowden briefly analyzes five ivory pieces sold by Parry’s son Ernst Gambier-Parry in the 1920s (Appendix 1).

Lowden arranges the works chronologically. This appears to be the most logical solution, even though it is not possible to determine the exact dates and origins of the artworks. Four pieces were selected

for radiocarbon analysis. The author devotes an independent sub-chapter to the downsides of this analysis and examines the results in Appendix 3.

The oldest work is the whole group dates to around 1100. Three carvings originated from before 1300, while most of the other objects (11 pieces) date to the fourteenth century. There are six works from the fifteenth century (one of which is debatable and may have been made in the nineteenth century). The only medallion from the whole collection represents the art of the sixteenth century, even though its authenticity too is uncertain. The remaining six works are baroque.

Ivory has a wide range of uses, and this is partly reflected in the structure of the collection. It contains highly masterful diptychs and triptychs, as well as a Madonna sculpture—types that had become widespread as private devotion developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There are also practical objects among the artworks, such as the front cover of a set of writing tables, and a *gravoir* (hair parter, no more used for its original purpose). Examples of applied art include different kinds of wedding cases and boxes, often decorated with romantic scenes.

The modern history of the individual artifacts is well known thanks to Parry himself and his descendants. The collection comes with a handwritten catalogue containing the owner's notes, and a typed transcription, also complemented with Parry's later observations. During his frequent travels, Parry wrote diaries, which unfortunately have not been completely preserved. Lowden works with all of these usually brief notes, and in the individual catalogue entries he reproduces them in their entirety. The artworks' older history remains unknown, as is often the case with objects acquired on the antiques market.

Each catalogue entry contains the description of the artwork's present state, including several measurements. Entries on fragmented works include a reconstruction of what is assumed to be their original appearance.

The photographic component of the publication is impressive. The ninety color photos show the artworks from several angles, including from the back, and also capture interesting details.

As its first book, the catalogue largely draws on The Courtauld Institute of Art's *Gothic Ivories Project* (www.gothicivories.courtauld.com), of which Lowden is director. This Internet database gathers

and catalogues European ivory artworks from around 1200–1530 and currently contains more than 3100 objects, representing an excellent source of information for anyone with an interest in medieval art and Internet access. Several formal errors have crept into the text. They do not blemish the content, but they do create an impression of incompleteness (for example the missing footnote in catalogue entry no. 2, incorrect inventory numbers, and a blue letter on page 13).

Even though the book includes a summary of research about ivory as well as an overview of the basic literature, the reader unfamiliar with ivory sculpture could use more references to literature on themes that do not get enough space in the catalogue.

Finally, a lingering question: was the book meant primarily for experts, or also for the general public? If the latter, then it is a pity that this remarkable material, which has the potential to be enormously attractive to lay readers, is not presented in its many interesting aspects. No matter what the book's intention, however, we should welcome a work that comprehensively presents little-known and even unpublished artworks and offers them for further research.

- 6 For example Antje-Fee Köllermann, "Models of Appropriation, The Reception of the Art of Rogier van der Weyden in Germany", in *Van Eyck to Dürer, Early Netherlandish Painting and Central Europe 1430–1530*, Till-Holger Borchert ed., Brugges 2010, pp. 69–81.
- 7 For example Christof Metzger, "When Pictures began to travel, The Role of Prints in The Transmission of Images", in *Van Eyck to Dürer, Early Netherlandish Painting and Central Europe 1430–1530*, Till-Holger Borchert ed., Brugges 2010, pp. 105–111; Peter Parshall, "The Multiple Image: The Beginnings of Printmaking, between Old Theories and New Approaches", in *Origins of European printmaking: fifteenth-century woodcuts and their public*, Peter Parshall ed., New Haven 2010, pp. 37–56, sp. p. 47–48.
- 8 <http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/medieval/medieval-1438-lit.html>; accessed on 7.23.2014 and http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/04/2009/hm4_1_221_1.html; accessed on 7.23.2014.

Kristina Ketmanová

Masaryk University, Brno
ketmanova@mail.muni.cz

