
THE EMPEROR'S IVORIES
Masterpieces from the Habsburg Kunstkammer Collections

March 27 till July 22, 2007

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Exhibition Hall VIII

Currently, the Collection of Sculpture and Decorative Arts of the KHM is closed for necessary renovation and installation. At regular intervals, however, the collection puts on spectacular special exhibitions assembled from its magnificent holdings to make at least parts of the unique collection accessible to the public.

After "Exotica" (2000), "Glyptic Masterpieces" (2002), tapestries depicting the Biblical story of Tobias (2004), "Masterpieces of the Collection" (2005), "Amber" (2005/6) and "Giambologna" (2005), it is now the turn of one of the most fascinating as well as one of the oldest materials used for objects d'art - ivory, the mighty tusks of elephants.

The Kunsthistorisches Museum's collection of ivories - on show here for the first time in a selection of 100 masterpieces - owes its existence to the refined taste and connoisseurship of the Emperors Rudolf II, Ferdinand III and Leopold I, and of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm. The wealth and depth of its holdings and the outstanding quality of the individual objects make it one of the best collections of its kind in the world.

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wissenschaftliche anstalt
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1010 Wien, Burgring 5
www.khm.at
Tel. u. Fax +43 1 525 24- DW

Handelsgericht Wien
Firmenbuch-Nr.: 182081t
UID-Nr.: ATU 45940200
DVR-Nr.: 0448125

Baroque ivories combine the artist's virtuoso skills with the sensuous surface texture of the exotic natural-object to create a precious collector's piece born of the specific requirements of *Kunstammer* collections. Both courtly and non-aristocratic collectors favoured small-scale objects d'art that require close inspection and careful scrutiny. Ivory statuettes, reliefs, cups and vessels as well as turned objects were show-pieces that served no practical purpose but satisfied the highest artistic, technical, and material demands; they were primarily intended for the aesthetic enjoyment of refined connoisseurs. The long list of subjects includes stories from classical mythology as well as profane and religious topics. The consummate skill of the artists in rendering them dazzled all who saw them. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, ivory was rapidly being supplanted by porcelain - the "white gold" - which was a much cheaper though less exclusive material for small statuettes.

From the beginning, the aura enjoyed by ivory was surely also fed by mythic ideas about the impressive elephants' tusks that were regarded as powerful symbols of strength and authority. The use of ivory for worldly and ecclesiastical insignia was legitimized by the Old Testament's description of Salomon's throne as "made of ivory". But the *Physiologus*, a celebrated book on the natural world by an unknown Greek author and the main source for Christian animal fables, also helped define the importance of ivory for the Middle Ages. By 1200, narwhale tusk was equated with the horn of a unicorn. Often shown with its head in Mary's lap as a symbol of the Virgin Birth, unicorns were credited with immense healing powers that even the most elevated princes of the church did not want to do without: this precious natural object was believed to protect from all poisons, to offer help against illness and impotence, and even to serve as a guardian of chastity, all of which made it the most expensive medicine sold in pharmacies who stocked it in powdered form. One thing that helped make ivory a decidedly courtly material was the fact that numerous princes and noblemen learned the art of turning ivory on a lathe, a skill that combined both relaxation and playful learning.

Scholarly concept and curatorial advisor: Dr. Sabine Haag, Collection of Sculpture and Decorative Arts/Secular and Ecclesiastical Treasury



OPENING HOURS

Tue - Sun 10 am - 6 pm, Thu 10 am - 9 pm

ENTRANCE FEES

Adults	EUR	10,-
Concessions	EUR	7,50
Pupils	EUR	3,50
Family ticket	EUR	20,-
Vienna-card holders	EUR	9,-
Groups of 10 or over, each	EUR	7,-
Guided tour	EUR	2,-
School group of 10 students or over, each	EUR	2,-
Student group of 10 or over, each	EUR	5,-
Audio Guide in German, English, Italian	EUR	3,-

Tickets include the entrance to the special exhibition and to the permanent collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Until further notice.

Catalogue

Museum publications (in German) in conjunction with the exhibition include

“Ivory Masterpieces”, 192 pp, colour plates, € 20,-

and the illustrated book

“Imperial Ivory. Matthias Steidl 1643/44-1727 in the Kunstkammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum“, 48 pp., colour plates, € 18,50

Both are available from March 27, 2007 in the Museum Shop or online at www.khm.at

Press Office

Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM

Irina Kubadinow

1010 Vienna, Burgring 5

Tel.: + 43 1 525 24 - 4021

Fax: + 43 1 525 24 - 4098

e-mail: irina.kubadinow@khm.at

<http://www.khm.at>