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THE EMPEROR'S IVORIES
Masterpieces from the Habsburg Kunstkammer Collections

A SELECTION OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EXHIBITS



ST. GREGORY WITH SCRIBES

Master of the Vienna Gregory Tablet

Carolingian, 9th century

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 8399

Pope Gregory the Great is regarded as the author of the liturgical texts spoken by the priest during Mass in the Roman Catholic Church. Charlemagne later made them obligatory throughout his newly-founded Roman Empire. Legend tells of a scribe who spied the dove of the Holy Spirit whispering the prayers in Gregory's ear before the saint dictated them to him in aloud voice.

The genius ivory carver responsible for this work retains the motif of divine inspiration but depicts the pope as an author, pausing to listen to the voice of inspiration before continuing to write. The composition is extended over two storeys and set inside the Lateran Palace. We are eye-witnesses to the divine word becoming text and its subsequent dissemination in the form of books.



SO-CALLED OLIFANT OF COUNT ALBRECHT III OF HABSBURG

Lower Italy (Amalfi or Salerno), 11th century, or 1st half of the 12th century
dedication inscription dated 1199

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4073

Over a hundred mediaeval ivory hunting horns have survived. The oldest extant examples are Byzantine, while the decoration and some of the inscriptions on others point to their Saracen origins. "Saracens" were members of the Islamic-Arab civilisation who had settled around the Mediterranean basin. Such hunting horns were mainly Saracen (Fatimid) exports destined for members of the European aristocracy. They were highly sought-after as they were connected with the horn of Roland, who - according to the popular song of Roland - had blown his before dying to warn Charlemagne of the advancing Saracen army. However, most of the olifants were made in Lower Italy which saw the establishment of competing Latin-Christian workshops copying Fatimid-Saracen models from the 10th century onwards. This olifant is the oldest extant artwork in the Habsburg's collection: in 1199, Count Albert III Alsace, presented the horn filled with relics to the Abbey at Muri in Switzerland.



VENUS AND AMOR

Nikolaus Pfaff (1556? - 1612)

Prague, c. 1601/07

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4658

Ivory carving requires the specific form of collecting engendered by a *Kunstkammer* assembled by an appreciative connoisseur and patron. Daniel Fröschl, the imperial court antiquarian of Rudolf II, lists four ivory portraits of the emperor, as well as a number of turned ivories, by the imperial court ivory carver, Nikolaus Pfaff. They show him - in the spirit of Rudolf's truly cosmopolitan court - competing with the late-Mannerist traditions inherent in the works of Sustrius and Spranger. This creative give-and-take between the demands of the imperial patron and the artist's mature potential led to the creation of ivories where delicate expression corresponds with a subtle composition, culminating in the exquisite refinement of virtuoso carving.



FURY

"Furienmeister"/Master of the Furies

Salzburg?, c. 1610/20

originally in the residence of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 3727

This incredibly dynamic figure expresses the power of the period around the turn of the seventeenth century, a period marked by political, religious and social upheavals. Informed by late-Gothic expressiveness, the scrawny body seems almost torn apart by furious movement. The intensity of expression culminates in the fury's painfully distorted face. With their emphasis on silhouette the works of the Master of the Furies serve as a precursor of Matthias Steinl's mounted figures. This fury is one of the Master of the Furies' mature main works, which are marked by an amalgamation of motifs taken from sculpture, painting, graphic works, goldsmith-work and turned ivories. The former concentration of works by the Master of the Furies in the *Kunstammer* of the Prince-Archbishops of Salzburg suggests an extended sojourn of the artist in that city.



HESPERIDIA FEEDING THE SERPENT LADON

"Furienmeister"/Master of the Furies

Salzburg?, c. 1610/20

originally in the residence of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg

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In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells of the Hesperides who guard the golden apples, the fruits of immortality and thus a great treasure, in the garden of the gods which is located on the western shore of the world ocean. Hera, however, had doubts about their reliability and had the serpent, Ladon, join them on their watch. The twelfth labour of Hercules was to bring the golden apples to King Eurystheus. .

This group is a technical bravura piece - it is cut from a single tusk. The dynamic interplay between body and drapery illustrates the battle for form and space. The interaction of the two bodies enhances the contrast between the smooth skin of the human body and the serpent's rough hide.



COVERED TANKARD DEPICTING A BACCHANAL

Georg Petel (1601/02 - 1634)

Andreas I. Wickert (1600 - 1661)

Augsburg, 1629

Commissioned by Count Ottheinrich Fugger

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.no. KK 4519

The story of drunken Silenus, taken from classical mythology, was a popular moralizing commentary on the dangers connected with Bacchanalian pleasures such as drunkenness, lust and stupidity.

The drastic rendering of the inebriated company is based on the works of Peter Paul Rubens who also executed designs for ivories. Georg Petel, one of the leading sculptors of the 1st third of the 17th century, cleverly transposed motifs taken from his Flemish friend's paintings into a convincing sculptural composition of powerful images. The simple metal setting was commissioned by Count Ottheinrich Fugger. It turns the sculpture into a functional drinking vessel though it was probably never used as such.



SATYR AND THE NYMPH CORISCA

Adam Lenckhardt (1610 - 1661)

Vienna, 1639

signed and dated

inspired by a scene from the pastoral melodrama "Il Pastor fido" by G.B. Guarini

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4564

The foolish Satyr approaches his former lover from behind to punish her for her infidelity. But when he attempts to grab the nymph by her lush hair he is fooled once more. Surprised, he almost falls backwards while Corisca flees, making fun of her duped lover with obscene gestures. The clarity of the depictions, the unembellished realism evidenced in the modeling of the bodies, and the narrative power of the scene make this original composition unique. Lenckhardt's small sculptures cut from ivory or rhinoceros' horn document the influence of contemporary Venetian and southern-German/Austrian sculpture. From 1642 onwards Lenckhardt was court sculptor to Karl Eusebius of Liechtenstein in Vienna.



APOLLO AND DAPHNE

Jakob Auer (c. 1645 - 1706)

Vienna, c. 1688/90

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4537

In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells of the nymph, Daphne, whom Diana saves from Apollo's amorous advances by turning her into a laurel tree. Jakob Auer's starting point was Bernini's celebrated marble group but for him the story is mainly an excuse for virtuoso carving. The smooth perfection of the two bodies and the elaborate carving of foliage and draperies emphasise the decorative virtuoso qualities of this show-piece that perfectly documents the artist's ability to transcend the tusk's natural form.

Various 17th and 18th century travel diaries single out this group from the host of ivory works in the Imperial treasury.



COVERED TANKARD WITH FLOWERS

southern Germany, 1st third of the 17th century

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4777

This covered tankard is a characteristic example of the turned ivories popular in the early 17th century which saw the beginning of a move away from the simpler, stereometric basic forms featuring empty spaces to the much more complex formal speculations popular in the 1610's. Both artists and collectors were fascinated by machines and this led in the late 16th century to the development of such show-pieces in which nature is surmounted by human creativity - *ars naturam superat*.

This tankard may have been in the collection of the Emperor Rudolf II whose inventories list a comparable *becherlin* (mug) or *blumenkrug mit vilen blumen* (flower-ewer with many flowers).



SET OF TURNED IVORY WORKS

Marcus Heiden (tätig 1618 - 1664)

Johann Eisenberg (1600 - 1640)

Coburg, c. 1630/37

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, KK 4671, KK 4676, KK 4772, KK 4777

In the late 16th century it became fashionable at some courts to make gifts of ivory objects d'art. This selection of turned ivories documents the stylistic variety, complex geometry and bizarre artificiality of these ivory objects d'art turned on a lathe. These magnificent examples of human ingenuity and craftsmanship were collected as examples of the material application of geometry in technical achievements.

This made these precious creations perfect show-pieces for a princely *Kunstammer*, where a contemporary encyclopedic love of collecting aimed at displaying the wealth of human knowledge. Turning ivory on a lathe was both important from an art-theoretical point of view and highly challenging considering the limits imposed by the fragility of the material. At the time, turning ivory on a lathe was also included in the education of princes.



STANDING HOLLOW SPHERE

Lorenz Zick (1594 - 1666)

Nuremberg, 2nd third of the 17th century

ivory, shell cameos, gouache on paper

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4503

Hollow standing spheres based on complex mathematical calculations are among the most challenging turned ivory objects. The virtuosity of the artist was greatly admired by all who saw them, making them highly sought-after princely gifts. Within a hollow sphere these turned objects d'art contain additional geometric shapes or a capsule enclosing miniature portraits. Ribbons attached to the sides make it possible to open the capsule and admire the portraits through a slightly-larger opening. Shell cameos on a globe born by Hercules are a reference to the world-encompassing empire ruled by the House of Habsburg, and depict Habsburg rulers from Rudolf I to Ferdinand III.



BACCHANAL

Johann Ignaz Bendl (active before 1682 - 1730)

Vienna, signed and dated Ignati bendl f. 1684

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 3655

This series of twelve framed mythological scenes cut from the interior wall of an ivory tusk in 1684 is considered the earliest dated work by Johann Ignaz Bendl. The nude male figure, cut in-the-round, elegantly doing a handstand documents the virtuoso aspect of these ivory reliefs designed for a decorative over-all impression. Such virtuoso ivory objects had no practical purpose but were composed as show-pieces to be displayed together with paintings; occasionally they were also used to decorate important pieces of furniture.



EMPEROR LEOPOLD I. MOUNTED ON HIS CHARGER

Matthias Steinl (1643/44 - 1727)

Vienna, c 1690/93

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no. KK 4662



EMPEROR JOSEPH I MOUNTED ON HIS CHARGER

Matthias Steinl (1643/44 - 1727)

Vienna, 1693

signed and dated

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no. KK 4663

Together with its companion piece depicting King Joseph I vanquishing Fury, the statuette of Emperor Leopold I as victor over the Turks and the French is an allegorical monument. This ambitious project deals less with the glorification of the emperor and his eldest son than with illustrating the divinely-endorsed rule of the House of Habsburg and the continuation and renewal of the Imperium Romanum under the present and future rulers of the Holy Roman Empire.

However, it was never planned to transpose the statuettes into a more monumental format, they were always intended as indoor show-pieces to be displayed in the Imperial Treasury. There they were first singled out as a rare highlight among the city's sights in 1715. The double-monument was commissioned after the election and coronation of Joseph I as Roman King and the subsequent festive entry into Vienna of the imperial father and his son. Here, Steinl, the imperial court ivory-carver, documents his eminent virtuosity by executing two small-scale monumental mounted statues; the consummate handling of delicate details

is breathtaking. However, the work's incredibly complex political-historical meaning raises its importance above mere formal questions and makes it a unique monument of imperial propaganda. Leopold is characterized as the victorious general and emperor, the defender of his realm and of Christianity, his son as one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse. These ivory statuettes are the only mounted statues of the two rulers executed during Leopold's reign in the imperial capital of Vienna.



ST. MICHAEL VANQUISHING SATAN

Johann Schnegg (1724 - 1784)

Bayreuth (?), c. 1740/60

ivory, wood

© Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.-no. KK 4572

Combined figures - figures executed partly in ivory and partly in wood - were a fashion in late-baroque small-scale sculpture.

This composition is informed by Jesuit spirituality and didactically contrasts humility and arrogance. St. Michael, the personification of good, is depicted in brilliantly-white ivory; he is shown triumphing over Lucifer, the fallen angel, who personifies evil and the dark powers and is rendered in dark wood. The ivory clouds hovering above the globe emphasize the triumph of the divine powers.

The cool smoothness of the highly type-cast figurative group is a reference to the porcelain figures of the later 18th century that began to replace ivory as the material of choice for small-scale statues.