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Katherine Eve Baker
Broward College

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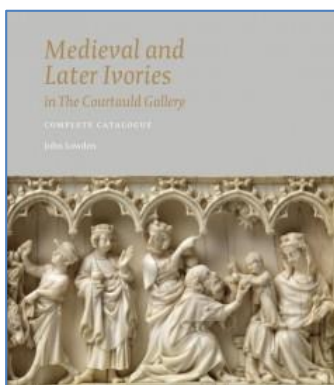


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Book Review: John Lowden, *Medieval and Later Ivories in the Courtauld Gallery: Complete Catalogue*, with an essay by Alexandra Gerstein, London (Paul Holberton Publishing), 2013, 144 pages.

By Katherine Eve Baker, PhD, Broward College

In our modern imaginary, ivory is a substance dipped in blood, with conservation and the cessation of the illegal trade at the forefront of our minds. For those of us who study the past, however, it is a medium of tactile piety and secular luxury, which held a prestigious spot in the pantheon of materials for artists and patrons of previous eras. Recent years have brought a flourishing of study in this field, spurred in part by the Gothic Ivories Project, a publicly available digital database that was the brain-child of this catalog's author. The twenty-eight entries that comprise *Medieval and Later Ivories in the Courtauld Galley* act in much the same manner as this digital platform, allowing the user to come away with a well-rounded vision of the objects presented.

As stated in the foreword, this publication is the first scholarly catalog to treat a discrete part of the collection of Thomas Gambier Parry, a neo-Gothic artist and Victorian gentleman whose objects passed into the hands of the Courtauld in the mid-1960s through the generosity of his grandson Mark Gambier Parry. **(Figure 1)** The essay

“Thomas Gambier Parry: Collecting in the Gothic Revival” by Alexandra Gerstein provides a thorough understanding of the life, projects, and collecting habits of the elder Gambier Parry, situating him amongst his contemporaries and providing a plausible impetus for his acquisitions. In terms of ivory, Gambier Parry’s first purchase was in 1839, making him a fairly early collector of this medium. Judging from the inventories of his collection, the fifteen years between 1860 and 1875 were

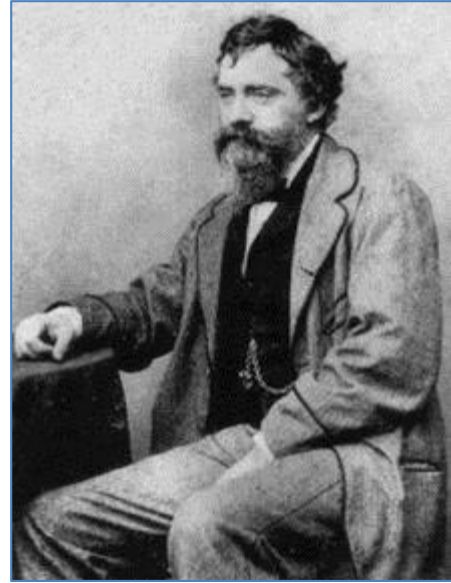


Fig. 1 Thomas Gambier Parry

particularly prolific, when he more than doubled his previous holding.¹ The reasons behind this rise, whether personal, artistic, or market driven, would have been an interesting addition to the essay, although anyone interested in Victorian collecting will find it imminently useful.

For those who wish to familiarize their students with the study of ivory, the catalog’s introduction makes an excellent addition to any syllabus. Lowden has a capacity for making the technical accessible, from his description of the difficulties of working with tusks and teeth, to the discussion of the processes and (sometimes) problematic results of radiocarbon dating. Four pieces were tested for this publication. While one object was shown to be a later production (no. 21), with turn of the sixteenth-century style and modern ivory, two objects (nos. 2 and 22) were found to have been made using ivory that *predated* their style by at least a century. While the recycling of

¹ For the inventory of 1860, 12 ivories were listed. The inventory of 1875 lists 35 ivories (Lowden, p. 23).

older panels was a well-known option in times when elephant ivory was difficult to get, these objects make clear that even when ivory was plentiful, artists did not automatically select the “freshest” material. It is an observation that reinforces recent discoveries made in the Parisian archives, which point to surprisingly large stocks of unworked ivory being kept by the city’s carvers c. 1500, supplies that were transferred across generations.²

The introduction’s discussion of the difficulties of studying ivory is a useful summary of the problems we continue to face when trying to produce scholarship about these objects. Our traditional questions – Who made this and where? What was its function? etc. – are stymied by “the extraordinary reticence of the sources.”³ Inscriptional silence, archival muteness, and a tendency for objects to have undergone transformations in regards to use and decoration have frequently tied the hands of ivory researchers who attempt to produce sweeping visions of production trends. So far, the most successful analyses have come in the form of catalog entries and case studies, wherein every curve of a swaying figure, every shifted hinge hole, every polished surface from repeated handling can be contextualized and made to produce information.

The complete catalog of the Courtauld Gallery’s ivories greatly contributes to this accumulation of knowledge, particularly in the Gothic period. Each ivory is thoughtfully photographed, including the back of objects like the writing tablet of no. 13, which allows newcomers to the field to visualize what the “shallow indent(s)” of tablets actually look like. More glorious visually are the details, illustrations of such precision that the tactile qualities of the material seem to leap from the page. **(Figure 2)** This close looking

² I discussed the large store of raw ivory listed in the estate inventory of Chicart Bailly (1533) at the conference “Gothic Ivories: Content and Context” (London, 2014). Further discussions of this text will be forthcoming.

³ Lowden, p. 14



Figure 2 Detail anointing the body of Christ, cat. No. 12.

Of the camera lens is paired with the superb descriptive skills of the author, and excerpts from the catalogue would make a welcome addition to any course interested in teaching students how to describe subject and iconography. Evocative phrasing like the billowing

clouds of the small panel of no. 7 having a “somewhat intestinal appearance” make these entries a pleasure to read.

A sort of (re-)introduction for most of the Gambier Parry ivories, for a few objects it is their first publication (nos. 16, 17, 19, 22, and 24). While the bibliographies for most objects are thin, indicative of their scholarly neglect, each entry makes an effort to provide as much supplementary material as possible, including references to numerous comparative examples and unpublished masters theses and dissertations. When available, Thomas Parry Gambier’s notes about the object are also given. The anecdotes about acquisitions are particularly charming, such as the *Virgin and Child triptych* (no 5), which was purchased one rainy day while Gambier Parry was sketching in the Friuli mountains.

Gambier Parry clearly had a keen understanding of his ivories. For example, no. 20 was tentatively identified by the collector as Flemish, 15th or early 16th century. This attribution is essentially retained by Lowden, who places the object in Burgundy/Flanders *c.* 1450-1500. The practiced eye of the author himself is at work with this entry, as he closes his discussion with an observation that it may be “based, at least in part, on contemporary woodcuts of devotional content,” although he was unsure of the source.⁴ The association with religious prints was absolutely correct, and it can now be confirmed that no. 20 was heavily indebted to marginal illustrations from Books of Hours produced in Paris around the year 1500. **(Figure 3)**

The use of Parisian prints for ivory carving at the turn of the 16th century seems to have been a widespread phenomenon, one whose repercussion continue to be parsed.

⁴ Lowden, p. 112



Figure 3 Casket, Burgundy/Flanders c. 1450-1500

While the connection to these printed images does not guarantee Parisian production, as these illustrations traveled and became models for artists across the globe, given the presence of large scale ivory workshops in the city c. 1500 we at least need to consider the French capital in our discussion of provenance for objects like no. 20. These kinds of associations based on localized models, of course, need to be taken with sizable grains of salt. The *Creation of Eve and the Annunciation* panel (no. 21) deftly provides that cautionary specimen. Stylistically linked to France of the Late Flamboyant period,

including possible resonances with printed illustrations, radiocarbon dating done for this publication demonstrated, with 95.4% probability, that the elephant used for this object died between 1663 and 1954. Science is not a panacea, however. The previously unpublished ivory portrait medallion of Anna, Queen of Hungary, once dismissed as a 19th century imitation, has proven to be made from some very old ivory, from an elephant that likely died between 1284 and 1438. As Lowden points out, this does not guarantee authenticity, since like the forgers of panel painting in the 19th century, modern ivory carvers could have also gone to ancient materials to craft their “fakes.”

Overall, *Medieval and Later Ivories in the Courtauld Gallery* is an excellent example of what catalogues should do. The entries act as introductions to these objects, laying out their form, iconography, comparative material, and possible function, but never shying away from their enigmas or areas where we are still lacking information. The complete catalog does not act as the final word on these ivories, but instead seeds the soil for future research, seemingly trying to seduce the audience into a desire to know more about each object in the Parry Gambier collection. As a researcher, this is the work of the best catalogs, the ones that drive us to ask more questions. They force us to get out our magnifying glasses and reference materials and begin a new relationship with an object from the past that seems to push past the muting power of historical distance and speak. 🐘