Serving knife

Place of origin: Italy (made)
Date: ca. 1550 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Steel, etched, engraved and gilt, green stained ivory (African elephant ivory) with ebony, brass and silver
Museum number: 310-1903
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 62, case 11

Public access description

This knife dates from the first half of the 16th century and is probably Italian. Its blade is engraved with musical notes and blessings to be said before and after a meal. Knives with musical notes on the blades are known as notation knives. A notation is the written version of a physical process, such as the sound of music. Once it is written down it can be preserved and recreated. This knife is etched with notations expressing gratitude for a meal. On one side of the blade the inscription translates as, 'The blessing of the table. May the three-in-one bless that which we are about to eat', to be sung before the meal is taken. On the other side the notation gives thanks after the meal: 'The saying of grace. We give thanks to you God for your generosity'. The point of the knife allows meat or bread to be skewered and offered to a fellow diner. Notation knives are extremely rare.

Descriptive line

Knife with steel blade, parcel gilt, etched with graces to be sung before and after meals, handle of ivory with bands of ebony and brass, Italy, around 1550

Physical description

Serving knife. The broad, steel blade ends in a triangular point and has etched decoration of leaf scrolls at each end. The blade is engraved with graces to be sung before and after meals. The handle is ivory, tapering away from the blade and rectangular in section and has engraved leaf ornament emphasised with black infill. The finial on the handle has bands of ebony and brass, with a silver knob.

Dimensions

Length: 29.1 cm, Width: 3.6 cm, Depth: 0.9 cm

Museum number

310-1903

Object history note

The Museum bought this knife as Lot 23 from a sale of "An Interesting and Valuable Collection of Objects of Vertu of the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries and old chinese Porcelain, Formerly the Property of a Gentleman" by Christie, Manson & Woods, 8 King Street, St. James' Square on Tuesday 21st April 1903. A minute of 18 April 1903 signed A.B. Skinner recommends the purchase of this knife among several items of cutlery describing it as "being of extreme rarity" and likely to "fetch a high price". The agents through which the knife was sold, Durlacher Bros. of 142 New Bond Street, estimated it would fetch £60 although the Museum secured it for £25.7s.1d (including agent's fee). The provenance of the knife until 1903 is not known.

Historical significance: Notation knives are extremely rare. A note in the Object Register refers to:

"Three knives from the same set in the Foulc Collection, Philadelphia Museum. Another (?one of these) illustrated in L'Art pour tous, Vol. XII (1873), No. 307, p. 1228: in collection of 'M. Alain de Pont l'Eveque'."

"Two others were sold in the Bourgeois Freres Sale, Cologne 1904 (Cat. Vol. I, No. 867). Another knife with a similar blade but different handle was in the Spitzer Collection (Cat. Vol. III, P.239, No. 144). All appear to be French (c.f. Museum knives nos. M604, 624, 627-1710; 2132-1855)"

A further handwritten note by Claude Blair, former Head of Metalwork (1974-82), says, "Another knife is in the Municipal Museum, The Hague. CB."

Historical context note

Knives with musical notes on the blades are known as notation knives. A notation is a mechanism by which a physical process, such as the sound of music, is written as a set of symbols so that it may be preserved and recreated. This knife is etched with notations expressing gratitude for a meal. On one side of the blade the inscription translates as, 'The blessing of the table. May the three-in-one bless that which we are about to eat', to be sung before the meal is taken. On the other side the notation gives thanks after the meal: 'The saying of grace. We
give thanks to you God for your generosity’. The point of the knife allows meat or bread to be skewered and offered to a fellow diner.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O110614/serving-knife-unknown/