Pen case and lid

Place of origin: Italy (made)

Date: 1500-1520 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Moulded leather, tooled, carved and stamped

Credit Line: Bequeathed by George Salting

Museum number: W.108&A-1910

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 64, The Wolfson Gallery, case SS, shelf 2

Public access description
The French word 'Etui' in medieval inventories and accounts was a general term for storage or travel containers, of various materials and sizes. References are also made in inventories to small 'etui' of cuir bouilli (heated and moulded leather), which were designed specifically to be attached to one's costume. Used to carry quill pens, ink wells, books, cutlery, and other personal possessions, these objects are frequently depicted in 15th century paintings and manuscript illuminations.

Descriptive line
Pen case and lid of moulded leather

Physical description
Pen case and lid of moulded leather (cuir bouilli), cut and embossed with the youthful St John the Baptist with a reed cross standing on a skull on one side, and the figure of a naked boy on the other. The groundwork is decorated with floral ornament. On the end of the lid is a sunburst with mask, and a similar one (worn) under the foot. There are twelve loops integral to the case and cover, and a red silk cord with tassels linked case and lid. Two paper labels are pasted, '1212' [printed red numerals], and '22' [printed black numerals].

Linda Woolley (Textiles and Dress curator, V&A, c.2002) felt that cord and tassel were plausibly old, although the condition was suspiciously good.

Notes on construction
A stretched inner liner; the outer worked cover consists of a foot cover (stretch/shrink marks) and a wraparound section. One side of ornament seems less accomplished than the other.

Dimensions
Height: 15.2 cm, Width: 3.8 cm, Depth: 2.7 cm

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Object history note
George Salting and leather

Only one reference to leather was found among Salting's (incomplete) papers at the Guildhall Library. It is possible that he bought most of his leather from auction sales (the papers for which have not all been checked, 12/2006)

George Donaldson, 106 New Bond St, IMPORTER OF HIGH CLASS WORKS OF ART

8 July 1895 ‘£40 asked’
‘Cuir-bouilli’ case for book (Italian) A leather box (Castellani Coln) £21 ‘fetched £48 at that sale’

It is possible that his interest in leather began, like his interest in renaissance furniture begins during 1884 (after the Spitzer sale, 1883 at which he was said to have spent £35,000, and the Fountaine sale, 1884).

Historical context note
The Secular Spirit (Exhibition catalogue, New York, Metropolitan Museum 1975)
P81
Etui in medieval inventories and accounts was a general term for storage or travel containers of various materials and sizes... A large leather case, ordered from a coffret-maker and referred to as an etui de cuir bouilli, was purchased to hold a painting by Jehan d'Orléans, painter to King Charles VI of France...References are also made to small etui of cuir bouilli which were designed specifically to be attached to one's costume. Used to carry quill pens, ink wells, books, cutlery, and other personal possessions, these objects are frequently depicted in 15th century paintings and manuscript illuminations.
See P.K. Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600* (London 1991), fig. 256 showing a leather pen case suspended from its cord.

Notes on the manufacture of medieval leather containers:

Waterer (and following him, Cherry) summarise the medieval techniques for making leather containers for dry-goods:

Stitching is the most common technique, with holes made in leather by awls. Thread is made from flax or hemp yarn rolled with beeswax. The other principal assembly technique is sticking to a wooden structure. The traditional adhesive for box covering is hot animal glue, which was often created as a by-product of the fleshings taken by the tanner from the skins or hides.

Leather objects can also be created by moulding. The traditional medieval term was *cuir bouilli*, though Waterer suggests that boiling could not have been used. The technique is quite simple, and consists of soaking the (vegetable-tanned) leather in cold water until it is thoroughly saturated. The leather is then very plastic and can be modelled over formers in moulds of plaster, wood or metal. If the surface is to be ornamented by tooling, stamping or punching, this must be done while the leather is damp. The leather is then dried gradually (to avoid brittleness), supported by its mould or filling which can be removed later.

The most common processes of decorating smooth-surfaced leather are:

- **Incising with blunt or sharp tools**
- **Punching** to give a texture to the background of incised designs, using a variety of small iron or bronze punches (also used in book binding).
- **Modelling**, to leave important features in low relief
- **Embossing**, performed with a ball tool from the flesh side of leather that has been previously dampened.
- **Carving**, which is done from the grain side with a special knife that can be inserted more or less horizontally and partially raises up a thin layer until the form appears to lie on the surface

Finally the object is decorated with coloured dyes, usually with some paint (tempera). Red seems a common colour (little work on medieval dyes). Some leather was gilded using glaire (white of an egg) or gold size to attach gold leaf which adhered under the heat and pressure of book-binding tools.

However, Davies argues that the multiple techniques of *cuir bouilli* have never actually been very clearly established. *Cuir bouilli* differs from other supported leathers in that after treatment it is rigid (without a support) and water resistant, indicating that the structure of the leather has been altered through a chemical reaction. Otherwise leather would remain flexible unless coated with a stiffening medium or mounted on a backing material. She suggests that all true *cuir bouilli* was made by taking vegetable-tanned leather and saturating it with water, then heating it to a temperature just before it starts to shrink, removing it from the hot water and moulding it immediately, and if necessary stitching it while wet. In this way the molecular bonding of the leather is weakened but not fully released allowing limited realignment of its molecular structure to take place in a more controlled manner. Alternatively, if the heat source application is limited to only the surface of the wet leather then it is possible that the shrinkage solely occurs in the outer layer of the leather, producing a surface hardening effect and reinforcing the structure. She speculates that by impregnating oils, resins and waxes, it may be possible to mould the structure of the leather when hot, and to produce more detailed surface decoration because otherwise this decoration would be distorted by shrinkage after toothing.

Bibliography

- Conservation of Leather and related materials (ed. Marion Kite and Roy Thomson, 2006), 'Cuir Bouilli' chapter 10 by Laura Davies, pp. 94-102

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O127921/pen-case-and-unknown/