Document case and lid

Place of origin: Italy (made)

Date: 1475-1525 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

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

Credit Line: Bequeathed by George Salting

Museum number: W.162-1910

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

Public access description

This document case bears the inscription DECRETI TECA, in Italian, 'case [for] decrees', and the arms of Bentivoglio of Bologna possibly of Antonio Galeazzo Bentivoglio, Pronotory Apostolic, Archdeacon of Bologna (1491-1511). It may have been used by the Archdeacon's official messenger.

The high value of personal possessions or official documents encouraged the use of protective cases of all shapes and sizes. These were moulded and stitched in leather, and were close-fitting and light-weight. They are exceptionally durable, and have often outlasted the contents. Integral loops allowed the lids to be secured with a cord or thong, by which smaller cases could be carried on a belt for convenience. They could be intricately decorated with fashionable ornament, personalised inscriptions or coats or arms, and sometimes colour.

Descriptive line

Case and lid for a document, of cut and embossed leather (cuir bouilli)

Physical description

Flat case for a document, of cut and embossed leather (cuir bouilli). It bears the inscription DECRETI TECA [Ital. case [for] decrees/laws], and the arms of Bentivoglio of Bologna possibly of Antonio Galeazzo Bentivoglio, Pronotory Apostolic, Archdeacon of Bologna (1491-1511). There are four loops for a cord to link case and lid, and by which the whole could be carried. The shield of arms in front is arranged between two crosses (each with knotted cords hanging from each arm) resting on skulls beneath an arcade in relief; a bone and jawbone lie on the ground adjacent. The back of the case and the cover are ornamented with a diaper pattern of lozenges, and bands of leaves, and the cover further decorated on the top with a wreath. The four loops are decorated with masks.

EDXRF analysis (October 2006) by Dr Lucia Burgio:

The white areas on the skulls on the front of the case were analysed non-destructively and in situ by EDXRF. No heavy metals could be detected, thus suggesting that no lead white, titanium white or zinc white was used to decorate the analysed areas.

The white surface of PR skull was analysed. No heavy metal could be detected, ruling out the presence of a traditional pigment such as lead white, or modern pigments such as zinc white and titanium white. It is possible that a white pigment such as calcite or gypsum was used, or that the white finish is the result of a surface treatment involving organic agents.

Notes on construction

An inner layer of hide was stitched down side and along bottom (the rough stitching is visible inside the lid)

A second layer of better quality was stitched like the first

A third layer of hide is again stitched

The outer layer was applied in sections, first a piece over the foot, then 3 horizontal bands, with feathered ends to conceal the joint.

The ornamental lid border seems to have been made with a needle inserted partially and lifted. 7 inexplicable holes near the neck of the body (at rear).

Latticework design.

A printed (red) label '1978' on the base.

Dimensions

Height: 16.7 cm, Width: 16 cm, Depth: 3.4 cm

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Object history note

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Probably a messenger box (cf. Bodebus als onderschijnsteken van de lopende bode, by Dr.R.E.J.Weber in The Netherlands P.T.T,
October 1963).

See also the entry by Alessandro Della Latta, (Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, tomo secondo, no.695) for a 15th century (north?) Italian case, 13cm x 14 x 1.8cm. Of which he says the type was made from the early 14th century and throughout the 15th. Thought to be a container for a document, or a devotional image (on the basis of the inscription AVE MARIA, AMA DIO). Probably made from 3 thicknesses of leather giving 5mm in total.

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.

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 tooling.

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/O127923/document-case-and-unknown/