Polyptych - The Virgin and Child

Object: Polyptych

Place of origin: France (Paris or probably Champagne/Burgundy, made)

Date: ca. 1320 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Elephant ivory carved in high relief, painted and gilded

Museum number: 370-1871

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10, case 5

Public access description
This portable shrine opens to reveal the Virgin and Child surrounded by events from the Virgin's life and the infancy of Christ. Christ holds an apple, symbolising his redemption of mankind after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. These image encourage the user to meditate on the Virgin's role in bringing Christ to earth.

The term tabernacle polyptych has been used here (ref. Williamson and Davies) to describe an object which consists of a deep central chamber with canopy, usually containing the Virgin and Child, and four hinged wings with narrative scenes, which would distinguish them from the smaller category of simpler polyptychs, which are made up of a series of plaques hinged together but with no central tabernacle.

A feature that links most tabernacle polyptychs together is the method of facture: Although the Virgins in the tabernacles appear from the front to be statuettes they are with few exceptions carved integrally with the back and base panels, which is remarkably skilful.

This polyptych is of a type seen in good numbers, and most of the related pieces have typically been ascribed to Paris and the second quarter of the fourteenth century: two finer examples are in the Thomson collection in Toronto and in the Louvre.

Descriptive line
Tabernacle polyptych, ivory, with the Virgin and Child, France (Paris or probably Champagne/Burgundy), ca. 1320

Physical description
Ivory polyptych carved in high relief with the Virgin and Child and scenes from the infancy of Christ, in no narrative order: on the left wings are the Visitation, the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi, and on the right the Nativity, and the Presentation in the Temple.

In the centre, beneath a canopy, supported on slender columns, is the standing Virgin crowned by a wingless angel emerging from clouds; she holds a flower (probably a rose) in her right hand and looks towards the Christ-Child, who holds an apple in His left hand and places His right arm around her neck.

Dimensions
Height: 22.4 cm, Width: 16.2 cm open, Depth: 2.1 cm, Weight: 0.4 kg, Width: 6 cm central section

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Object history note
On loan to the Museum from John Webb, London, from 1867; purchased from Webb in 1871 (£165).

Historical context note
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URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O166591/the-virgin-and-child-polyptych-unknown/