Statuette - The Crucified Christ

Object: Statuette

Place of origin: Tuscany (made)

Date: 1290-1310 (made)

Artist/Maker: Pisano, Giovanni (Maker, Designer)

Materials and Techniques: Carved elephant ivory with traces of gilding

Museum number: 212:1 to 3-1867

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 9, The Dorothy and Michael Hintze Gallery, case 2

Public access description

This is a celebrated small masterpiece in sublime quality. We know that Giovanni Pisano carved a great ivory Virgin and Child in 1298. The statue is now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Pisa. We also know that scenes depicting the Passion of Christ belonged to the ensemble of which it formed a part. Although it is unlikely that this crucifix figure was made for this Pisan commission, its style and superb quality strongly suggest that the same sculptor made it. It is also closely comparable to figures on the pulpit that Giovanni Pisano made for Pisa Cathedral. This dates from the years 1302-1310.

This figure was originally partially painted (the loincloth) and gilded (the hair and beard). It is similar to Giovanni Pisano's surviving crucifix figures in polychrome wood. These are now in Siena, Pistoia, Prato, Pisa and Berlin. Small crucifixes such as this were made for side altars and chapels. Medieval inventories also list ivory crucifixes among the possessions of the rich and powerful.

Giovanni Pisano (ca. 1250-after 1314) was one of the most significant sculptors of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. He continued his father's interest in adapting Northern gothic forms to an Italian context - this carving has a strong tension between naturalistic observation, and idealised forms, which is typical of gothic art. The choice of ivory as a medium was unusual for Italy at this date, and probably reflects the desire to create an object reminiscent of the ivory sculpture being produced in Paris.

Descriptive line

Statuette, ivory, The Crucified Christ, attributed to Giovanni Pisano, Italy (Tuscany), probably ca. 1290-1310

Physical description

Statuette of the Crucified Christ; ivory with traces of gilding. Christ is shown at the point of death, with his eyes closed and his head turned to one side; his mouth is slightly open and gash to his left cheek, emphasizes his suffering. His long hair is divided into two distinctive cascading locks at the sides and falls onto his shoulders at the back. On the underside of his jaw - and not easily visible - a long section of his beard has curiously been shaved flat, in the manner of a wide strap. The corpus of Christ, carved fully in the round, is now missing its arms and legs below the knees. The latter has been roughly broken off.

Dimensions

Height: 15.3 cm, Width: 6 cm, Depth: 5 cm, Weight: 0.2 kg

Museum number

212:1 to 3-1867

Object history note

The ivory was acquired by the Museum from the collection of John Webb in 1867 (£15). Webb's collection was particularly rich in medieval ivories. Nothing is known for certain about the early history of this object. Many of Giovanni's other small-scale works were made for churches in the towns in which he produced large scale works (such as Siena, Pisa and Pistoia). It is possible that the V&A ivory was made for an altar in one of the churches in these towns. The early fourteenth century inventories of Pisa cathedral mention an ivory crucifix, but it is impossible to say if this is it.

Historical significance: Giovanni Pisano was one of the most significant sculptors of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. He continued his father's interest in adapting Northern gothic forms to an Italian context - this carving has a strong tension between naturalistic observation, and idealised forms, which is typical of gothic art. The choice of ivory as a medium was unusual for Italy at this date, and probably reflects the desire to create an object reminiscent of the ivory sculpture being produced in Paris. The whiteness of the ivory was highlighted by the very sparing use of colour and gilding on the figure. The crucifixion figures produced by Giovanni in marble, wood and ivory are thought to have been very influential, particularly amongst Sienese artists.

Historical context note

This figure would have come from a crucifix. The crucifix would probably have been a free-standing object, intended for adorning an altar during the ceremony of the mass. The presence of a crucifix on the altar had been usual during the mass since at least the twelfth century, and was discussed by writers such as Pope Innocent III and the liturgist Durandus. Small crucifixes were made for side chapels and altars, and medieval inventories also list ivory crucifixes amongst the possessions of the rich and powerful. One of the somewhat larger wooden
crucifixes by Giovanni Pisano is known to have been used in penitential processions at Easter, and it is possible that the V&A’s ivory could have been processed in a similar way. Ivory was an unusual artistic media in Italy at this point, and its use may have been a conscious emulation of French works which were coming into Italy during this period.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72533/the-crucified-christ-statuette-pisano-giovanni/