Panel - The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi

Object: Panel

Place of origin: Lower Rhine (possibly Werden, made)
North Rhine-Westphalia (possibly, made)

Date: ca. 800 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Carved ivory

Museum number: 149A-1866

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 8, The William and Eileen Ruddock Gallery, case 9

Public access description

This is one three ivory panels which appear to copy early Christian models, perhaps of the 5th century. The narrative takes place as an integrated sequence, rather than separating events out. Thus the wise men following the star, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi are shown in one.

The panel is from a casket (known as the Werden Casket) probably made about 800 in the Lower Rhine area, possibly Werden. The date and origin of these palquettes have been the subject of considerable scholarly debate, with the majority of authorities divided between an Early Christian and Carolingian origin.

This and the two other ivory panels from the Abbey of Werden in the V&A collection depict a mixture of scenes from Biblical and Apocryphal stories. They have been linked stylistically to a book-cover in the treasury of Milan Cathedral and other surviving panels and pyxides. The scenes of the Annunciation, the Magi seeing the Star, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi closely resemble the Milan book covers. Other panels which are thought to belong to the same group can be found in Berlin, Toulouse and Nevers museums and also possibly a panel in the British Museum representing Christ disputing with the Doctors. Three pyxides, one still at Werden, one in the museum at Rouen and the third in Florence have also been identified as belonging to the same group.

Descriptive line

Panel from a casket (known as the Werden Casket), carved ivory, depicting scenes including the Nativity and the Adoration, probably Lower Rhine (probably Werden), probably Carolingian, probably ca. 800

Physical description

One of three panels from an ivory casket (known as the Werden Casket), carved ivory with a narrow border of leaf ornament. This panel depicts scenes including the Magi seeing the Star; the Nativity with the manger in an open shed; and the Adoration of the Magi. Chipped and cracked, and pierced with several holes.

Dimensions

Height: 4.5 cm at left, Length: 25.1 cm, Depth: 0.7 cm, Weight: 0.1 kg, Width: 15.5 cm

Museum number

149A-1866

Object history note

Formerly in the Abbey of Werden, Westphalia, Germany. Purchased by the museum in 1866, from the Webb Collection.

Historical context note

This and the two other ivory panels from the Abbey of Werden in the V&A collection depict a mixture of scenes from Biblical and Apocryphal stories. They have been linked stylistically to a book-cover in the treasury of Milan Cathedral and other surviving panels and pyxides. The panels which are thought to belong to the same group can be found in the Berlin, Toulouse and Nevers museums and also possibly includes a panel in the British Museum representing Christ disputing with the Doctors. Three pyxides, one still at Werden, one in the museum at Rouen and the third in Florence have also been identified as belonging to the same group.

The Magi Seeing the Star: Only Matthew mentions the Magi in his Gospel 2:1. When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of king Herod, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, Saying: Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and are come to adore him.

The Gospel narrative omits to mention the number of the Magi, and there is no certain tradition in this matter. Some of the Church Fathers wrote of three Magi; they are very likely influenced by the number of gifts. In the Orient, tradition favours twelve. Early Christian art is no consistent witness: a painting in the cemetery of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus shows two; one in the Lateran Museum, three; one in the cemetery of Domitilla, four; a vase in the Kircher Museum, eight (Marucchi, "Eléments d'archéologie chrétienne", Paris, 1899, I 197). On the present relief three Magi are shown apparently agitated by the star above them.

The Nativity: The panel shows Christ on a crib, beneath a shed-like roof. He is attended by Mary and Joseph an ox and an ass. Only Matthew
and Luke describe the nativity, that in the middle-ages was much embellished upon. The presence of ox and ass is due to a misinterpretation of Isaías i:3 and Habacuc 3:2 ("Itala" version), they appear earlier than the present relief in the unique fourth-century "Nativity" discovered in the St. Sebastian catacombs in 1877.

The Adoration of the Magi
The Virgin and Child are depicted enthroned, three Magi present their gifts on oval trays or dishes. The earliest surviving depictions occur in Fourth-century paintings in Roman catacombs and in Byzantine mosaics.

It is obvious that the panels formed part of a flat, shallow casket with a sliding lid. A second short panel - now missing - would probably have shown the Journey to Bethlehem, and the lid was perhaps carved with a Christ in Majesty.

The eastern or western origin of this panel has been much debated. The architecture depicted on panel 149-1866 may be an indication of oriental origin: the facade flanked by two towers is a style of architecture associated with the Christian East. The shed-like roof over the nativity scene on the present panel is a more western feature. Dalton concludes that the precise localisation of the ivories can only be conjectural.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92728/the-nativity-and-the-adoration-panel-unknown/