

### A Mirror Back showing a Hunting Party

I have been asked to comment on the art-historical significance, quality, relevance for the collection of the Museum Schnütgen and the price of this ivory mirror back. It is being offered to the Museum for 360.000 Euro by Brimo de Laroussilhe, Paris, and I have previously inspected the object at the dealer's premises. The mirror back has been the subject of a full entry in the catalogue by Marie-Amélie Carlier, *Art du Moyen Âge, XIe - XIVe siècle* (Brimo de Laroussilhe, Paris, 2012, no. 27); this gives a full bibliography, which I will not repeat here, as I believe a copy of the entry is being provided along with the present submission.

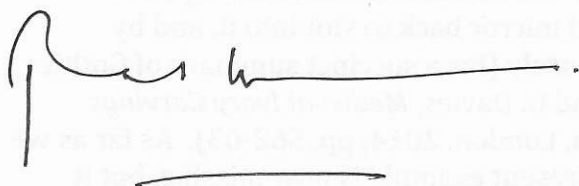
This circular relief, enlivened with four crawling dragon-like beasts around the outer edge, measures 10.2 cm in height and 10 cm in width. Its function as a mirror back is revealed by inspecting the back, which is recessed (for the now-missing mirror) and has a raised border with a cut-out slot at the top; this allowed the tongue attached to a second mirror back to slot into it, and by twisting, the pieces would lock shut securely (for a succinct summary of Gothic ivory mirror backs see P. Williamson and G. Davies, *Medieval Ivory Carvings 1200-1550*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2014, pp. 562-63). As far as we know, the pendant mirror back to the present example is now missing, but it would have been carved with a complementary scene of courtship.

The scene on the front of the mirror vase, framed within a cusped border, shows a pair of lovers riding on horses, with an attendant figure behind, holding a spear. The lady, wearing a distinctive hat with a pointed brim (a *chapeau à bec*), tenderly reaches out to touch the chin of her lover, who looks lovingly towards her and holds a falcon on his left hand. This is a quintessential and popular image of late medieval courtship, seen on a good number of other mirror backs of similar form, all carved in the first thirty years of the fourteenth century (for a comparable example in the Victoria and Albert Museum and a discussion of the group see Williamson and Davies, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 192). The present mirror back is closest to one now in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

The quality of the workmanship and carving is very fine, and the slightly rubbed surfaces - to be expected on an object intended to be used and repeatedly handled - does not detract from the aesthetic appeal or its art-historical importance. It is in generally good condition, with only minor damage and small repairs.

It is highly likely that the mirror back is the product of a Parisian workshop executing works for the wealthy elite class, and probably dates from the years around 1320. Mirror backs of this quality, representing the art of secular Gothic ivory carvings *par excellence*, rarely come onto the market. When they do appear, they are not cheap, but the present example is not unfairly priced. The best Gothic ivories in recent years have been sold for higher prices than this, and the opportunity to acquire such an accomplished and beautiful carving should not be missed. Apart from its inherent quality it also has a distinguished post-medieval history, forming part of the celebrated Sulzbach, Garnier and Kofler-Truniger collections.

It would certainly be a first-rate addition to the outstanding collection of the Museum Schnütgen. Although the Museum is fortunate in possessing many medieval ivories of great quality and importance, the principal strength of its holdings is focused on religious works of art. A typical, but top quality, example of secular carving such as this would therefore add great lustre to the Collection. In addition to being a beautiful object in its own right, it would allow different stories to be told in the Museum, highlighting the romantic and leisure aspects of life in the Middle Ages to set alongside the works of art made for the use of the Church. It would also demonstrate eloquently the fact that ivory carvings of both secular and religious subject matter were made in the same workshops, and that stylistic and compositional elements were common for lay and ecclesiastical patrons alike. I wholeheartedly recommend its acquisition.



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