

Rosario Arquero Avilés
Gonzalo Marco Cuenca

THE SALE of the Pyxis of Zamora.



In 1911, the Chapter of Zamora Cathedral sold some chests to the antique dealer Juan Lafora, including an ivory pyxis from the Caliphate era, valued at 52,500 pesetas (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

A few years earlier, this Caliphal pyxis, which would come to be known as the Pyxis of Zamora, was discovered by Manuel Gómez-Moreno and his wife Elena Rodríguez-Bolivar. The two researchers, in their task of cataloguing the pieces from the reliquary of Zamora Cathedral so that they could form part of the *Monumental Catalogue of Spain*, found the precious pyxis carved from ivory.

With this discovery, the Cathedral Chapter of the time recognised the importance of the small jewel it treasured and did not hesitate to send it to an exhibition of Retrospective Art held in Santiago de Compostela in 1910 (Gómez-Moreno, 1995; Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003). It should be noted that the Gómez-Moreno couple's *Monumental Catalogue* remained unpublished and was not finally published until 1927 (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003; Sadia, 2022).

It should also be noted that at the start of the 20th Century, the confiscations of Spanish artistic heritage, which had been ongoing since the mid-18th Century, were still taking place, with large quantities of works of art, books and other objects of cultural value and heritage being sold at grotesque prices. Many of these works left Spain.

The Cathedral Chapter's choice to send the pyxis to the Compostela exhibition - after enthusiastically welcoming the find - would end up with dire consequences for the piece, as it was publicly exhibited for the first time in Spain and antique dealers were very attentive to any movement in the field of heritage that could bring them profits (Sadia, 2022). In this regard, the pyxis had the misfortune to come across Juan Lafora, one of the leading antique dealers in the country, who, after sniffing out the piece, would never lose track of it (Sadia, 2022).

It is also known that the Dean of the Cathedral, at the Chapter meeting of 23 February 1910, stated that "*some antique dealers had been making proposals to acquire objects from this Holy Church, some deteriorated and unused, and others easily replaceable by other less valuable ones*" (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003).

Among these objects was the Caliphal pyxis, which was undoubtedly the most prized item in the lot. Shortly afterwards, following the Dean's report, the Chapter authorised the sale of the Pyxis of Zamora, agreeing to keep the matter absolutely confidential. Only the archpriest showed a conscience regarding its heritage and bitterly opposed the operation (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003; Sadia, 2023).

In March 1910, the Apostolic Nuncio approved the sale of these objects to help the institution meet its needs (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003; Sadia, 2023). What is curious is how the clergy understood that they could meet these pressing needs, as they invested the 52,500 pesetas obtained from the sale in the public treasury, buying public debt securities (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003; Sadia, 2023).

The singular beauty of these ivory pieces undoubtedly made them attractive for national antique dealers and, even more so, attracted the attention of art collectors from all over the world. So much so that other pieces similar to the Pyxis of Zamora were also sold to antique dealers and subsequently to collectors. Today, these pieces, which have been alienated from Spanish heritage, are exhibited in museums outside Spain.

Bibliography.

- Gómez-Moreno, M.E. (1995). Manuel Gómez-Moreno Martínez. Fundación Ramón Areces.
- Martín Benito, J.I. y Regueras Grande, F. (2003). El Bote de Zamora: historia y patrimonio. De Arte. Revista de Historia del Arte, 2, 203-224.
- Sadia, J.M. (2022). El autoexpolio del patrimonio español. Cuando España malvendió su arte. Almuzara.