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THE ART OF IVORY CARVING.



Ivory carving is the decorative art of carving in ivory. It is usually very delicate and meticulous work, requiring great precision and detail, as it generally involves working with single pieces of small or medium size, which entails the difficulties associated with the use and shape of this select material.

-curvature, hardness, colour, etc.-

Ivory is a bony material from the teeth and tusks of various vertebrate animals, especially elephants, although its origins may be varied. It is a solid, dense, heavy material that, mainly because of its scarcity and difficulty in obtaining it, became one of the most prized raw materials for adornment and the production of sumptuous objects (Marfil *et al.*, 2018).

Since ancient times, this exquisite and select material has been considered of great value, both artistically and economically. For this reason, it was recognised and popularly called "white gold", due to its aesthetic colour, which largely depends on the quality and origin of the material (Marfil *et al.*, 2018).

The Pyxis of Zamora is a piece of ivory, from an elephant tusk, featuring silver details and of exceptional artistic quality. This ivory pyxis (small casket) reflects the refinement and technical mastery achieved during the al-Andalus period in the Caliphate workshops of Medina Azahara. It is composed of or divided into two elements or pieces of ivory, which make up the body and the lid, sculpted with a beak and bevel (Puerta Vílchez, 2013).

Ivory pieces were crafted in qualified artistic workshops under the exclusive authority of the Caliph, who utilised this rare and expensive raw material that was difficult to obtain. During this period, there was great interest in the production of high-value objects, which were considered precious or luxurious at the time (Holod, 1992).

Giving sumptuous gifts was an essential activity in the main Islamic courts, as part of the sovereign's representative and promotional strategy (Silva Santa-Cruz, 2014).

These gifts were used as cases for the presentation of rich materials - such as fragrances and jewels - that complemented and increased the monetary value of the gift, due to their rarity, their extraordinary beauty and the exotic character of the raw material. They were also conceived with a certain will to last, after the fragrances had been consumed or the precious stones had been used (Silva Santa-Cruz, 2014).

The pieces were also everyday objects, designed to delight the recipient and showcase proximity to the Caliphate's power. But they were by no means mere vessels, as they carried multiple meanings and often bore the names and titles of the giver and the recipient, as well as the date when the gift was made (Holod, 1992).

The recipients of these ivory pieces, their patrons and probably the artists who made them were members of the Caliph's inner circle, and the place where they were made, the ivory workshops of the palatial city of Medina Azahara, made these works an expression of Caliphal power (Zozaya, 1998).

These ivory pieces are generally finely decorated with leafage ornamentation and sometimes depict animals or human figures, although these are rare. The carvings, made using the *ataurique* technique, featured floral details and stylised leafage forms, and were primarily intended for the women of the court, symbolising fertility and the continuity of the dynastic line of the Caliph. Conversely, decoration with human or animal figures was primarily intended for or linked to male power, bearing messages more directly related to the exercise of government (Monteira Arias, 2018). Over time, Caliphal ivory caskets and jars (pyxis) were frequently reused as reliquaries in church treasuries and occasionally mutilated or modified with artistic additions (Monteira Arias, 2018).

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