

Brief essay on bone-carved objects in the Ema Klabin Collection and the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection

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The content of this essay owes much to the recent research that has been carried out on bone-carved objects, such as *forzierini* (also known as *cofanetti nuziali*), large altarpieces or small triptychs used for private devotion. For a long time, these objects were despised by both *connoisseurs* and art historians, either by virtue of their materiality – thought to be inferior to ivory – as well as their pejorative classification with the Minor Arts¹.

In recent years, researchers have moved away from this premise. First, we must say that since Late Antiquity there was a prosperous production that used bone as raw material. That is because the “bone possesses unique qualities which were appreciated by craftsmen and which made it the material of preference for many types of objects².”

Second, as Houriane emphasized, “much dissension still exists as to what constitutes the minor arts.” Since 2012, “we saw how some of these arts were now being more fully integrate into general studies and what means were used to achieve this³.” Following this line of thought, I understand that the objects discussed in this essay allow us to think beyond traditional canons, boundaries and academic topographies.

The movement to find *forzierini* and the triptychs for private devotion led me to two private collections located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil: that of the Ema Klabin Foundation, which houses a small casket carved in Venice in the 15th century; and that of the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection, which has tryptichs of the 19th century⁴.

The *forzierino* of the Ema Klabin Foundation

¹ TATSCH, Flavia Galli. Objects and their visual narratives: some considerations about the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe in the caskets of the late-medieval period. *MODOS. Revista de História da Arte*. Campinas, v. 2, n.2, p.193-212, mai. 2018. Available from: <<http://www.publionline.iar.unicamp.br/index.php/mod/article/view/1028>>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24978/mod.v2i2.1028>.

² ST. CLAIR, Archer e MCLACHLAN, Elizabeth. *The carver's art. Medieval sculpture in Ivory, Bone and Horn*. New Jersey: The State University of New Jersey/Rutgers, 1989, p. 7.

³ HOURIHANE, Colum (ed.) *From Minor to Major. The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History*. The Trustees of Princeton University, 2012, p.ix.

⁴ I would like to thank the Ema Klabin Collection and Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection for the kindness with which they received me and openness so that this research could be elaborated.

Open to public visitation, the Ema Klabin Foundation is a nonprofit house museum. The objects exhibited are in their original setting, even after the transformation of the house into a cultural foundation⁵. In the living room, on the Italian chest of drawers of the 18th century, there is the small *cofanetto nuziale* (M-0609) elaborated in Venice in the 15th century and attributed to Bottega degli Embriachi, an active workshop in Florence and Venice at the end of the *Trecento* and beginning of the *Quattrocento*.

Baldassare Umbriachi, the workshop owner, and Giovanni di Jacopo, his chief craftsman, created products that satisfied contemporary tastes. I am talking about objects of desire for a courtly culture shared by several European regions. The *forzierini* were gifts offered by the groom to his bride, probably, when the future couple began to get to know each other better⁶, that is, after the negotiations between the families and before the exchange of vows and the ring⁷. Large-scale manufactured for an extensive market, they were comprised of an arrangement of small plaques in bone assembled on wood carcass within *intarsia* wood borders. The décor was complemented with geometric designs *alla certosina*.

The sides of the *forzierini* presented scenes composed of three or four plates, with religious or secular themes. In the first case, the stories were from the Old and New Testament; in the second, the scenes displayed were taken from Medieval romances and from Classical mythology, as the story of Pyramus and Thisbe⁸ and Jason and the Golden Fleece. The characters and animals represented were set in various types of landscape depending on the theme, such as the maritime, the country or the city. The urban landscape reflected contemporary architecture and celebrated the cities, as seen in altarpieces or frescoes of the period⁹.

On the cover of the *forzierino* of the Ema Klabin Collection, pairs of winged *armorini* kneel on a bottom of rose leaf foliage hold, in the front, a kind of crown and, in the back, a ball. Dated between 1400-1425¹⁰, the twelve plates that form the sides

⁵ COSTA, Paulo de Freitas (org.). *A Coleção Ema Klabin*. São Paulo: Fundação Cultural Ema Gordon Klabin, 2017, p. 27.

⁶ TOMASI, Michele. *Monumenti d'avorio*. I dossali degli Embriachi e i loro committenti. Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore Pisa/Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris, 2010, p. 88.

⁷ TOMASI, Miti antichi, p. 134; WILLIAMSON, op.cit., p. 752.

⁸ TATSCH, 2018.

⁹ MERLINI, Elena. *Trittici portatili della Bottega degli Embriachi*. Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen, XXXIII (1991), 47-62. TOMASI, 2010, pp. 212-213.

¹⁰ According to the collection's website: <https://emaklabin.org.br/explore/autores/baldassare-degli-embriachi-oficina-embriachi/>.

feature a procession of grooms and brides facing each other. The figures are longilineal, they touch hands or raise their arms towards the partner (figure 1), always “protected by shield and sword guardians on all four sides¹¹.” The box is clearly part of a widespread visual culture that manifested itself in frescoes, miniatures, ivory mirror boxes, *aumonières* and etc.



Figure 1

Bottega degli Embriachi (attributed) Venice, 15th century. Wood, bone, marquetry alla certosina (horn and bone), 17,8 x 18,7 x 12 cm. Ema Klabin Foundation Collection, São Paulo, Brazil

The *cofanetti nuziali* always contained a space specifically reserved for the Family stemma. The coats of arms could be carved, painted or applied to small metal plates. In the case of our casket, the spaces intended for this are on the sides of the lid and on the shields held by the characters arranged in the four corners. As in similar objects of other collections, this space has no traces of any of the forms of insertion of the coats of arms (figure 2).



Figure 2

¹¹ COSTA, 2017, pp. 49-50.

Bottega degli Embriachi was also responsible for the production of large bone-carved altarpieces that, as Tomasi said, were commissioned by “Europe's largest principals in a game of reciprocal emulation (...) to detain them to churches of great prestige¹².” There was also the production of small-scale triptychs for particular devotion that followed more or less the same confection scheme: supported on a staggered base of ornate *wood alla certosina*, the plates inserted in the central panel generally presented the Virgin and Child or the Crucifixion. The side panels brought the saints of devotion to their owners.

Much cheaper than large altarpieces, *forzierini* and triptychs for private devotion were elaborated on a large scale. The significant number of these objects in museum collections is a witness to their appeal, despite the repetitive composition of the scenes. Or perhaps, their success was attributed to that same standardization. As several experts argued, buyers could choose the size, shape, scenes and characters that should be exposed in them. These factors, added to the functionality in secular or religious daily use, eventually provided their survival.

At the end of the *Settecento* and throughout the *Ottocento*, the critical fortune of the objects attributed to *Bottega degli Embriachi* was the result of several factors. During the years of “revolutionary vandalism” (1789-1799), they were subtracted from the royal, nobiliary collections and churches to be offered at auctions, in antique houses or in flea markets. To the vast offer in the market, the appreciation was added to the appreciation for having been elaborated in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance – it is worth remembering that the “division” of both periods had not yet been institutionalized, because it was believed in a continuity between them¹³.

Thus, removed and stripped of their functions, they began to integrate other spaces such as museums and private European collections, as that of the French Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779-1842) and Pierre-Henri Révoil (1776-1842), exponent of the *Troubadour style*; of the Italian Teodoro Correr (1750-1830), in Venice and that of the brothers and barons Fausto (1843-1914) and Giuseppe (1845-1934) Bagatti Valsecchi, in Milan, who intended to create an “instrument for the reconstruction of the

¹² TOMASI, 2010, p. 6.

¹³ TOMASI, 2010, p. 16.

environment¹⁴”; and that of the Scottish antique dealers James Dennistoun of Dennistoun (1803-1855) and Lord Alexander Lindsay (1812-1880), among many others.

The great appreciation for the *forzierini* was the subject of engravings, as in *Les Arts au Moyen Âge* (1845)¹⁵ by Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779-1842), and several paintings, including that of the Englishman James Roberts (1753 – ca. 1809), *Charles Sauvageot dans son appartement du 56 rue du faubourg Poissonnière* (1856) in which one sees this violinist and collector in his bedroom having, on his left, the *forzierino* with scenes from the history of Paris and on the wall on the right, a triptych very similar to that of the Embriachi. Also Sir William Fettes Douglas (1822-1891), painter and *connoisseur*, recorded the trade of *forzierini* in the 19th century in *The Curiosity Shop, Rome*¹⁶.

The triptychs of private devotion in the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection

The same appreciation for the *forzierini* extended to other *embriacheschi productions*. Tomasi drew attention to the fact that the collectionism of large altarpieces, sold or dismantled during the French Revolution, began well after the collectionism of the *cofanetti*¹⁷. I venture to say that the same has happened to the triptychs for private devotion.

Probably from the second half of the *Ottocento*, like the creation of numerous artifacts and furniture with gothicizing and pre-Renaissance elements, the *embriacheschi* triptychs inspired the elaboration of objects “in the 15th century style¹⁸.” This was in line with the historicism that shaped this century, it motivated diverse owners and

¹⁴ See Museo Bagatti Valsecchi website. Available from: <https://museobagattivalsecchi.org/il-museo/le-collezioni/avori/>. Access on November 17, 2020.

¹⁵ DU SOMMERARD, Alexandre. *Les Arts au Moyen Age en ce qui concerne principalement le Palais Romain de Paris, l'Hotel de Chuny, issu de ses ruines : et les objets d'art de la collection classée dans cet Hôtel*. [Atlas], Paris, 1845. Available from: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/dusommerard1845atlas/0001/thumbs>. Access on November 17, 2020.

¹⁶ MacCOOL, D. S. *Nineteenth Century Art. With Illustrations from Pictures and Objects in the Fine art Loan Collection of the Glasgow International Exhibition*, 1901. London and New York: Macmillan & Co, 1902, p. 260. Available from: https://archive.org/details/nineteenthcentur00macc_0/page/n260/mode/2up

¹⁷ TOMASI, 2010, p. 19 and subsequent.

¹⁸ GOLDSCHMIDT, Adolph. Pseudo-Gothic Spanish Ivory Triptychs of the Nineteenth Century. *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, vol. 6 (1943), pp. 48-59. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20168776>.

collectors in Europe and the United States to recreate or alter domestic spaces in order to adapt them aesthetically and functionally to the different *revivals*¹⁹.

Among these objects, I think, are the altarpieces of the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection — CIJY. Unlike the Ema Klabin Foundation, the CIJY collection is arranged in the family residence and is not open to the public²⁰. Despite this, “its management strongly encourages its interface with museological institutions and academia both in Brazil and abroad²¹.”

Several works were carried out in the residence in order to house the vast collection. In 2003, a chapel was created. In the corridor that connects the private rooms and the sacristy that precedes the chapel are arranged several triptychs of unknown authorship. In this essay, I would like to comment only three of them. The first two have the same structure: a central panel and two metal-fixed sides to the central support (figures 3 and 4).



Figures 3 and 4

Both have practically the same composition. The central panel is divided into two parts: occupying the upper third, beneath a trilobed arch, you see a version of the Eternal Father. Below, the central figure of the Virgin standing holding the Child is

¹⁹ TURPIN, Adriana. “Objectifying the Domestic Interior: Domestic Furnishings and the Historical Interpretation of the Italian Renaissance Interior”. In: CAMPBELL, Erin J.; MILLER, Stephanie R; CONSAVARI, Elizabeth Carrol (eds). *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior, 1400-1700. Objects, Spaces, Domesticities*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 207-225.

²⁰ Beatriz Yunes Guarita, the couple's daughter, has been the CEO and Chief Curator since 2017.

²¹ *Longing for the world. 22 centuries of art in the IVANI AND JORGE YUNE'S COLLECTION - CIJY*

flanked by two minstrels angels. On each of the side panels was inserted the image of an apostle. Unlike the triptychs of Bottega degli Embriachi, there are no trees, or the city landscape. The characters are under gothic canopies.

The base of one of the triptychs (figure 3) has two carved male figures surrounded by trilobed arches. I have not yet found a consensus on these medallions, as they can represent the devotees as well as elements that fill the spaces, according to Goldschmidt²².

In the other triptych (figure 4), in which remains of polychromy are still found, the base is carved, possibly, with the images of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. The attribution of these “effigies” is based on the representation of a flag, on top of the right side wing, which refers to the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Aragon.

As I stated above, there is a significant lack of specialized studies, and my research needs to turn to various sources to find the way to critical analysis such as auction house websites. Some of them attribute the first two triptychs to the workshops of the city of Dieppe, France, which in the 19th century was quite fruitful in the carving of ivory pieces²³.



Figure 7

²² GOLDSCHMIDT, Adolph. Pseudo-Gothic Spanish Ivory Triptychs of the Nineteenth Century. Available in PDF

²³ It is the example of the lot sold in 2013 at The Saleroom. The home of art & antiques auctions. Available from: <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/alcala-subastas/catalogue-id-sralc10007/lot-dc601f23-d269-4a84-a26f-a447009f2226>. Also the auction lot in Invaluable. Auction Houses Artists. Available from: <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/french-school-probably-dieppe-last-room-of-19th-c-91-c-6244ddf900>.

The third triptych of the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection features the original chromia in blue and red and a distinct composition from the other two. In the central panel, under a canopial arch, the Virgin and Child are surrounded by four minstrel angels. Below, the standing Christ Child is held by two women holding shields with the coats of arms. At the base are male and female figures surrounded by trilobed arches.

The side panels are divided into three sessions: below, under trefoil arches, the Annunciation (right wing) and the Nativity (left wing); in the center, a monarch is beset by women; and, at the top, the effigies of Isabella (right wing) and Ferdinand of Aragon (left wing). At the base and side panels are the male and female figures surrounded by trefoil arches. The other characters still need to be identified.

In an initial analysis, it is possible that this triptych was also elaborated in France. However, it is also possible to consider another hypothesis, that it was the result of some Spanish workshop, having seen the frank dialogue with the triptychs elaborated in the *Ottocento* attributed to the Valencian Francisco Pallás y Puig (1859-1926), as that found in the collection of The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore and the Cranbrook Art Museum, Michigan²⁴.

To finish this brief essay, I tend to perceive the objects analyzed here as an invaluable source for future research. Both in terms of themselves and those who have acted on them and their taxonomies. It is also necessary to perceive them based on their relationships with collectors and displays in the Ema Klabin Collection and in the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection, which present themselves with quite diverse intentions.

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²⁴ RANDALL Jr, Richard H. *Masterpieces of Ivory from the Walters Art Gallery*. New York: The Walters Art Gallery, 1985, p. 318; BARNET, Peter (ed.) *Images in Ivory. Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*. Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, and Baltimore, The Walters Art Gallery, 1997, pp. 295-296.

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