HANDPICKED
COLLECTING BOXWOOD CARVINGS FROM THE SIXTEENTH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

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In 1862, at the height of the Industrial Revolution in Protestant England, the Duke of Devonshire sent a circlet of carved wooden prayer beads to a special exhibition at London's South Kensington Museum, which had opened only five years earlier 'to increase the means of industrial education and extend the influence of science and art upon productive industry.'[1] Even in the vast halls of that great museum, and among over eight thousand works of art, this precious object from the duke's collection at Chatsworth House was undoubtedly a surprising – even suspect – object [FIG. 134].[2] Of the rosary's myriad images, drawn from both the Old and New Testaments, only two, on the circlet's terminal paternoster nut, were singled out for mention in the catalogue: 'The Crowning of the Virgin' and 'The Sacrifice of the Mass', both long-standing sore points of dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants, the one having to do with the role of the Virgin Mary and the other the interpretation of the Last Supper of Christ and his apostles. The scene described as 'The Sacrifice of the Mass' is, more specifically, a depiction of the Mass of St Gregory [FIGS. 135, 136]. For Roman Catholics, the story of Christ's appearance to St Gregory at the altar confirmed the doctrine of transubstantiation: the belief that the bread and wine of the Mass become the body and blood of Jesus. The subtleties of this

FIGS. 134, 135, 136

FIG. 137

point of dogma are little understood today outside theological circles, but stood at the center of a centuries-long debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants.[3] Thus, in Victorian London, the carving of this circlet rosary was surely seen as problematic, hovering between the aesthetically alluring and the religiously proscribed.

Inside this tiny paternoster nut, a man and a woman witness the sacrament of the Eucharist taking place at the altar from a gallery above. While dressed in contemporary Flemish fashion, this is no ordinary couple. It is likely that they represent King Henry VIII (1491–1547) and his first wife Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), whose initials are carved, together with the royal arms of England, on the exterior of the nut [FIGS. 137, 138].[4] The London exhibition catalogue was the first published reference to suggest that 'the rosary belonged to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (1473–1530) before it belonged to Henry VIII'.[5] The purported royal ownership is a 'most likely' history, but it must have been an astounding one for its mid-Victorian audience. By means of the story embedded in this one object, Henry VIII, the foundational monarch of the Church of England, is linked to the Roman Catholic tradition against which he, and the nation that followed him, had rebelled. Centuries later, the subject was still very much in the air. Only in 1829 had Roman Catholics in England been given the right to vote and to hold most public offices. Only in 1850, a decade before the exhibition, had the pope reestablished a governing hierarchy in England – for the first time since the death of Mary Tudor (dubbed 'Bloody Mary' for her

persecution of Protestants) in 1558.[6] A prominent Roman Catholic community had established itself in London in the same Brompton neighborhood as the museum where the rosary was exhibited. It drew new adherents from a wide swathe of society, cutting across class, ethnic, religious and political lines.[7] Did anyone other than Mr Robinson, the author of the exhibition catalogue, notice the carved prayer beads or the theory about their history? Yes, probably, for in the nineteenth century the rosary enjoyed a newfound vogue, symptomatic of a romantic taste for piety.[8]

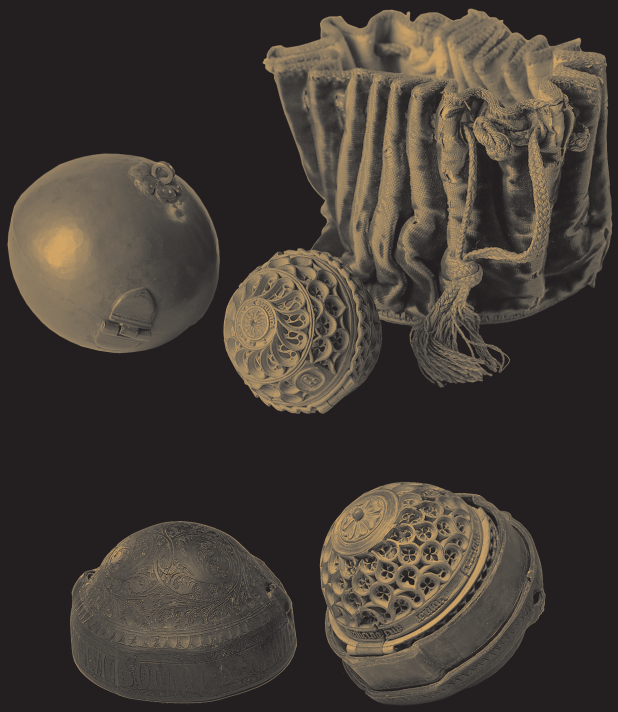
Did these beads fascinate Victorian audiences uniquely because of their royal history, their religious significance, or their virtuoso artistry? Robinson's catalogue entry would suggest it was their history and religious significance. From the installation, however, it would seem that the intention in borrowing them was to focus on their artistry, for they were displayed in a section devoted to medieval art, among numerous ecclesiastical treasures, not alongside the more than twenty 'Historical Relics', among which objects linked to the tumultuous English Reformation figured prominently. Three decades earlier, in an 1836 encyclopedia entry mentioning the circlet, it was not the subject of the Mass nor of the Virgin carved in the beads that caught the author's attention; rather it was simply the marvel of its artistry and its tiny scale: 'Nothing can surpass the exquisite beauty of the workmanship of this relic of other days. Every figure is perfect in consequence of the extreme minuteness of their size.'[9] The Chatsworth rosary

FIG. 138

seems to be the defining example among a number of such intricate boxwood carvings, 'small wonders' that, across the centuries, have had a multivalent appeal – toggling between religious and artistic. The appeal they have held for their owners, while shifting in focus, has not abated over the centuries. Thomas Wolsey, who was proposed in the 1862 exhibition catalogue as the original owner of the Chatsworth beads, served as an increasingly powerful advisor to Henry VIII from the king's coronation in 1509 until Wolsey's fall from power in 1529. The lack of documentation for the rosary's history makes the proposal difficult to prove. Would Wolsey have ordered it for Henry and Catherine's marriage?[10] Could it have been made to celebrate the birth of their daughter Mary in 1516, for whom Wolsey stood godfather, along with Katherine of York, Countess of Devon, and Elizabeth Howard?[11] In fact, prayer beads were sometimes presented to mark occasions like marriages and births.[12] However, given the number of carved boxwood prayer beads and nuts belonging to members of the circle around the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, Catherine of Aragon's nephew, it seems more likely that the Chatsworth beads would have been a wedding gift from Catherine's imperial relatives.[13] It is not known who took possession of the rosary after the royal marriage was dissolved in 1533, but given her adherence to the Church of Rome, Catherine would probably have retained it. For his part, Henry VIII passed restrictions on rosary devotion in 1538, and their use was banned in 1547.[14] Similarly, it is unclear how the rosary entered a bishop's col-

lection in Aachen sometime after that, if it did. The interest of a subsequent owner, *père* François de la Chaise (1624–1709), confessor to King Louis XIV (1638–1715) and a Jesuit, followed by *père* Gabriel Broitter (1723–1789), also of the Society of Jesus, might be explained by their order's advocacy of the rosary as a form of Catholic devotion, but the means by which it came into De la Chaise's possession is unexplained.[15] While the collection history is murky, the Chatsworth rosary and related boxwood nuts provide glimpses into a world when prayer, life and art were intertwined.

The uncertainty surrounding the Chatsworth rosary's provenance is not unusual for the over one hundred and thirty Gothic boxwood carvings that are known today. Nonetheless, the very survival of such a large corpus of small and delicate objects – and the evidence of later, specially crafted containers to house them safely, such as the prayer nut of Evert Jansz van Bleyswijck [FIGS. 139, 140] – indicate a chain of dedicated owners who cherished and protected them. Some of them were family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. Seldom, though, can the chain be completely reconstructed.[16] Identifiable patrons owned or commissioned eleven of the surviving boxwood carvings. They include men and women, married couples, European royalty, Church officials, members of the Netherlandish aristocracy and of the exclusive and distinguished Order of the Golden Fleece.[17] Some original owners have only been introduced to modern art-historical literature quite recently.[18] While some



FIGS. 139, 140

FIGS. 141, 142

carvings were acquired as unique examples of their types, others were collected obsessively in large groups. This essay outlines collecting trends with regard to fifteenth-century boxwood carving, with special attention paid to people who established the substantial holdings of today's museums.

'YOUR LOVE IS BETTER THAN WINE'[19]

The scenes and inscriptions of boxwood prayer nuts attest unequivocally to the religious motivation of the original owners who acquired them. This is the case with the magnificent Chatsworth rosary, but equally with beads of far more modest artistry, such as the one with the kneeling nun holding prayer beads in her own hand in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art [FIGS. 141, 142]. Nestled within the bead, in close proximity to the Virgin and Child, the nun's association with them is intimate and direct. Framing them is a narrow band for an inscription that, surprisingly, uses only part of the available space, reading simply: 'O mater dei memento mei' ('O Mother of God, remember me'). This is a humble supplication. Lending an even more somber air to the ensemble, the other half of the bead presents an image of the Pietà, with St John and the Magdalen flanking the Virgin. Its inscription, corresponding to Acts 7:59 concerning the stoning of Stephen, and used in the evening prayer service of Compline reads: 'Domine Jesu, suscipe spiritum meum' ('Lord Jesus Christ, receive my spirit'). Together they indicate a meditation on mortality. There is nothing playful about this carving, nor is it distinguished for its technical

virtuosity. It served a private devotional function for its owner, who probably kept the object closed and opened it for prayer, just as owners of ivory diptychs would have done in previous centuries. Other carvings further endorse the use of prayer beads: a nun holding them in her hands [FIG. 142], a circlet of prayer beads hanging from a nail on the wall where the Holy Family is camped in Bethlehem, suggesting that Mary and Joseph, too, used such beads in their devotions [FIG. 143].

Nonetheless, the history of the Van Cranevelt prayer nut demonstrates how a carving acquired for devotional use became an object admired for its craftsmanship in the hands of later owners within the same family. Its likely first owner was Machteld van der Dussen, for whom, like other women of her class and time, the reputation of Mary Magdalen as a wealthy woman of exceptional piety was particularly exemplary.[20] Machteld was the great-great-grandmother of Joost van Cranevelt, into whose possession the prayer nut later passed. Like his ancestors he was a Roman Catholic, but he was equally an art enthusiast. A manuscript written in his hand describes the nut as 'an ingenious apple, carved from boxwood,' using the term 'ingenious' repeatedly.[21] He is the earliest known owner to remark on the quality of the exterior, with its 'openings of very equal and wonderful proportions'.

The original owners of these small boxwood wonders acquired them for the spiritual impact they provided, which, curiously, is in inverse proportion to their size. Their minute scale and the ingenious

FIG. 143

FIG. 144

intricacy of their carving established an intimate link between the faithful beholder and the essential stories of the Catholic faith. In the most accomplished carvings, these played out like a grand opera on a miniature stage, complete with exotic costumes, elaborate props and animals large and small. Like the precious prayer books of Simon Bening [FIG. 144], such carvings present a holy land in miniature, a sacred realm reached not by actual travel but through intensive looking and prayer. A few moments' gaze and one tumbles headlong into the tiny world created by the carver. The effect is, perhaps, not unlike obsessive attention to the iPhone and the world it reveals beyond one's immediate surroundings. There is an 'Alice in Wonderland' quality to these prayer nuts: a means of escape from the present. That kind of fascination does not depend on adherence to a religious creed, and that, combined with private rather than public ownership, seems to lie at the root of preservation of Gothic boxwood carvings to the present day.

'FURNISHING WISDOM AND PLEASING ARTS'[22]

Comprised of wonders of nature (*naturalia*), art objects (*arteficialia*), foreign curiosities (*exotica*) and technical instruments (*scientifica*), as well as 'images of sacred history',[23] sixteenth-century princely *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* were perfect homes for sixteenth-century boxwood carvings.[24] The virtuosic carving technique that they required,[25] clearly impressed authors of the inventory of the dukes of Bavaria, who were among the earliest collectors.[26] The 1598 Wittelsbach *Schatzkammer*

inventory mentions several boxwood carvings. One is simply described as 'a little monstrance carved from boxwood' ('in Buchsbaume holz außgeschnitten Monstränzl'), while another is distinguished as 'a subtly carved ball of boxwood' ('ein subtil außgeschnittne Kugl von buxbaum').[27] The description reflects the sense of marvel that these objects awakened. The dukes lacked the full technical means to unravel the secrets of carving these objects that we now have, but some aspects of the carver's art would surely have been discerned by these collectors, for woodworking was a hobby among the Bavarian nobility.[28] Duke Wilhelm V (r. 1579–97), a devout Roman Catholic and a significant patron of art and architecture, might have acquired the boxwood nuts, but his predecessor Albrecht V (r. 1550–79) is a more compelling candidate.[29] He was a particularly ambitious collector who worked closely with his Flemish advisor Samuel Quiccheberg, who trained as a physician, to build an encyclopedic collection of art and wonders at the Munich Residenz. In 1565, Quiccheberg penned a treatise of global ambition, which he called *Inscriptiones vel tituli theatri amplissimi, complectentis rerum universitatis singulas materias et imagines eximias* (Inscriptions or titles of the most ample theatre that houses exemplary objects and exceptional images of the entire world). In it were instructions for the foundation of a princely *Kunstkammer*.[30] Sacred images were to be an integral part of the collection. Another essential component was a workshop of turning and joining tools considered by 'princes and patricians to belong to the domain of the

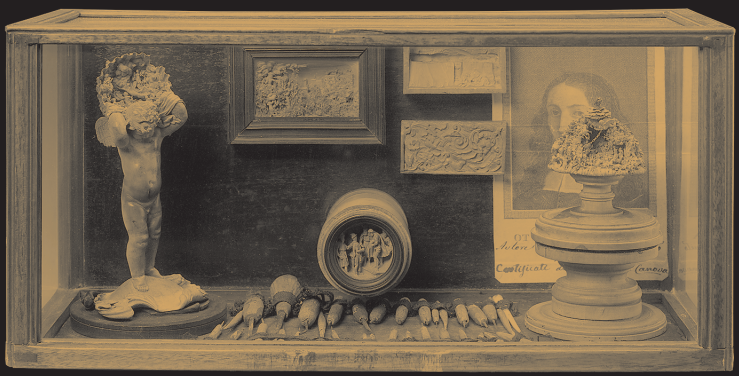


FIG. 145

FIG. 146

more congenial arts'.[31] Moreover, it should include 'diverse works made on the lathe from wood [...] readily revealing their inner forms to their makers'.[32] The installation, therefore, should provide an understanding of technique, 'so that, beyond their ornamentation and elegance (which are here present to the highest degree), a not trifling delight is experienced'. A similar, almost fetishizing fascination with technique is encapsulated in this unique selection of tools and boxwood carvings by the Italian seventeenth-century sculptor Ottaviano Jannella [FIG. 145].

The Munich monstrance [FIG. 146] is made up of three parts: a prayer nut that sits atop a small pedestal and is crowned by a pinnacle. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, taking apart and putting together this particular multi-piece carving would have served as a compelling source of conversation and entertainment for visitors to Munich's princely court.[33] The only other multi-piece boxwood carving that survives today [FIG. 83] might have belonged to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558).[34] We might assume, then, that the Munich ensemble was intended for a patron of similar standing.

A number of nuts, or inventory references to them, suggest the orbit of Charles's imperial court.[35] A nut was among the possessions of Margaret of Austria, aunt of Charles and governor of the Netherlands from 1507.[36] The arms on another indicate ownership by Floris van Egmond and his wife Margaretha van Glymes. Floris was a member of the army of Emperor Charles V and Stadholder of Friesland. As his multiple titles reflect, Albrecht

of Brandenburg (Archbishop of Magdeburg in 1513, Archbishop and Elector of Mainz by 1514, and cardinal in 1518) was a prominent figure in the established Church and a supporter of Charles V's election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519.[37] A renowned collector, he was the owner of a skull-shaped prayer nut that bears his coat of arms carved into its hasp [FIGS. 147, 148]. Albrecht notoriously provoked Martin Luther's ire for his involvement in the sale of indulgences, articulated in the famous *95 Theses* of 1517. Albrecht, in turn, proved hostile to the Reformation, though until 1539 Luther had hoped to persuade him of the rightness of reform.[38] The personalized bead shaped like a skull was probably a gift to the archbishop from a Catholic supporter.[39] Was it emblematic of their ardent defense of Catholicism? Albrecht's collection of more than eight thousand relics and his patronage of a new church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary have certainly been seen this way.[40]

A Munich prayer nut reads as a carved proclamation of Catholic doctrine [FIG. 149].[41] It pictures a conventional iconographic combination unique amongst surviving boxwood carvings: the Crucifixion set over Moses and the Brazen Serpent. The complex faceted exterior includes eight additional carved reliefs that alternate Old Testament scenes with events from Christ's Passion. The 1598 inventory describes this prayer nut simply as 'subtil und kunstvoll geschnitzt', overlooking its theological complexing and stressing only its craft as its distinguishing feature.[42]

The Dresden Residenzschloss *Kunstkammer*, now called the Grünes Gewölbe ('Green Vault'), had a

FIGS. 147, 148, 149

FIG. 150

single boxwood carving as early as 1640 [FIG. 150]. Coincidentally, its iconography echoes the Munich nut now thought to be in the Abegg-Stiftung collection and mentioned above [FIG. 149]: 'A turned little wooden sphere, that can be taken apart in the middle. Old-fashioned exterior, a work by monks, pierced and carved openwork [tracery], in one half the Crucifixion of Christ and in the other half to be found Moses and the Brazen Serpent, subtly carved in wood'.[43] Fewer than hundred fifty years after its creation, the Dresden example was perceived as 'monks' work' – a curiosity from a bygone age of idealized artistic productivity in religious houses. But its artistry did not fail to impress, and it seemed a perfect fit for the character of the *Kunstkammer*. The founder of the Dresden collection was Elector Augustus (r. 1553–86), who imagined his cabinet of art and rarities as 'a kind of university of technology and science for himself and his sons, who were educated for their future positions as rulers of an economically highly developed country. Since the production of art was still considered to be just another industrial activity, the *Kunstkammer* contained works of art along with its products of the decorative arts and its objects of historical, ethnographic, or geographic significance'.[44] It is possible that the Dresden prayer nut was acquired by Augustus, or by one of his successors, many of whom were very engaged with the collection. The Elector Moritz of Saxony (r. 1547–53) built an additional west wing to their palace to house the treasures of Saxony's electors.[45] In October 1751 the writer Johann Georg Keyssler encouraged readers of his travel

guide for Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy and Lorraine to go and see it: 'In Dresden there is one thing that you should endeavor to do and that is to visit the so-called Grünes Gewölbe or Schatzkammer.'[46] Presumably, the boxwood carving would have been on view alongside the Grünes Gewölbe's thousands of other treasures when the collection opened to the public in 1730.

The royal collections in Denmark, where Lutheranism had been embraced by the king by 1537, included at least one boxwood piece in their treasury as early as 1673.[47] None of the Copenhagen carvings have royal identifiers, which makes it difficult to identify their original owners. Given that much clerical property passed to the crown at the Reformation, it would appear that, as in Dresden, works were preserved for their skilled carving and not for their devotional use.[48] Another is noted in the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities by 1690;[49] and a third one was transferred from the Royal Treasury to the Cabinet of Curiosities in 1826.[50] It is assumed that these are the three examples that survive in Copenhagen today: a prayer nut [FIG. 8] and an altarpiece [FIGS. 123, 124], in the collection of the Statens Museum for Kunst, and a second prayer nut that is kept in the Nationalmuseet [FIGS. 119, 151]. The nut and the altarpiece in the Statens Museum are of particular interest to this study, as the former bears the inscription 'ADAM THEODRICI ME FECIT' [FIG. 22] and the latter a coat of arms.[51] Is Adam Theodrici the name of the original maker and the latter the original patron and/

FIG. 151

FIG. 152

or owner? Most likely, but this does not shed light on how the works of art arrived in Copenhagen.[52]

'THEY PUSHED THE SEARCH FOR THE INFINITELY SMALL'[53]

The six boxwood micro-carvings known to have entered princely collections in the seventeenth century described above have remained there. The other examples, over one hundred, changed hands multiple times. Many surfaced in nineteenth-century Paris in private collections that were increasingly put on public display [FIG. 152]. In that period, buyers and sellers alike flocked to the French capital to engage with the city's thriving medieval and Renaissance art market. Ironically, just as Napoleon III (r. 1852–70) and Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809–91) razed the medieval buildings of Paris, collectors constructed modern homes on grand boulevards to display their historical collections.

One of Napoleon III's closest advisors, Count Alfred Emilien O'Hara van Nieuwerkerke (1811–92) became Minister of Culture, fighting vehemently against the emergence of modern art. His love of traditional craft is probably what brought him to boxwood micro-carvings, of which two are known to have been in his collection.[54] An excerpt from the catalogue of the 1878 *Exposition Universelle*, Paris's third World's Fair, describes Van Nieuwerkerke's two prayer nuts after they were acquired by Count Alexander Petrovich Basilewsky (1829–99).[55] The excerpt expresses a particular interest in their methods of manufacture: 'At the turn of the sixteenth century, in Flanders and Germany, a number

of *imagiers* took pleasure in carving boxwood with even more love than their predecessors had with ivory, an art that was by then abandoned. They pushed the search for the infinitely small until they enclosed full scenes in rosary beads, of which the Basilewsky Collection has two. However, these have not gone to the extreme of minutia. Their execution is broad, maintaining only what is necessary for effect and neglecting what is cumbersome. The little carved triptych on a base in the same collection is one of the most perfect specimens of its type. The *Calvary* is pictured in its entirety at the center, in full round, between bas-reliefs of *The Carrying of the Cross* and *The Entombment of Christ* on the shutters, while the base carried *The Flight into Egypt* between two other scenes impossible to distinguish without the help of a magnifying glass. *The Presentation in the Temple*, depicted in figures that are barely one centimeter in height, interrupts the steps, which serve as plinths to this ensemble.'[56] The author's fascination with the intricate nature of the altarpiece must have been shared by exhibition visitors and its owner alike [FIGS. 42, 153, 154].[57] Basilewsky was one of many passionate collectors who came to Paris from abroad and acquired works of art from older collections, including those of Louis Fidel Debruge-Dumenil (1849), Louis Fould (1859), Prince Peter Soltykoff (1861) and the Comte de Pourtalès (1865). The 1874 catalogue of Basilewsky's collection lists hundreds of works of art in many different media and categories, with a concentration of Limoges enamels and majolica.[58] His private collection was viewed on request or by

FIGS. 153, 154

FIG. 155

a set number of visitors, which was common practice amongst the great collectors in Paris of this era, but Basilewsky also showed works of art at the Paris Exposition in 1865 and again in 1867 [FIG. 155].[59] Presumably, he saved the three boxwood carvings described above for the 1878 World's Fair because of their virtuosic quality. Today, all three survive in the collection of the Hermitage in St Petersburg, with the triptych being the most impressive example due to its complex construction and multi-figured Crucifixion scene.[60]

A looming figure and peer to Van Nieuwerkerke on the Parisian antiquarian market was Vienna-born Frédéric Spitzer (1815–90). He had built himself a mansion near the Arc de Triomphe with galleries in which, as in the Louvre, *objets d'art* were arranged in glass cases and catalogued in order, so as to bring before the eyes of visitors the complete history of the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[61] Spitzer, however, was no purist, and he commissioned metalsmiths in Aachen and Paris to produce modern works of art inspired by and often slavishly copied from originals to augment their number.[62] Four surviving boxwood carvings were altered by Spitzer for the market and published accordingly in the 1891 catalogue written by Louvre curator Émile Molinier [FIG. 156].[63] Today, these examples survive in museums in Chicago [FIG. 157], Baltimore and Toronto [FIG. 158] and in a Dutch private collection [FIG. 95]. The Toronto *Carrying of the Cross* had its nineteenth-century triptych wings removed at an unknown date and is displayed to today's audiences accordingly.

FIGS. 156, 157, 158

It is evident that the original parts are missing, but the virtuosic quality of the carving remains intact. The Chicago *Crucifixion*, on the other hand, survives without any housing. The Baltimore *Adoration* maintains Spitzer's additions and is possibly the most impressive of the three works as a result. Many of the surviving boxwood carvings that entered public and private hands during the nineteenth century presumably did so via Spitzer. He was known for his prolific stock and for his vivacious social life, which included hosting friends and clients at his Paris apartment dressed in Renaissance garb [FIG. 159].

AN ELEMENT OF ROMANCE[64]

The Australian-born British collector George Salting (1835–1909) purchased a good portion of Spitzer's collection at the 1893 sale of *Medieval and Renaissance Objets d'Art*. Salting bequeathed parts of his vast collection to London's British Museum, the National Gallery in London and the Victoria and Albert Museum.[65] This behavior at auctions was not unheard of. A few years earlier, after the fall of the French Empire in 1870, another British collector, Sir Richard Wallace (1818–1890), bought the aforementioned Count van Nieuwerkerke Collection *en bloc*. It included the two boxwood prayer nuts: one with scenes from the life of Christ and another with the vision of St Hubert and St George.[66] Like Salting, Wallace exported the works to London. In 1870, he inherited the collection of his father, the 4th Marquess of Hertford, along with Hertford House, which he renovated to accommodate his collections.

FIG. 159

FIG. 160

Converted into a public museum after his death in 1890, it opened for the first time on 22 June 1900. The collections on view then, and today, include a wonderful triptych [FIG. 42] that Wallace purchased from the Paris-based dealer Charles Mannheim on 5 October 1871.[67] It is singular in terms of both its elaborate form and its comprehensive Old and New Testament program.[68]

Spitzer identified Wallace amongst his most significant patrons, boasting that he sold over 60,000,000 francs worth of art to the English collector and to Baron Adolphe Carl von Rothschild (1823–1900), alone.[69] Adolphe and his cousin Ferdinand James von Rothschild (1839–1898) were avid collectors active in Paris, and the grandsons of the founder of their family's banking dynasty, Mayer Amschel Rothschild (1744–1812). Both men inherited the established collections of their fathers, Carl (1788–1855) and Anselm (1803–1874), which they added to their own holdings. Recently the term 'neo-*Kunstkammer*' was coined to describe the aims of Rothschild collecting, specifically in relation to that of Ferdinand and Anselm.[70] The same could also be said of Adolphe, whose collections were admired in Europe and abroad.[71] Ultimately, both men donated their collections to major public institutions: Ferdinand to the British Museum in 1898 and Adolphe to the Louvre in 1901. Consequently, these two institutions boast two of the world's most significant holdings of sixteenth-century boxwood carving. The British Museum gift, called the Waddesdon Bequest after Ferdinand's country house, includes many of the works listed in

Anselm's 1866 inventory, among them a most impressive monstrance [FIGS. 83–90] with scenes of Christ's infancy and Passion as well as a superlative triptych [FIGS. 29, 160] that focuses on the Passion.[72] Adolphe's gift to the Louvre included five impressive boxwood carvings, among which are a decade rosary [FIG. 111] with the arms of the Dutch Count Floris van Egmond and his wife Margaretha van Glymes and an impressive triptych [FIGS. 29, 114, 115, 161] recently traced back to its first owners, Augustijn Florisz van Teylingen and his wife.[73] Neither Adolphe nor his father Carl's collections are documented in an inventory and therefore we cannot determine who acquired these carvings, but it can be said that they fit the profile of objects worthy of either of these nineteenth-century 'neo-*Kunstkammern*'.[74]

'THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS SEEM ALMOST MIRACULOUS'

The American collector William Walters (1820–1894) was amongst those who visited the 1878 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.[75] Resident in Paris between 1864 and 1884, he was part of the historical collecting milieu and would probably have known Van Nieuwerkerke.[76] His son, Henry Walters (1848–1931), made his first purchases from Seligmann in 1902. Seligmann had obtained much of his stock from Spitzer's 1893 Paris sale, and in 1902 he dispatched Emile Rey to New York to sell stock.[77] In New York, both J. Pierpont Morgan and Walters were major clients.[78] The aforementioned altarpiece in Baltimore that was in Spitzer's collection was probably acquired by Walters from

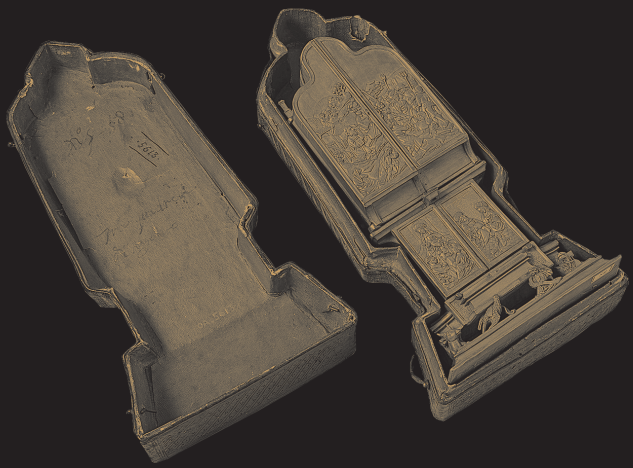


FIG. 161

FIGS. 162, 163, 164, 165

Seligmann, as were two additional prayer beads on view in the Walters Art Museum today.

Like Walters, the American financier J. Pierpont Morgan bought collections *en bloc* as well as single works of art. On 13 April 1906, he purchased Baron Oppenheim's entire collection in London with the intention of bringing it directly to New York, but he was prevented from doing so by tariffs on importing works of art then in effect.[79] His Oppenheim purchase included four boxwood carvings: one triptych with the Crucifixion and Resurrection [FIG. 162], another with the Crucifixion and the Carrying of the Cross [FIG. 163], a prayer nut with the Carrying of the Cross and the Crucifixion [FIG. 64] and finally a medallion, unusual in representing the Feast of Ahasuerus [FIG. 164]. A boxwood diptych featuring the Nativity and the Mass of St Gregory was purchased by Morgan in 1898 from Charles Mannheim, and remains a cornerstone of the Morgan medieval collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [FIG. 165]. All of these works are illustrated in a 1910 catalogue of Morgan's collection.[80] By 1914, the guide to the J. Pierpont Morgan collection on exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum records two cases of boxwood in the medieval galleries. Regarding their carvers it was observed that 'their achievements seem almost miraculous'.[81] Here the two strains underlying the collecting of these objects merge in a single sentence. Yes, they are 'miraculous', as their original owners prayed they would be; but 'almost miraculous' is the assessment of the artist's capability.

A marked interest in boxwood carvings persisted even after the industrialist collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries died and their collections passed to institutions. Between 1950 and 2016, fewer changed hands on the auction market than were sold through private dealers. The principals of the Blumka Gallery, active in New York ever since the Nazi *Anschluss* obliged the family to relocate there from Vienna, evince a special interest in boxwood carvings, having offered some of the most notable examples in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These include the prayer nut depicting the Queen of Sheba [FIG. 166] in Toronto, a faceted prayer nut in the Smith College Museum [FIG. 167], and the triptych with the Virgin in Sole in a private collection in the United Kingdom [FIG. 168]. The owner of the triptych expresses his fascination with boxwood carvings in much the same vein as the princely collectors of the past: 'I love the intricacy of these miniature carvings which are so like ivory carving. They are true marvels and inspire wonder.'[82]

The most committed collector of boxwood carving in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was, without a doubt, the Canadian publishing magnate Ken Thomson (1923–2006). Thomson's collecting career began at the age of 30, in 1953, and continued until his death at the age of 83. Through his close friendship with the German-born, London-based dealer Hermann Baer, he developed a connoisseur's eye and a love of small sculpture. Together Baer and, later, the English dealer Sam Fogg advised Thomson

FIGS. 166, 167, 168

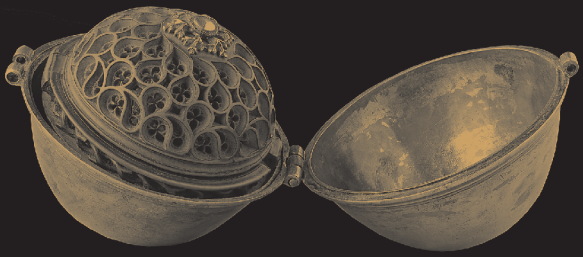
FIGS. 169, 171, 170

on the acquisition of precious medieval and Renaissance works of art, helping him to amass the largest group of boxwood carvings in the world: six prayer nuts, two skull nuts and two triptychs (one which has lost its outer wings). Thomson purchased his first boxwood devotional carving in 1969 [FIG. 169].[83] The prayer nut is modest at first glance, depicting the Expulsion of the Money Changers in the top hemisphere and then the Entry into Jerusalem below. A fascinating detail is revealed when the nut is viewed under a microscope: a tiny basket with doves carved fully in the round held by a woman just in front of Christ. When the nut is moved, the doves also move ever so slightly within their cage – a truly magical detail, like an inside joke between the object's owner and maker. Ken Thomson waited five years before buying his next boxwood carving, an intricate Vision of St Hubert [FIG. 65], which was the first of four consecutive annual boxwood carving acquisitions. In 1975, he acquired a nut with scenes from the life of St Jerome [FIG. 170],[84] in 1975 it was a prayer nut picturing the Annunciation and the Nativity [FIGS. 229, 230] once owned by Spitzer,[85] and finally, in 1976, he purchased one of the gems of his collection, a unique prayer nut picturing the story of David and Goliath [FIG. 171].[86] Two skull-shaped prayer nuts, carved in fruitwood and indirectly connected to the boxwood carvings that are the subject of this study, were acquired in 1977 and 1982 [FIGS. 49, 50, 147].[87] Thomson bought four more boxwood carvings before his death in 2006, all of which came from the Blumka gallery in New York [FIGS. 170, 172–74]. His son David

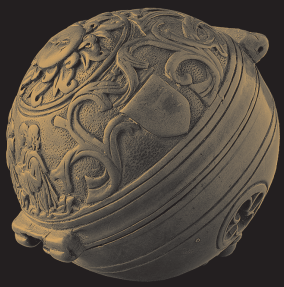
Thomson (b. 1957) continues to collect these works in honor of his father, and indeed, three additional works can be considered part of the latter's legacy [FIGS. 23, 32, 113, 175–77]. Ken Thomson's collection of over eight hundred examples of European precious works of medieval and Renaissance art at the Art Gallery of Ontario represents his love of miniature, virtuoso works of art: 'As you know, I like small works of art, small sculptures, usually in boxwood or ivory and in materials that largely are organic and they feel good. When I say they feel good, the quality of the carving, of the execution, can come through not only through the eye but through the touch.'[88]

In addition to his admiration for small-scale craft, Thomson expressed the tactile appeal to which the United Kingdom collector also alluded in comparing them to ivory carving. He articulates a special, almost spiritual link that he feels – not to the actors in the Christian drama who appear in the nuts – but to the artist who created them: 'How did he ever end up doing this? It defies my imagination.'[89]

FIG. 172



FIGS. 175, 173, 174, 176, 177



* This essay builds on the 1992 groundbreaking dissertation *South Netherlandish Boxwood Devotional Sculpture, 1475–1530* by Susan Jean Romanelli, to trace the collecting history and patterns of the works of art at the center of this publication, as well as recent research by our colleagues, as cited in the footnotes. With many thanks to Angela Glover in Toronto who spent four years helping to expand the corpus of known boxwood carvings, and to Adam Levine whose relentless provenance and collecting research was invaluable to this essay. We are also grateful to Christine Brennan, Christine McDermott and Hannah Korn in New York.

1 Supplemental Charter, 1851, quoted in 'Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851: an Outline of its Activities Past and Present', privately published, as cited by Robertson 2004, p. 10, note 3.

2 Robinson 1862.

3 For a discussion that was published at roughly the same time as the exhibition see, for example, Birckbek 1849, vol. 2, pp. 84–85. For the history of the dispute in England occasioned by the Reformation see Dickens 1989.

4 'Hony soit qui mal y pense', the motto of the exclusive Order of the Garter, founded in 1348 and headed by the English monarch, appears on the rosary. The couple pictured on the prayer nut are not easily discernible with the naked eye, and were not detected by earlier authors. They were first identified by Lisa Ellis and Alexandra Suda in the course of research for this catalogue through scientific imaging techniques (see the chapter by Dandridge & Ellis, pp. 514–577). Two other prayer nuts include the Mass of St Gregory, but neither has a couple looking on from the gallery (cf. cat. no. 9 and Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. no. 1878.134).

5 Robinson 1862, p. 64.

6 Coppa 1998, p. 96.

7 Gilley 1981.

8 Heimann 1996, p. 23.

9 Partington 1836.

10 Romanelli 1992, p. 252.

11 Session 2003, p. 48.

12 Despite the coincidence of godparents, the rosary did not come into the Devonshire Collection in that era.

13 On gifts of rosaries on important occasions in life see Baum 2013, pp. 136–37.

14 Duffy 1992, p. 450.

15 The names of the earlier owners are given in Romanelli 1992, p. 248, based on the *Catalogue of Works of Ancient and Mediaeval Art, Exhibited at the House of the Society of Arts*, London 1850, pp. 9–10. Members of the Jesuit order first came to England in 1580. See South 1999.

16 For example, Joost van Cranevelt's prayer nut in the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg was a cherished heirloom, as described in a family document: '[…] this apple has been preserved as an exceptionally rare jewel from generation to generation in the family of Jonkheer Joost van Cranevelt'; see Scholten 2012a, p. 136.

17 See cat. nos. 15, 23, 35, 36, 44, 47, 50, 51, 60, 63; in addition, a prayer nut with the arms of Jacob van Borselen, Lord of Gouda, and Ursula van Foreest; and a pendant with the arms of Dismas van Berghen and Marie Lauweryn, both in the British Museum, inv. nos. WB.238 and WB.239. See also the chapter by Reesing, pp. 244–289.

18 Marks 1977; Scholten 2011b; Reesing 2016; Suda 2016; and the chapter by Reesing, pp. 244–289.

19 Inscribed on François du Puy's prayer nut, cat. no. 23.

20 Scholten 2012a, pp. 137–40.

21 See Appendix, pp. 588-603.

22 As stated in Quiccheberg 1565, p. 72.

23 Pilaski 2013, pp. 21 and 122–27, emphasizes the role of religious imagery in the context of the *Kunstkammer*.

24 For a thorough history of the *Kunstkammer* see Impey & MacGregor 1985.

25 See the essay by Dandridge & Ellis.

26 Seelig 1985.

27 Diemer *et al.* 2008, vol. 1, nos. 370–73.

28 Quiccheberg 1565, p. 27

29 Maxwell 2011, p. 1; Schlosser 1978,

pp. 142–43, fig. 96 (as cited by Romanelli 1992, no. 2). A second prayer nut entered the *Schatzkammer* collection in 1846; see Romanelli 1992, no. 41.

30 See Quiccheberg 1565; Pilaski 2013. In Munich, Duke Albrecht V and Quiccheberg designed a building that could accommodate visitors; see Petzet 1986, pp. 16–36.

31 Quiccheberg 1565, p. 72.

32 Ibid., p. 72. Sixty-eight years later, manifesting a keen interest in technique, Van Cranevelt proclaimed that a lathe could not have been used to create the prayer nut in his collection.

33 See the chapter by Scholten, pp. 171–210.

34 The object's *cuir bouilli* case is ornamented with heraldry, but no such item is listed in Charles's inventories. See Thornton 2015, pp. 186–95.

35 See the chapter by Reesing, pp. 244–289.

36 Marks 1977, p. 140.

37 Bietenholz & Deutscher 1985, vol. 1, pp. 184–85.

38 See Dillenberger 1999, pp. 86–87. For Albrecht of Brandenburg's collection of relics and his relationship with Luther see the discussion in Ainsworth *et al.* 2015.

39 Suda 2016.

40 In 1520 Albrecht published an inventory of his relic collection, the *Hallesches Heiltumsbuch*.

41 Diemer *et al.* 2008, vol. 1, no. 370, where Peter Volk argues that the prayer nut in the Munich Residenz collection is not no. 370. Most likely it can be identified with the nut in the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, inv. no. 7.14.67; Wetter 2011, pp. 15–38. In the nineteenth century it belonged to Jacques Moyet in Amsterdam; sale Amsterdam (C.F. de Roos, G. de Vries & W.J.M. Engelberts), 13 April 1859, no. 582 (with thanks to Frits Scholten).

42 Diemer *et al.* 2008, vol. 1, p. 138. Inventories cite singular features to distinguish works one from another, sometimes mentioning material, size, weight and appearance. The inherent monetary value of the materials – easily converted into cash – is of the utmost importance, but is not listed for wooden objects. See the chapter by Scholten, pp. 13–79, for the meaning of the adjective 'subtil' as applied to boxwood micro-carvings.

43 Authors' translation of: 'Eine gedröhete höltzerne kügelein, so in der mitten von einander genommen werden kan. Auswendig altväterisch, von münchs arbeit, durchbrochen und ausgeschnitten, in dem einen halben theil die creutzigung Christi, in der andern helfte aber die erhöhung der ehrnen schlangen subtil in holtz geschnitten zu befinden.' See Syndram & Minning 2010, fol. 453v, no. 85. See Wetter 2011, p. 69, for one of the earliest and most comprehensive summaries of boxwood carvings in princely collections.

44 Menzhausen 1978, p. 19.

45 Four rooms in the new wing had columns with bases. Their capitals were painted a bluish-green, hence the name Grünes Gewölbe.

46 As cited in Kappel *et al.* 2007, p. 5; Keyssler 1751, p. 1299.

47 Romanelli 1992, p. 227.

48 Grell 1996, p. 173.

49 Romanelli 1992, p. 281

50 Ibid., p. 275.

51 The meaning of the inscription is discussed in the chapter by Scholten, pp. 13–79; on the coat of arms see the chapter by Reesing, pp. 244–289.

52 It could be significant that the Danish King Christian II lived in exile in the Netherlands from 1522 to 1531 (with thanks to Ingmar Reesing).

53 Gonse 1878, p. 216.

54 Gaynor 1985. Also cat. Compiègne 2000.

55 On Basilewsky see Darcel 1885; Kryzanowskaya 1990; Rappe & Pagella 2013.

56 Gonse 1878, pp. 216–17: 'Sur les confins du XVe et XVIe siècle, dans les Flandres et en Allemagne, un certain nombre d'imagiers se sont plu à ciseler le buis avec autant et plus d'amour que leurs devanciers ne l'avaient fait de l'ivoire, qui fut alors abandonné. Ils ont même poussé la recherché de l'infiniment petit jusqu'à enfermer des scènes entières dans les grains d'une paternostre, comme la collection Basilewsky en possède deux. Ils ne sont point

tombés dans la minutie cependant. Leur exécution est large, n'accusant que ce qu'il faut pour l'effet et négligeant ce qui ferait encombrement. Le petit triptyque porté sur un soubassement de la même collection est un des plus parfaits specimens de ce genre. Au centre, *le Calvaire* est figuré tout entier et en ronde-bosse, entre *le Portement de croix* et *la Mise au tombeau* sculptés en bas-reliefs sur les volets, tandis que le soubassement porte *la Fuite en Egypte* entre deux autres scènes, impossibles à débrouiller sans l'aide d'une loupe, et que *la Présentation au Temple* interrompt les degrés qui servent de socle à cet ensemble, le tout exprimé par des figures qui font à peine un centimètre de hauteur.' The translation is by the present authors.

57 For a history of cultural interest in small objects see Mack 2007.

58 Darcel & Basilewsky 1874.

59 Rappe & Pagella 2013, p. 21.

60 On 13 December 1884, *The Academy* newspaper reported on p. 402: 'The famous Basilewski Collection has been bought by the Russian government for 6,000,000 francs, to the great disappointment of collectors and dealers. It would have made one of the greatest sales on record. The catalogue was in preparation, and contained 750 lots. [...] Now, all will go to St Petersburg.'

61 Jacques St Cere to *The Critic*, 8 April 1893, p. 225, as quoted on http://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/before-the-blisses/collectors/the-spitzer-collection.

62 Distelberger *et al.* 1993, pp. 282–87; Truman 2012.

63 Molinier & Pabst 1891. On Molinier's advisory role to contemporary collectors see Bos 2015.

64 Baldry 1904, p. 3.

65 Later, on 9 and 10 January 1929, more of Spitzer's collection was sold in a five-session sale at Anderson Galleries in New York City. The sale included Medieval and Renaissance fine and decorative art.

66 Mann 1981, nos. S280, S281.

67 Cat. Compiègne 2000, no. 87 (a still-life painting by B.-A. Desgoffe, dated 1880, and depicting works of art from the collection of Sir Richard Wallace, including the boxwood tabernacle-shaped triptych now in the Wallace Collection).

68 Thornton 2015, pp. 20–25.

69 Jacques St Cere to *The Critic*, 8 April 1893, p. 225, as quoted on http://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/before-the-blisses/collectors/the-spitzer-collection.

70 Thornton 2015, pp. 42–53.

71 Ibid., p. 153.

72 Additionally, boxwood objects not accounted for in the 1866 inventory came with the Waddesdon Bequest, so it can be assumed that some were given from Anselm's collection to his brother Nathaniel, and that Ferdinand also purchased others in addition to those he received from his father.

73 Reesing 2016, and the chapter by Reesing, pp. 244–289.

74 Thornton 2015, p. 77, who has coined the term 'neo-*Kunstkammer*'.

75 Thornton 2015, p. 77.

76 Johnston 1999, p. 48.

77 Paris dealers increasingly opened New York and London branches to accommodate overseas collectors.

78 Johnston 1999, pp. 147–48.

79 'Mr. Morgan's Old Carvings; Baron Oppenheim's Collection Bought by J. Pierpont Morgan Is Shown to London, But Not to New York – Our Ridiculous Tariff Prevents Bringing Over Ancient Statues and Reliefs', *The New York Times*, 18 November 1906.

80 Williamson 1910.

81 Cat. New York 1910, p. 77.

82 Personal communication to Barbara Drake Boehm, 2016.

83 At the Melvin Gutman sale, New York (Parke-Bernet), 24 April 1969, no. 16.

84 Sale cat. London (Sotheby's), 10 July 1975, *Medieval, Renaissance and Later Works of Art*, no. 25.

85 Sale cat. Monaco (Sotheby's), 24 June 1976, no. 312.

86 Ibid., no. 309.

87 Acquired by Ken Thomson from Maria Baer, London, 21 June 1977 (unknown provenance); sale cat. London (Christie's), 21 April 1982, no. 159.

88 Ken Thomson with Andy Barrie, *Metro Morning*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 10 November 1997.
89 http://www.ago.net/thomson-teitelbaum-conversation.